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# We Rode 3,800 Miles Across America on a Tandem Bike in Our 60s. Here's What We Learned.

It wasn't always easy. But the places we saw and the people we met made it all worthwhile.

The idea of a cross-country trip was born six years earlier, after Steve surprised Karen with an anniversary gift of a used tandem bike. ANDRE CARRILHO

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Feb. 24, 2022 11:00 am ET

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As we pedaled over the Golden Gate Bridge to head across America on our tandem bike last summer, we knew we would hit a wall somewhere down the road. It happened 17 riding days in, rounding a canyon bend in southern Utah.

"Look up ahead," Steve said, steering the bike to a stop. There it was, a rising stretch of pavement we thereafter would call simply The Wall. We stared silently.

It had been a nearly flawless morning of smooth two-lane pavement, light traffic and canyon land scenery that belonged on tourist brochures. But now we were at a dead stop in the early afternoon, facing what our GPS showed in dark red, signifying a grade greater than 12%. We had ridden 50 miles since morning and climbed 2,800 feet—a short day, but we had suffered a flat along the way. We were heading into a heat wave, the afternoon RV traffic was picking up and it was getting hard to stay in the saddle.

We had another 1,800 feet to climb. We had never cut a day short dead in our tracks. Would this be the first time?

Not for the first time, we asked ourselves: Why had we thought it was a good idea to ride a tandem bike for 3,800 miles at a combined age of 127?



We were riding high in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah on Day 17, but would hit 'The Wall' an hour later.

PHOTO: STEPHEN KREIDER YODER

## An anniversary gift

We had begun dreaming of this trip six years before, after Steve surprised Karen with an anniversary gift of a used tandem bike. We had never tired of cruising by car on two-lane roads through deserts and mountains and wheat fields. It would surely be richer at 10 miles an hour.

First, we mastered the bike. Steve took the "pilot" post up front, Karen rode "stoker," and we wobbled off on a bike path near

home in San Francisco. Our primers were [instructions](#) from legendary bike mechanic Sheldon Brown and "[The Proper Method.](#)" an essay by Bill McCready, founder of tandem maker Santana Cycles. They taught us to mount, ride and dismount while communicating every move. It was like ballroom dancing: Partners put in equal effort, but the one in control—the pilot—bore responsibility. We repeated Bill's words: "The stoker makes no mistakes."

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The bike immersed us in natural beauty in a way our car couldn't. We took weekend bike-camping trips south along coastal Highway 1, north to Sonoma Valley wine-country roads, east to the Sacramento River delta levee tops. During Covid lockdowns, we cycled 20 miles most evenings along the beachfront [Great Highway](#).

Riding tandem solved two couples-cycling conflicts: No one could race ahead, and we could talk without riding double file. Fortunately for us, we still had plenty to say after 42 years of marriage, and we've always relished adventures while traveling in odd ways. Before ever dating, we hitchhiked to Iowa from Indiana. Our first date was a daylong motorcycle trip, and our honeymoon was hitchhiking around Japan all summer. We've been backpackers together on buses and trains and boats in more than 30 countries, sometimes with infants, most recently in Algeria. [It's what we do.](#)

Our cross-country fantasy began to seem rational, and we put up a U.S. wall map, pressing pushpins into towns along a route across nine states. The first test would be whether we could make it across the Sierra Nevada. Steve wasn't sure. "Of course we can," Karen insisted.



Our tandem bike carried four gallons of water on Day 9 as we headed east from Middlegate, Nev., toward Austin.

PHOTO: STEPHEN KREIDER YODER

**And we're off**

We left late last May, crossing the Golden Gate at 5:10 a.m. on our Co-Motion Speedster, a robust tandem bike made in

Oregon and named by someone unaware of our riding pace while carrying 100 pounds of tent, sleeping bags, cookstove, clothes, tools, spare parts, water and a honey-bear mascot with emergency-energy powers. The day before, as is custom, we had launched our tour by dipping the back wheel in the Pacific.

The ride across California's Central Valley took us on rural roads through wheat fields, vineyards and ranches into the Sierra foothills.

On Day 4, at 5,000 feet, we found hospitality of a kind we would encounter all along our route. On Route 88, the Cook's Station bar and grill welcomes bike campers. Unfortunately, the bar was closed; fortunately, the people there had agreed to leave three bottles out for us, two of water and one of wine. We pitched our tent among tables on the deck.

