INSIDE KNOWLEDGE

SECRETS to SOCIAL SURVIVAL

How to make friends, have fun, and get what you need on the road.

by Larry Diskin

We often write about selecting the proper gear. We recommend exotic locations, give you the maps, and lead you on three-month expeditions. But rarely do we share the secrets of social survival, tricks of the trade so to speak. Adventure Cycling has been training people how to lead bicycle tours for more than 25 years. Our Leadership Training Course is the training and selection process for Adventure Cycling tour leaders. But it doubles as a forum for exposing future leaders to social and cultural issues that bicycle tourists encounter, and sometimes create, during a tour.

Here are a few concepts to keep in mind that will help you have a positive experience.

Share the Road. It’s a two-way street. Many motorists feel that bicycles do not belong on the road. A few irresponsible cyclists can do a great deal to perpetuate negative reactions. Here are a few common no-nos that can create lasting negative impressions. Try to look at truckers as your ally. Despite what some believe, many truckers are genuinely concerned about cyclists. Treat them with respect; they are trying to make a living.

- Truckers can be a reliable source of road condition information and emergency assistance. They sometimes look out for your safety by radioing other truckers to pass along their whereabouts — but they will also radio to warn other truckers about bad riding practices or inappropriate actions such as “tipping the bird,” which could easily make the rest of your day miserable.

- Embrace Cultural Differences. There are potential conflicts between cyclists who are on vacation and the people who live and work in their own real world along your cycle touring route. Most of Adventure Cycling’s routes pass through rural areas, where life is different from life in metropolitan areas. Tourists have a responsibility to be aware of and respect differences. Those who have a sincere interest in understanding the local people will leave the best impression. If you want everything to be like it is at home, stay home!

SHOES

You’re going to stand out in small towns. Make sure it isn’t for all the wrong reasons.

- Wear shoes you’re comfortable in. Many cyclists wear shoes that are not well suited for walking. As a result, you may find yourself struggling to keep the doors open.

- Be Considerate. Keep in mind that you are an ambassador for all bicyclists. You’ll stand out everywhere you go and your actions will be associated with other bicyclists in the future. Cyclists are often guilty of behaviors that can result in justified negative reactions. Here are a few common pitfalls to avoid:
  - Do not block sidewalks or entryways with bicycles or bikes.
  - Do not occupy a café for hours over a cup of coffee.
  - You are going to ask for help from a bike shop, make it worth their while. Some shops have a do-it-yourself area where you can use tools and work on your bike. Even if this area is provided as a free service, make a small purchase to express your appreciation.

- If this area is provided as a free service, you will go into a bike shop for some kind of assistance during your tour. Your behavior can dramatically affect the service you receive.

- In many cases, bike shops are in business because the owner is passionate about bicycling. But remember that part of that statement is “bike shops are in business.” And in an age of Internet sales, mail order madness, and price haggling, many shops struggle to keep the doors open.

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- Always ask before using restrooms and always make a small purchase if you use the bathroom.

- Your appearance is important. Cyclists are accustomed to the appearance of other cyclists. It may seem status quo to you, but tight bright lycra, aerodynamic helmets, bike shoes and sports glasses can make you appear quite strange to people who are not familiar with the sport. Take off your helmet and glasses. Show strangers your eyes and you’ll look a lot friendlier. Tight lycra bike shorts can be more revealing than some folks are comfortable with. If you wear these, keep a lightweight pair of baggy shorts accessible and slip them on over your tights before you go inside cafes and grocery stores.

- Don’t be cheap. You are an ambassador for all things bike. Tipping is very important. You may never be there again but tipping definitely leaves an impression that will affect others in the future.

Follow up. Send a postcard to people you meet along the way. Even a few to people you briefly met. It will be appreciated and is likely to find a home on their refrigerator.

- How to treat a bike shop. Inevitably, you will go into a bike shop for some kind of assistance during your tour. Your behavior can dramatically affect the service you receive.

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- If you are going to ask for help from a bike shop, make it worth their while. Some shops have a do-it-yourself area where you can use tools and work on your bike. Even if this area is provided as a free service, make a small purchase to express your appreciation.

- Shops without do-it-yourself areas are more prevalent, and there are many valid reasons that some of them do not loan tools. If they do loan you a tool, take your bike to an out-of-the-way area of the store to work on it. If you have to ask how to use the tool or how to accomplish the task at hand, you really should just pay the bike shop to do it for you. That is, after all, why they are in business.

- Hoping for on-the-spot service? Bike shops are often very busy in the summer months. The fact that you are away from home on a tour may not make you any more important to the bike shop than any of their usual customers.

- It’s not that they are against touring, or are not interested in your business, but rather a matter of having to prioritize. Bike shops rely on their repeat patrons for support and you may not be perceived as one of those. They need to make sure the regulars get their bikes back on time in order to insure that those customers come back next time.

- If you are hoping for immediate service, walk in with a smile, a relaxed attitude and tote a six-pack of cold microbrew. Make sure you act like somebody they care to help, avoid coming across as demanding or pushy. When the time comes, ask for help in a way that allows them to feel good about helping you. Offer the person you are speaking with a beer. (Even if they don’t drink beer, they’ll appreciate the gesture.) Remember, the bike is your main tool on this adventure. If it breaks down, smile and look at it as part of the adventure. Be patient … good things often happen when you least expect it.

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