

Big Sur Surprise

It was still dark when we left Ragged Point but early morning sunlight brightened the horizon. Three of us embarked on a bike tour to Big Sur on Highway 1.

We were exploring new territory. Tom Parsons regularly rides from his home in Cambria to Lucia and back. I had ridden as far as Gorda. Byron Hatcher, a new member of the San Luis Obispo Bicycle Club, joined us on this ride out of curiosity and a sense of adventure. His wife, Brooke, drove their car and kept an eye on us.

Reverse Alpenglow painted the western clouds in shades of pink and orange as dawn broke. No cars passed; we owned the road in the early morning.

The air temperature along the coast was warmer than it had been when I drove through Cambria. Occasional breaths of cooler air caressed us as we passed tiny canyon inlets. The rocky hillside was littered with clumps of pampas grass. Flowering white yucca plants lit up the hillsides like bright candles. A thousand feet below, long-plumed mare's tails streamed off the crests of breaking waves. I looked down at the top of a hawk hovering high over the ocean peering into the water looking for breakfast.

Chunks of sedimentary rock on the pavement reminded me that Highway 1 is built across the foot of a mountain range that is trying to return to the sea.

We had a nice two mile descent past Nathaniel Owings Memorial Redwood Grove and Cruickshank trailhead to sea level at Villa Creek and a quick look at the sun as we shot past Villa Creek canyon. Best to enjoy it now because that thrilling descent was going to turn into a grueling climb in a few hours when we returned.

We stopped in Gorda for a quick break. Another club member, Mike Curren, joined us there.

Tom and Byron led the way toward our next stop at Lucia. As we pedaled through Pacific Valley, Mike told me about panning for gold in the mountains nearby. He and his friend Gene used to look for nuggets but all they found was poison oak.

When we descended to sea level at Willow Creek, the iodine-and-salt smell of the ocean—fish and floating kelp—washed over us. I heard sea lions barking and saw a pair of them on an offshore rock, facing each other in pinniped conversation.

We climbed the last hill into Lucia past a high rock slope on the right that is covered with black chain link netting designed to confine falling rocks and protect bicyclists.

We chatted briefly at the store with Persay Bryant, who described himself as a thespian and expressed his philosophy of life by saying, "I am content in whatever state I'm in." At that moment he was in a state of sobriety.

North of Lucia, rolling hills provided intermittent views of the coastline. A hawk sat on a utility wire looking out to sea. He turned his head to watch me as I rode by. I slowed down and watched his

head revolve as he tracked my progress. I wondered if I could get him to turn his head completely around but he stopped at about 200 degrees and resumed his watch over the ocean.

We saw groups of cyclists all day long. One solo rider, Pete from St. Petersburg, was doing his 25th ride from San Francisco to San Diego. Another group from Monterey was going to spend the night in Morro Bay, then ride on to San Luis Obispo the next day and take a bus back home.

We climbed to a summit at Nepenthe, then a long descent took us past Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park into Big Sur where we discovered Bob Robinson's Fernwood Resort.

Bob had a big barbecue/smoker going out front and was cooking chicken, sausage, pork tenderloin, roast beef and ham plus baked potatoes, mushrooms and corn—all we could eat for \$9.99. I don't think we put him out of business but we tried.

It took five hours to ride to Big Sur. We needed to return to Ragged Point by sunset at 5 pm. It was 12:30 when we finished eating. We started back with a sense of urgency that was frustrated by the long climb to Nepenthe.

We crossed the summit through wisps of drifting clouds. The fog bank, which had been far out to sea in the morning, flowed in and settled just above the highway. It was delightfully cooling on climbs but chilling on descents.

Far out on the horizon, beyond the fog's edge, the ocean reflected a yellow gold from the descending sun. It was 2:00 when I passed Esalen—36 miles to go with three hours of daylight remaining. Tom and Byron were out of sight ahead of me; Mike was behind.

The fog was thinning as we rode south. I looked to the left while crossing Willow Creek and saw sunshine hitting the banks above.

The long climb out of Willow Creek is a challenge. Midway up, I looked down and found one more gear that I could downshift to. That was as good as finding gold. At my average speed of 12.4 miles per hour, I could make it if I did not stop.

Two hours later I passed through Gorda on schedule – just a few more climbs and descents on long sweeps of curving highway.

I turned into the parking lot in the last shreds of fading daylight. Byron and Brooke drove back up the highway to check on Mike. True to the *randonneur* code, he declined assistance and rode the last few miles with headlamp and taillight.

On our next trip, we'll ride from Lucia to Carmel and back. I can't wait to see Bob Robinson again with his big smoker.