

# MY NAME IS DAVID AND I'M A CYCLOTOURIST

by David Axel Kurtz

I love bike touring. I love the self-reliance, the adventure, the absolute accomplishment of it. I love planning the routes, planning my kit, figuring out what's worth pushing and getting rid of everything else. That's what bike touring is: stripping away everything you don't need. That and a whole lot of riding.

I'm in law school. So's my girlfriend, Lauren Kousaie. She'd never been touring before. We were looking for a tour that we could take together. Then our friend Cassie invited us up to The County for Potato Blossom Festival. Cassie's also in law school. She's from Presque Isle. Lauren's from Dover-Foxcroft and she's been up there before. I never have. I'm from Kennebunkport, and before law school I'd been north of Augusta exactly once in my life. When Cassie talked about Aroostook County it was like she was talking about a different world. I wanted to see that world. I'm a Mainer; I wanted to see my state!

We planned and plotted. We settled on a route. (If you want to nerd out over our bikes and kits, check out [daxelaudax.wordpress.com](http://daxelaudax.wordpress.com). I'll also post route maps.) We rode out...

Tuesday morning. Dawn just risen. We headed north on 88. There was dew on the grass, a soft blanket of fog rolling down the hills of Falmouth. My bike weighed a ton. I felt wonderful.

Lauren was ahead of me (a theme of this trip!). I look up and see she's on the ground. I bolt over to her. Her right pannier has detached and gotten caught in her rear wheel. Blood is running from her leg. She gets up. She's fine. She's just worried about her bike. We look over her bike, there on the foggy roadside. As we're standing there, a lobster delivery truck pulls over next to us. A fellow named Stephen gets out holding a First Aid kit. Gives us bandages. Tells us to be safe and drives away.

We pass around Freeport, following the route markers from the Bicycle Coalition's Women's Ride. The fog burns away. We watch the sun glisten over the sea from Wharton Point. We sit on the Brunswick Common and eat some dried banana chips. Some hippies on motorcycles give us a thumbs-up. We take 201 North. It's wooded and quiet. Hilly, too. I'm huffing and puffing. The sun feels wonderful. It's not even noon. We cross the Cobboseecontee at Ring Hill. We pass farms and meadows and houses on the lake. We cruise into Gardiner, crash out in this little park on Water Street. We take off our cleated shoes and run our toes through the grass. Old people keep stopping and staring at us. We wave. They mostly wave back.

We ride on the rail trail north to Augusta. We wave at the statehouse (thanks for LD 1301!) Then we cross the river and follow Riverside Drive into the afternoon sun. We're stopped at some intersection. A white van pulls over and a guy gets out. His name is Dan and he says he used to bike tour all the time. He offers us a warm shower and a place to stay. I wish I hadn't just booked a hotel room. We chat for a while, there on the shoulder. Bike touring rules.

We're on our way to Big G's, a childhood haunt of Lauren's notable for serving sandwiches the size of continents. On the way we run into some railroad tracks. I don't see them until it's too late, I fall down. Scrape myself up pretty bad. Bruise a few ribs, sprain my wrist, smash my butt. For a minute I think that our tour is over. But I shake it off. Get some medicinal hugs. And I'm able to keep riding. We got to our hotel. I wrap up with an ice pack and go to bed. Day One, Portland to Waterville: 90 miles. 3600' of climb.

**Day Two** of a tour is always the hardest for me. My muscles were so cold. It was a cold day, cold drizzle, clouds low over endless cornfields. By the time we got to Canaan the sun was out and I felt better. By the time we got to St. Albans I was a hill-climbing machine. Good timing. It's beautiful country—lakes, woods, rolling fields, family farms. But it's hilly. Did I mention the hills? We fought our way up them and then coasted all the way down. Time after time. We got to Dexter. There was a mountain in our way. Fortunately our route would go around it. Then I realized: my 'way around' was a rail trail. It wasn't paved. And our road bikes are not cut out for dirt. We Googled and Googled but couldn't find a way around. We were going up and over. Oh, Route 23. It took us 90 minutes to ride 6 miles. One single hill was about 400'. I've seen brick walls less steep. At one point we actually got off our bikes and walked. Then we got back on and kept pedaling. In first gear the whole way. We made it to the top. We took a breather under an apple tree. Then we coasted on a magnificent downhill into Sangerville.

Rode to the pond where Lauren's godparents, Rick and Jodi, have their camp. Something I've learned: in most of Maine, "camp" doesn't mean "place for a tent." In this case it means "perfectly nice house." With handmade wooden fixtures. And a dock stretching into Manhanock Pond. We lay on the dock and watched the sunset. Day Two: 56 miles, 2600' of climb.