Ahead of our expectations, we crested the Sierra at Carson Pass, altitude 8,574 feet. "That wasn't so hard," Steve said. Karen agreed, and we began what we call the "whee," the downhill payback for a cycling ascent.



The stiffest climbs were behind us, we wrongly assumed, as we rode along Colorado's Sangre de Cristo mountains on Day 28.

PHOTO: DAVID KREIDER

The whee makes it easy to forget the pain of climbing. To make it to the pass, we'd plotted the day not just by miles, but by altitude gain and grade. Our thighs burned, but we took quick breaks every 15 minutes for water or shots of energy from Honey Bear. Karen urged us on by reading out the remaining feet of climb from the GPS display. We resisted Lycra-cyclist speeds—"We're hiking now," was our mantra while plodding uphill at a walking pace made possible by the extra-low gears Steve had installed. We stuck to two of our principles: Don't talk uphill, and never walk the bike.

Tandem Cross-Country



TANDEM  
CROSS-COUNTRY

START:

Ocean Beach,  
San Francisco

DAY 27:

Highest altitude,  
Monarch Pass  
(11,312 ft.)

DAY 58:

'Mount  
Vesuvius'

Utah Colo.

Nev.

Ill.

Mo.

Calif.

Va.

Kan.

Ky.

DAY 17:

Calf Creek  
campground

DAY 61, FINISH:

Yorktown, Va.

DAY 36:

Walnut, Kan.

Note: Days are riding segments within 12-week trip.

Downhill in a park at 4,800 feet in Genoa, Nev.—a trading post on the 19th-century emigrant trail—a tourist, newly retired, grilled us about our trip and then said she wanted to give us a hug. She wouldn't be the last to express love and awe, one of the secret vanities of riding tandem at 60-something.

At Fallon, Nev., we pitched our tent at the Churchill County Fairgrounds for \$7, showering in livestock-washing stalls. We knew to camp there thanks to the Adventure Cycling Association (we're members), which maps just over 50,000 miles along 32 U.S. and Canadian touring routes and lists city parks, churches, fire stations and campgrounds that welcome cyclists. Our plan stuck closely to the association's routes and overnight recommendations, with Karen navigating from the stoker saddle from GPS and paper maps.

Our map led us on Highway 50 along the old Pony Express route by a salt-lake basin and the Sand Mountain dunes to Middlegate, a desert crossroads with fuel pumps, bar, motel, free cyclist camping and tumbleweeds rolling through. The next day, we pitched our tent in the crumbling Nevada mining town

of Austin, where a motel manager let us shower free and sold us free-range eggs.



Some fellow cyclists popped up repeatedly, including Kim Seong-geun from South Korea, center, and Caitlin Fitchett from New Zealand, right, here climbing toward Lizard Head Pass, Colo., on Day 24.

PHOTO: STEPHEN KREIDER YODER

"No services next 78 miles," our map warned as we left our next stop, Eureka, and we filled our water containers with a collective four gallons. Taking a break day in Baker, Nev., we met Kim Seong-geun from South Korea, who kept popping up on later days—one of dozens of touring cyclists we would encounter who provided counsel and camaraderie.

Our fears of reaching an impasse were unfounded, even on Day 15's climb to 10,350 feet in the badlands of Cedar Breaks National Monument in Utah.

Then came The Wall, in [Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument](#). We had no drive left. Dejected, we turned off the road and headed ¼ mile downhill to Calf Creek campground and found just one site unoccupied. But could we make it up The Wall even tomorrow morning?



A heat wave was upon us, so we woke at 2:30 a.m. and stopped for

a late lunch at 10:30 a.m. just outside Hite Outpost, Utah, on Day 20.

PHOTO: STEPHEN KREIDER YODER

## Before dawn

Our mood turned after we found cold beer.

At a nearby campsite, a family invited us to join them for a Fat Tire. Back at our site, the creek bed nearby was smooth stone, and we bathed looking up at the canyon walls. To bed at 6:45 p.m., we woke at 3 a.m. and established a new principle: Climbs shrink before dawn. We were soon outside a cafe eating a breakfast burrito and warm coffee cake in Boulder, Utah. Maybe we could make Virginia after all.

