



Bicycle Touring With Your Kids

Most children love to ride a bicycle. The pace is fast and the scenery constantly changing. Little ones sit happily, fascinated from the vantage point of their bicycle seat or trailer. Older children enjoy the thrill and independence of riding on their own. Given the near universal appeal of bicycling as an inexpensive mode of transportation, plus its status as one of the most popular activities with children, a bicycle tour is an excellent choice for a family adventure.

The Advantages

Family bicycle touring can range anywhere from day outings to long-term trips. Some areas have designated bicycle paths, others country roads that lend themselves well to bicycle travel. Even in countries where large distances must be covered between areas of interest, most public buses and trains can accommodate bicycles for a small fee. With bicycles on an adventure, it's possible to explore a far greater area in an enjoyable, low-cost way than if you were solely dependent on walking or renting a vehicle. More than any other form of adventure travel, bicycling has the advantage of giving you an inside exposure to the places you are traveling through. In poor countries where bicycling is often the primary mode of transportation, traveling this way helps alleviate the disparity between your life-style and theirs. As a family on bicycles, shopping in local markets, eating local foods and traveling at a pace that matches that of the country you are in, you will be treated to a genuine hospitality that differs greatly from the normal relationship between tourist and local inhabitant.

In Morocco, during our two-month bicycle trip when our twins, Tristan and Colin, were nine, we camped for a few days in a small mountain village where local Berber children soon befriended us. As the village was also the site of a famous waterfall, a number of tourists were bused in daily and quickly targeted by the children as a source of money. When we asked the children why they didn't treat us in the same way, they assured us that we were their friends. The presence of our children and simple traveling life-style made them identify with us in a way they couldn't with the other tourists.

Bicycle touring with children is a surprisingly untapped source of travel. Despite the fact that nearly all children love to bicycle, few parents realize the potential to channel this enthusiasm into a family bicycle trip. Long-term travel with children is almost always done in a car or camper. Children (not to mention adults) easily become bored, frustrated and fractious when confined for hours of inactivity in a vehicle. On a bicycle children are too busy, too active and too visually stimulated to become bored or irritable. As constant participants rather than observers in the trip, their interest is continually aroused.

Children's Capabilities

Any child big enough to ride a ten-speed can go touring and carry full children's bicycle gear. Younger children are best off pulled in a trailer. Expect a child approximately nine years or up to cover an average of 40 to 50 kilometers a day, a pace that leaves plenty of time for breaks, sight-seeing and play after reaching your destination.

Although most children are avid bicyclers, be prepared for frequent stops. Children have a way of continually needing something: a drink, a snack, to go to the bathroom, to put clothes on, to take clothes off. Leave room in their handlebar packs for easy stowage of whatever items of clothing keep coming off and on. Another way to cut down on delays is to give each child his own water bottle, preferably the type mounted with velcro, an easy release mechanism. Mastering the art of taking a drink while underway is just the kind of challenge children like.

Despite all efforts on the parents' part, a certain amount of stopping is inevitable, as children have no

sense of time. Ask them if they are thirsty and they will say no. Five minutes down the road they will insist they are thirsty.

"But I just asked you five minutes ago!" you'll exclaim.

"Well," they will say, "we weren't thirsty then."

Hills are always going to present the major stumbling block when it comes to keeping your children moving. Since nearly everywhere has hills, avoiding them is almost impossible. Even places that you could have sworn were flat as a pancake will reveal hidden inclines when viewed from the vantage point of a bicycle. Figure that any hill that looks big to you looks twice as big to a child. The key here is to get them up it fast by whatever means works best. Going down the other side is never a problem. Children have an insatiable lust for speed. To a certain extent the downhill ride on the other side can serve as sufficient motivation for getting your children up a hill, although eventually they will figure out that the time ratio is unequal. As an indignant Colin remarked one day, "It takes us half an hour to go up a hill and five minutes to go down. That means most of the time we're going up."

Traffic can also cause a temporary interference with your bicycle pace as well as your enjoyment. Biking in traffic is never fun and a child's interest in it will lag as fast as yours. Only once in our experience has the presence of traffic provided the stimulant to an otherwise dull ride. Bicycling down the breakdown lane on our way to the airport in Lisbon we lived out one of our wildest fantasies, passing miles and miles of bumper-to-bumper rush-hour traffic. Despite the number of cars, the situation was hardly hazardous, as we were the fastest thing moving.

Perhaps because of the fast pace, children on bicycles soon develop an adult sense of accomplishment in achieving a goal: reaching a destination, making it up a steep hill, covering a major distance. All these become as gratifying to them as to their parents and are a motivating factor on any bicycle tour. Getting your children excited about the day's bicycling should rarely be a problem and no matter how long the ride, they will rarely be too tired to play afterwards.

Making it Fun

It's the rare child that doesn't enjoy bicycling. How to prolong that natural enthusiasm to last four or five hours of continual bicycling with a fully loaded bike is not much cause for concern. With a little parental input, some well honed imaginative skills and a few entertainment devices, children should be able to stay happy during any bicycle trip.

Encourage imaginative play. Even when bicycling, children can devise much of their own entertainment.

Conversing and story telling are always popular pastimes, often sparked by the surroundings you are bicycling through.

Store a reading book, small toy and a ball in a child's handlebar pack for quick access during breaks.

Children can have a wonderful time during breaks or at the end of the day rolling your spare tires (if you carry them). Their proficiency at this old-fashioned game will amaze you.

Pick an interesting route; as always, children are most interested in a route through changeable scenery: farmland with animals, country towns, fishing villages, coastal roads along the ocean. Any route with a long downhill ride or series of small roller coaster hills will be greeted with excitement.

Play games like "finding things" or guessing what comes next or who can find a good picnic spot or somewhere to swim? Getting children to enter into the spirit of things goes a long way towards keeping them interested.

Children riding as passengers can be kept entertained much the same way they are in a car seat: with books, toys, food, taking a nap. If your child is right at that age when throwing things is at its pinnacle, choose one of the trailers with screening.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Too fast a pace—Don't treat family touring like training for the Tour de France. Keep the pace relaxed even if one of you is a seasoned bicyclist. Children will lose interest fast if continually told to speed up. Let them set the pace.

Too ambitious an itinerary—Even on a long bicycle tour, keep the focus on having fun rather than miles covered. On our 1,500 mile trip with nine-year-olds we took three months to cover the distance. We rarely bicycled on days when the weather conditions were poor or for too many days in a row. Any distance can be covered with children provided you leave sufficient time to make it relaxing instead of rushed.

Too few breaks—Keep the breaks short, but coming often. Breaks are natural to children. They take them all the time when playing, so incorporate as many as possible. Some can be short food or drink breaks, a few longer ones for play and picnics.

Overanxious parenting—Pick a safe route, teach them the rules of the road, then let them go. Children don't need to be over protected or continually told to be careful. Stop worrying about all the 'what ifs' (what if a car comes around that corner, what if they hit a rock halfway down that hill...). As our boys once said, "If you worried about all the 'what ifs' you'd never do anything!"

Starting too late—As with hiking, start early and end early. This capitalizes on a child's high energy level at the beginning of the day and need to play at the end.

Adventuring With Children is available from Amazon.com.

Click here to visit [Menasha Ridge](#)

© Article copyright [Menasha Ridge Press](#). All rights reserved.

The details, dates, and prices mentioned in this article were accurate at the time of publication.

Find this article at: http://www.gorp.com/weekend-guide/travel-ta-mountain-biking-injury-prevention-sidwcmdev_055846.html

© 1999-2010 Orbitz Away LLC