

## Bicycle touring: It's not just for Freds

BY MARK JOHNSON

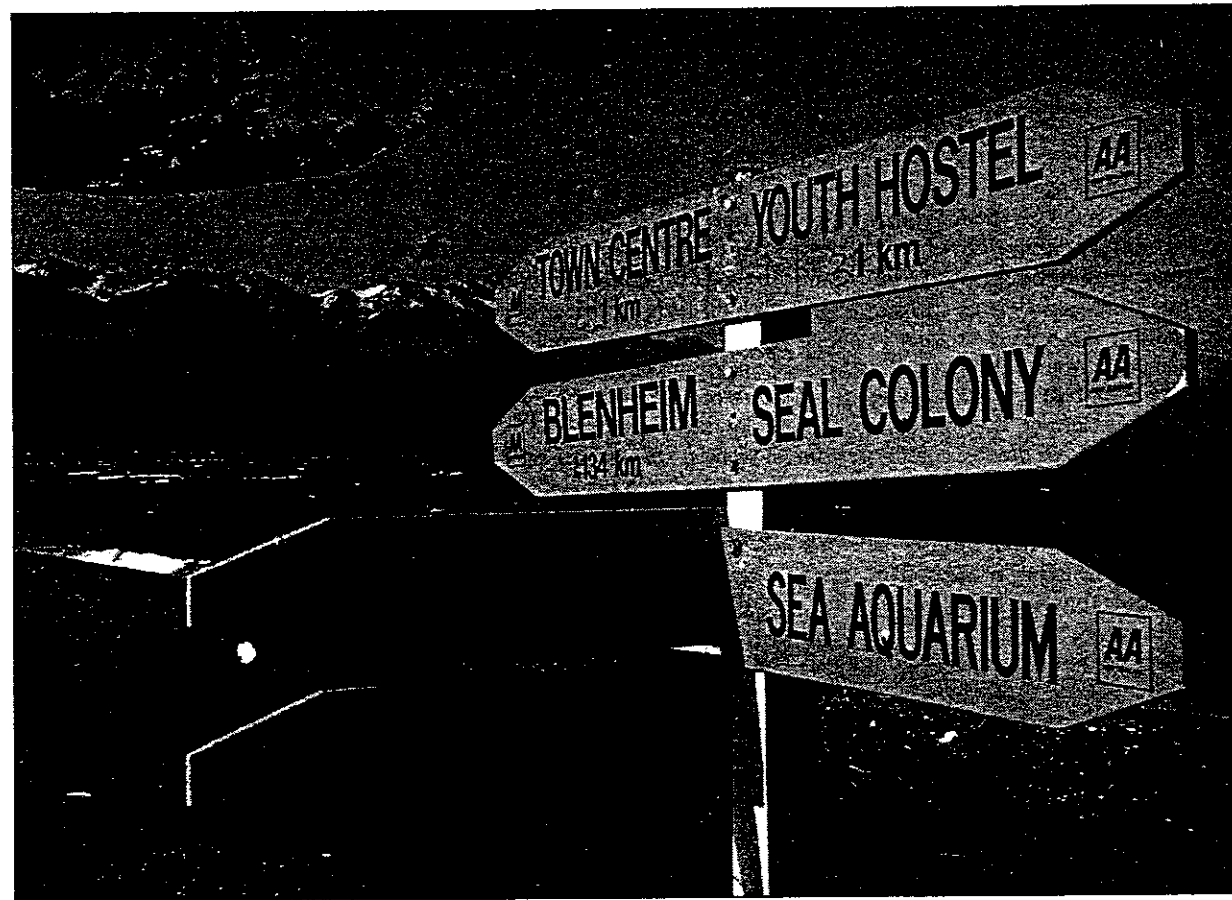
**T**he hail banging at the window reminds you: It's February; the roads are icy; you detest rollers and you're fattening right up. Desperate for alpine passes and G-force descents, you rewind the Tourvideo for the 47th time this winter. Hit "play" and Phil Liggett's British intonations ease you away.... Passing the 2000-meter-altitude marker, you sense Miguel Indurain behind you; he begs to match your fiery tempo. A mile-and-a-quarter in the sky, you're sick of the wheel sucker. Your chain slithers onto the big ring. Unable to meet your acceleration, the Spaniard cracks and rides deliriously into a snowbank. Arms raised above your loaded touring machine, you cross the line into glory.