We wouldn't hit a wall that hard again. On Day 20 at Hite Outpost, Utah, [the temperature hit 108](#), but we got up at 2 a.m. the next day and pressed [on past Bears Ears](#). On Day 27, we scaled our highest altitude, Monarch Pass in Colorado, at 11,312 feet.

The climbs would be easier now, we told each other. We were wrong.



Utah and its stunning scenery—and heatwaves and winds—were behind us at 6:30 a.m. on Day 23.

PHOTO: STEPHEN KREIDER YODER

After riding through the Kansas prairies, we found the Ozarks and Appalachians more grueling, with steeper inclines, higher humidity and narrower shoulders—and with more bike-chasing dogs, as bite marks in one rear saddlebag attest.

Our riding often ended with us in our sleeping bags by 7 p.m., our legs still throbbing even after a hearty dinner from the campstove. We got up still sore at 3 a.m. only thanks to a little contest: The first to let out the sleeping-pad air won, after which there was no further sleeping. The next contest was whether

Karen could make coffee before Steve got the tent down; Karen began winning after she perfected her technique.

We rode eastward with one looming dread: "Mount Vesuvius." That's what westbound cyclists in Colorado had darkly called the climb that would be our last major ascent, a narrow, winding 1,500-foot rise from tiny Vesuvius, Va., with some of the route's steepest grades. We used our predawn principle, inching up in the darkness at 3 miles an hour, stopping every 15 minutes, calling out "we're hiking now" and zigzagging when we could to reduce the grade just a few percentage points. We emerged, exhausted, on the Blue Ridge Parkway to pleasant pedaling in the early light.

Then came the whee, marred only when our front brake overheated the rim, bursting the tube—the last of our trip's seven flats.

On our 61st riding day, we cycled an easy 63 miles by old plantations along the Virginia Capital Trail and through Colonial Williamsburg to dip our front wheel in the beach off Yorktown, the end of Adventure Cycling's TransAmerica trail and destination of the 1976 Bikecentennial route established to celebrate America's bicentennial.

We sipped IPA at the Yorktown Pub and asked, what did we learn? A lot:

- We could do it, and safely. We're pretty old, but we averaged 63 miles a day covering 3,819 miles—including an Ohio River ferry and a lift through a dynamiting zone—using principles we had begun developing on shorter trips: Plot attainable days, then push each other to make it there; keep a modest pace and rest often while absorbing the scenery; aim to get up at 3 a.m., riding by 4:30 a.m. to avoid heat and traffic, and stop for lunch at 9 a.m.; make fun of the poor drivers trapped in their cars; congratulate ourselves at every day's end. We broke up the 61 riding days with off days and longer breaks with family, taking 12 weeks in all.

Our bright headlight announced us upfront. In back, a California flag projected two feet into the road from a pole with a flashing red light on the end. Karen watched her mirror, calling out "car!" when a vehicle approached and waving just before it passed "to let them know we're humans." At a general store east of Bryce Canyon, a driver who had passed us said: "You send out an aura of safety."





Steep climbs from the hollers yielded sublime rides like this, on Day 48 on a ridge in Lancaster, Ky.

PHOTO: KAREN KREIDER YODER

- America is hilly. We knew that. But not really. We climbed a little over 184,000 feet, our GPS app tells us, more than six Mount Everests. By car, Nevada was long flat stretches punctuated by mountain passes; by bike, it was the converse. The hills out of Kentucky's hollers were blips on the map compared with soaring Rockies inclines, but they took every ounce of energy.
- There isn't an ugly state. There wasn't a day that didn't surprise us with the beauty of the earth and towns in it. Our maps routed us mainly onto rural roads and Main Streets where pickups huddled outside cafes. Kansas vistas weren't peaks and mesas but towering cumulus over wheat-field oceans and grain-elevator monuments; our last morning there, the mist lifted to reveal a herd of longhorns.
- Oh, there was plenty of ugly. The hazard-strewn shoulder of busy Antioch Bridge the day we left home comes to mind, and spewing from towns everywhere was the sprawl of strip malls and storage units. But soon, we always knew, the route would direct us on to roads where wildflowers were our constant companions and where we could watch great blue herons launch slowly from streams or hear coyotes yelp before dawn. Farm animals were our audience: We called out to cattle, which feigned interest, and to sheep, which mostly did not.