**Day Three** and we rode out for Dover-Foxcroft. Went to the Bear's Den for a real hunter's breakfast. We followed the river towards Milo, an easy and glorious stretch. Then the road turned to dirt. I didn't realize that there was such a thing as an unpaved public road (#southernboy). So we turned north and took 16 instead. This road wins the Worst Road Condition Award for our entire trip. The shoulder looked like the Somme. It was like trying to ride across the backs of a stampeding herd of water buffalo. By the time we got to Milo I was basically ready to die. The road out of town was a pleasure. Rolling hills, beautiful fields and streams. We made it six miles and then: roadwork. No pavement, just deep soft sand. We made it about five feet and fell right over.

We rode back to Milo, dispirited, prepared to add 15 miles to our trip to ride around. A pickup truck pulled up next to us. A lovely woman in a shirt with peace signs on it asked where we were going. We told her about the road, and she said, "Want a lift?" We threw our bikes in her truck and she carried us over the rough spot. Her name is Michelle. Thank you, Michelle. You're the BEST.

The next ten miles were wonderful. Tall pines, blue sky above. Flat road, silent, didn't see a single car. We stopped by the banks of the river, wide



and blue and scattered all over with stones. It was wonderful and beautiful but above all I remember how different it felt. The air tasted different. We had crossed into Northern Maine. We crossed under the Interstate. Our next road was also dirt. We tried it anyway. It was brutal. But by the time we got to pavement I was ready to curl up and suck my thumb. Mattamiscontis Road: not for the faint of heart. We rode into Lincoln. Caught a bite to eat and headed north. Our goal was the Mattawamkeag Wilderness Campground. Mattawamkeag was just 15 miles ahead.

The sun's setting at our backs. Good road, wide shoulder, made good time. I'm very tired, and very sore. So imagine my surprise when we get to Mattawamkeag and there's a sign for the campground: 7.6 miles. Off the road. And: the road isn't paved. I was about ready to collapse. I don't think I could have made it down an escalator. We had just passed a tiny little motel. I told Lauren, I can't. We have to stay here. It was some place. The windows had no screens and the room's smoke alarm was clearly missing. I didn't care. I was absolutely wrecked. 71 miles, of which about 20 unpaved; 2200' of climb. I fell asleep before the sun had set.

**Day Four** we got up and went to the motel's little diner. It was packed. Everyone was bent over a police scanner. We drank our coffee and listened in. There was a killer on the loose. You probably know the story. A man killed two people, took a hostage, and then shot two more and stole their car to get away. Back in Portland I might not even have heard of this story. Here I'm sitting in a diner when the police scanner says that Clayton's been shot and Kevin Tozier's been killed. And there's a stunned silence, because everyone in the diner knows those people. They just lost a friend. And the killer's still on the loose. What could we do but ride on?

We finished our pancakes and got on our bikes. We were taking 2A, which is basically a logging road. We made sure we had all the motel water we could carry. There wouldn't be any more for 43 miles. It's a magnificent road. Just absolutely magical. There's almost nothing. No stores. No gas stations. Some stretches are ten miles without so much as a cabin. Just mountain wildflowers and giant trees and air that smells of stone and pine. At one point there was a little clearing and, just for a moment, you could see Katahdin. Close enough that you could reach out and touch it. Somewhere near Wytopitloc I had to slam on the brakes to let a moose cross the road. We finally made it to Linneus. We bought a gallon of water and found out that the killer was still on the loose. He was in a logging truck. Which was about all we'd seen for the last four hours. We got to Houlton to find that the killer was something like a mile away. Then they caught him. They opened the road. Nothing between us and Presque Isle but fifty miles. We could do it. We would. We rode north, golden sun up above, endless fields stretching off to either side. Mileage signs all ended in NB for New Brunswick. The eastern border was a mere two miles to our right. There were hills. Giant hills. We rode over them. We burned through those miles like wildfire. We rode down into Presque Isle with grins on our faces. I was singing. Lauren was singing. We rolled up to Cassie's house and dropped our bikes in her front yard. 98 miles. 3900' of climb.

Then we went out and DRANK SOME BEERS.

We went to the Potato Blossom Festival. We saw the parade. We saw the old restored John Deere tractors, the giant New Holland combines. We saw the beauty queens. We saw the Shriners in their little cars. Then Cassie took us on a tour of the County. Beautiful potato blossoms – in white, yellow, purple, blue – rolling all the way to the horizon. We had brunch St. Agatha, a mere five miles from the northern border of the state. We'd gone as far in Maine as it was possible to go. Then we caught a ride back to Portland, back to a new week, back to our lives.

**Four days. 312 miles. 12,500' of climb. One manhunt. One moose. Two bicycles. A thousand, thousand potato blossoms.**