What's that? Loaded touring machine? Whoa, dude ... I can fancy dropping Indurain, but me, on one of those Fred-mobiles? C'mon, be real.

While I can't promise that riding a touring bike will give you legs to dump Miguel with, bicycle touring *can* play an integral and enjoyable role in your yearly training program. Especially in the winter months, a few weeks on a 70-pound bike can do wonders for endurance, strength and climbing ability. Knowing that many committed riders look down on bike tourists, but up to *VeloNews*, I thought I'd play on your prejudices and pass on what personal experience has taught me about this obvious but unappreciated training method.

Prior to the summer of 1990, I had finished a number of Cat. IV races ... without success. That summer, I decided to ride across the United States. Upon completing my 5700-mile tour, I entered two criteriums ... and won both. Bike touring had obviously upgraded my cycling powers.

Eager for *real* suffering, I went to Grenoble, France, for the summer of 1991. There, I was invited to join a Cat. I-



Mark Johnson photo

**Now, doesn't this look like a nice option for those early-season miles?**

II team, and I quickly learned the difference between 20km Cat. IV criteriums and 170km alpine death marches. Still, my tour across North America gave me enough of a base to hang just behind the craze of relentlessly attacking Frenchmen. While living in Grenoble, I also mixed bike touring into my schedule: With a fanny pack and a wad of francs, I would ride all day to some youth hostel high in the Alps, crash for the night, then ride home the next day.

In December 1991 and January 1992, my girlfriend and

I spent four weeks touring in New Zealand. This trek left me fit enough to pull off one solo breakaway win, two seconds and a seventh in early-season road races. New Zealand was Melinda's first bicycle tour, and it established the foundation for her maiden season of U.S. Cycling Federation racing: By sprinting for two firsts, two seconds and a number of top-five finishes in 1992.

However, a brilliant sprint is worthless if you can't make *(Please turn to page 93)*

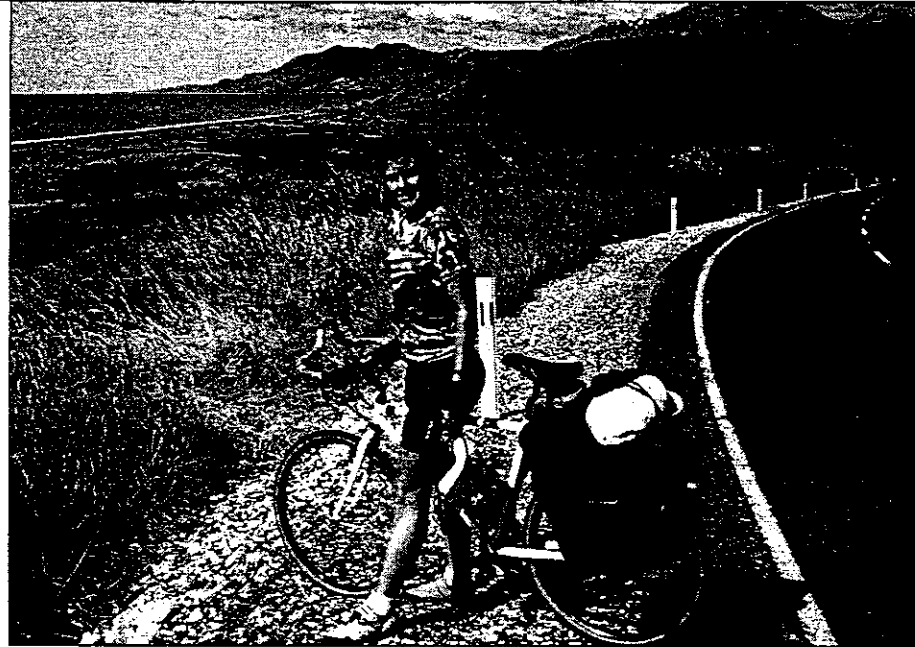
## Touring...