At Wyant's Store in Crozet, Va., we breakfasted on 'Dave's Mess,' a mix of eggs, potatoes, sausage, cheese and other goodies. The 'Plate of Crap' at Dove Creek Dinner Bell in Colorado, right, was our second breakfast on Day 23. PHOTOS: KAREN KREIDER YODER(2)

- Food is an unguilty pleasure. Ride all day, gobble what you want: Doughnuts! Pancakes! Biscuits and gravy! At Dove Creek Dinner Bell, just over the state line into Colorado, our menu choice was obvious: "Plate of Crap," \$10. The server warned we might not be able to finish the mix of eggs, hash browns, bacon, sausage, ham, onions, tomatoes, peppers and cheese smothered in homemade green-chile sauce. She clearly didn't know us.

That was breakfast. Each day, we'd stop for a gourmet midmorning picnic lunch—typically an array of hard cheese, anchovies, crackers, pickles, carrot slices, apples and chocolate. We ate ice cream by the pint. And large bags of chips.

- Most drivers are considerate. Sure, we encountered jerks: the semi driver who passed us downhill in Nevada, then braked hard and turned in front; the pickup driver in Colorado who got out and demanded we "get off the road"; the woman laying on her horn tailgating us in the Ozarks.

But we had no scary close calls. Most drivers held back until they could pass safely, and hundreds waved or gave thumbs-ups. We logged only four observed middle fingers.

West of Torrey, Utah, we held up traffic several times in one-lane construction zones. After we cleared the last zone, a pilot truck driver opened her window as she slowed to pass and yelled: "You guys are awesome!"



We had deflated our mattresses by 3:40 a.m. on Day 46 after a good night's sleep at Fordsville Volunteer Fire Department in Kentucky.

PHOTO: STEPHEN KREIDER YODER

- Americans are hospitable. Wherever we stopped, curious people approached to chat: Where are you from? Why are you doing this? Do you get along? Welcome to our town, and God bless you. Many offered water or food. When we were huddled in a farm building during a thunderstorm near Boone, Colo., a passerby in a truck drove us and the bike to better shelter.

Eager hosts were everywhere. We camped in city parks that offered us free pool admission. On Day 36 east of Walnut, Kan., the Immanuel Lutheran Church sign proclaimed "bicyclists welcome." We set aside toys in a Sunday-school room for our sleeping bags; a note in the kitchen said, "Help yourself to ice and food items," which included fried chicken, sausages and ice cream.

After our longest ride, Day 45 at 98.9 miles (century schmentury), we slept next to the red trucks at the volunteer fire department in Fordsville, Ky.

On Day 59, we pedaled into Mineral, Va., looking for the volunteer fire department that welcomed camping. At a red light, a disheveled man leaned out his pickup window and demanded to know where we had ridden from.

We answered, hesitantly. He threw his head back with a full-throated laugh: "From San Francisco? Well, God bless America!"

- We exceeded our hopes. When people along the route asked "why?" we responded "why not?" It was the same reason hikers set off on the Pacific Crest Trail, but with better downhill. We feel compelled once in a while to do something crazy to dynamite ourselves out of our comfort zone, and we succeeded.



Our trip ended at Yorktown, Va., where we dipped our front wheel at the beach. Next stop: Yorktown Pub.

PHOTO: STEPHEN KREIDER YODER

• We get along on the road. An old cycling saw has it: “Wherever your relationship is going, a tandem will take it there faster.” We occasionally argued about dumb stuff—directions, or when to stop—but spent most of our saddle time pointing out scenery and sounds and smells, analyzing the world’s problems, singing in harmony, or silently absorbing the moving picture of rural America.

We were transient, but it felt like the right place. Poring over our trip photos this month, Karen said: “It makes me homesick.”

So there’s this alluring bike route called the Southern Tier, from San Diego to St. Augustine, Fla. We’ve started poking pushpins along it on our wall map. Autumn would be the perfect time to set off.

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Corrections & Amplifications

A photo taken in Nevada was shot between Middlegate and Austin on Day 9 of the bike trip. A photo caption in an earlier version of this article incorrectly identified the location as between Fallon, Nev., and Middlegate on Day 8. (Corrected on Feb. 24.)

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*Appeared in the February 26, 2022, print edition as 'ACROSS AMERICA, ON A TANDEM BIKE.'*

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