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it to the finish line. What gets you there are well-developed, slow-twitch muscle fibers — the foundation for performance in an endurance sport like bike racing. In a typical day of touring, you might spend seven hours in the saddle. While these hours of steady-state riding (you only sprint for dogs) do develop fast-twitch fibers, the primary influence is upon the slow-twitchers. And because bicycle touring is weighted endurance training, it is especially suited to “educating” your muscles how to efficiently oxidize glucose and fat. Since touring’s sustained aerobic (with-oxygen) effort improves the ability to burn fat, the longer you ride, the more Christmas brownies you shed. This improved metabolic efficiency also reduces the production of lactic acid — the stuff that burns and makes you want to quit.

One might argue that touring is too slow to replace the long, steady, distance training that is the backbone of late-winter and early-spring workouts. I would argue back. For, while touring demands steady pacing (bonk 50km from food and camping and you’ll understand why), the extra weight puts additional stress on the muscular system. Thus, while pattering around on a 20-pound road bike won’t do much for your fitness, a day steadily pedaling 70 pounds will develop strength and stamina, especially when you’re touring hilly terrain. And touring also familiarizes your rear with long hours in the saddle.

Training your body to maintain the riding position and to recruit the muscles appropri-



The east coast of New Zealand's South Island provides the kind of scenery that cancels drudgery in base training.

ate to cycling is called sport-specific training. As the theory goes, you derive greater benefit for bike racing by training on a bicycle than you would from other types of exercise. So imagine pushing a loaded touring bicycle as sport-specific weight training — a way for your neuromuscular system to learn to recruit muscle fibers in the pattern particular to cycling... a way to adopt the cycling-specific efficiency not available through swimming, running or skiing.

While metabolic efficiency, climbing prowess and weight loss may sound painful from your Lay-Z-Boy recliner, cycle touring accomplishes all of these without the normal suffering and boredom. When fully into bicycle travel, you have so much fun that you are

hardly aware of your body’s transformation. Besides riding all day, you eat, hang out with locals and snap photos. Touring takes the drudgery out of the early season’s requisite long, steady miles, and turns them into adventures.

So, convinced by the unorthodoxy of a pitch for bicycle touring in *VeloNews*, you cajole your boss into giving you two to four weeks off in February or March. Since fun bicycle times are out of the question in the blizzard you call home, where do you go? My unqualified recommendation is New Zealand. Our winter is their summer, and a typical January day in Auckland is 76 degrees, and sunny. Furthermore, the South Island offers superb climbing in the Southern

Alps, and roads hug the ocean all the way around.

If you want to develop base fitness in Europe, try Southern Spain and Portugal. Although still subject to northern-hemisphere storm systems, the southern parts of these countries are relatively arid year-round. If you don’t have the cash to fly down under or to Europe, try Florida or Southern California. The weather tends to be warmer in Florida, but the drivers are friendlier in the Golden State.

Still think you’re too cool for bike touring? Well, maybe so. Pedaling a two-wheeled tank *does* have its negatives: 1) Passing bike racers make fun of you; 2) You begin to wonder, “Why go fast?”; 3) Following a spell of bicycle vagabonding, work is somber; 4) Loaded touring is not conducive to speed work. (However, late winter is not the time for intense intervals.)

Still reluctant to give bike touring a go? Consider this: All you need to do it is a mountain bike, racks, panniers, a sleeping bag and a tent. So why not spend a month rolling around New Zealand or the Iberian Peninsula, come home, and laugh when your training partners bonk hard, 60 miles into spring’s first century. Better yet, marvel at the ease with which your road bike accelerates and climbs. The transition from fat-pig touring bike to hyper-responsive road bike feels great, and translates into faster riding with less effort. Indeed, you’ll feel so strong that you, too, will dream of dropping Indurain ...

Mark Johnson photo