The Bay Area by Bike

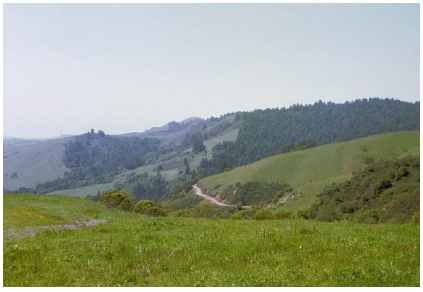
By Doug O'Neill

Copyright © 2003 Doug O'Neill

Sunday

San Francisco is infamous for its fog. However, as I drove up to San Francisco this April morning, the clouds began to disappear around the airport, and by the time I reached the city it was sunny. Quite unusual, but surely a good omen. Good omens are reassuring when embarking on an adventure like a seven-day bicycle tour around the Bay Area. Of course, the Go Greenbelt! tour is bound to have good karma; after all, the ride raises money for the Greenbelt Alliance, enabling it to protect open space and our quality of life.

This was my second year doing this tour, so at the introductory breakfast meeting, I got to say hello to some familiar faces and some new ones. I left the meeting a bit early, as Steve, the ride coordinator, asked me to point riders in the right direction at the Great Highway. He didn't want anyone starting the week out wrong, by riding into the ocean or something.



Open space on the San Francisco Peninsula

That put me at the back of the ride. I rode along the Great Highway with Jamie, a pediatrician from Redwood City. Just as the road begins to rise a bit from the ocean, we came across another group of stopped cyclists and joined them to see what they were looking at: A pod of whales swimming along Ocean Beach. We could see an occasional spout, which is usually exciting enough, but here we got to see the backs of the whales as they came out of the water for gasps of air. It was soul-stirring.

I felt fortuitous that Steve asked me to point riders in the right direction. If I'd left with the other riders, I probably would have ridden with the "Jets," the fast riders—the hammerheads—whose race-like pace produces an enormous adrenalin and endorphin rush. But if I'd ridden with them, I would have missed this fantastic site.

I never did catch up with the Jets today. I managed pretty well on my own, though. According to my cycle computer, I made it up Old La Honda in 21 minutes: a personal best by a minute and a half. I'm still in a bit of disbelief. Maybe the battery was getting slow, or maybe the falafel or ginger cookie I ate at Robert's Market in Woodside for lunch metabolized perfectly to maximize the amount of energy delivered to my legs.

In any case, I felt good. I enjoyed the ride through the beautiful green open spaces along Skyline Boulevard that much more. And as I descended into the valley on Route 9, I passed by some succulent wisteria, and got a giant whiff of its heavenly scent. In Saratoga, I felt motivated to make a little sidetrip to Villa Montalvo, not for a concert or to wander its gorgeous grounds but to simply view and smell its blooming wisteria.



Wisteria at Villa Montalvo

Then, it was on to Los Gatos, where we got to soak in the hot tub at the Los Gatos Athletic club. It was a wonderful start to the week.

Monday

It was pleasantly warm this morning. I rode with the Jets as we made our way from Los Gatos and through Almaden Valley to the reservoirs. Then Ken, an architect from Oakland, turned on the power. I couldn't keep up. He'd spent the winter training on a rower. Apparently, that's Lance Armstrong's training regimen. Leave it to Ken to research and duplicate this. Architects have intense personalities, don't they? Instead, I rode with Emily, an easy-going medical researcher, and surveyed beautiful lupine-filled fields as we made our way to a press briefing in Gilroy.

At the press briefing, we learned about the importance of land use zoning. A proposed change to the Gilroy land use plan would change the industrial zone of one site, which was adjacent to Monterey Highway and a cement plant, to a rural zone, and change the rural designation of another site near some outlet stores to industrial. The Greenbelt Alliance pointed out that these changes would result in a hodgepodge of parcels not well-suited to their designation and ruin some pristine lands forever.



Press conference



Coyote Creek Trail

Today's ride brought us through areas in southern Santa Clara County with clear development pressures. Developing these lands sensibly can control traffic impacts and produce parcels viable for their intended uses. This afternoon, we rode along Coyote Creek trail, surrounded by vivid purple lupines and bright orange poppies, then ascended Metcalf Road. The descent down San Felipe Road brought us from pristine hillsides, to newly developed subdivisions stuck into the hillside, to the promise of even more development in the Evergreen area of San Jose. It certainly got us to ponder the purpose of the week's ride.



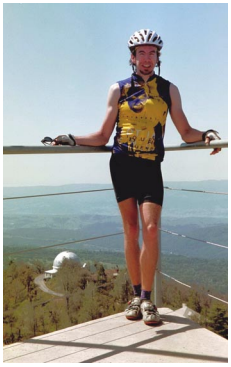




Descending San Felipe Road: Yesterday's pristine hillsides, today's subdivision, tomorrow's promise of new development

Tuesday

As we escaped the sprawl of San Jose today, we were reminded of the strange effect of hodgepodge development: We rode by some vineyards of Mirassou Winery, adjacent to gigantic homes—the vineyards seemed to replace lawns. Why would someone stick vineyards here, I wondered, before I realized that the vineyards had almost certainly been there first.



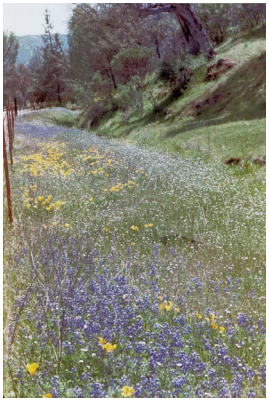
Me at the top of Mt. Hamilton

It was a relief to ascend Mount Hamilton, beyond the bustle of Silicon Valley below. It's a long ascent, but slow and steady. I was lucky to be riding with Steve, who pointed out trees in which birds had burrowed acorns, and got me to look down the steep cliff, which was covered in flowers: popcorn, owl's clove, lupine, and other varieties.



A sea of blue flowers

The descent down the backside of Hamilton is fun. Steep curvy roads are almost always fun: they challenge your ability and offer a rush of excitement. And the weather was magnificent. As I started the rollers of San Antonio Valley Road, I couldn't help but notice the flowers: they were everywhere. A patch of blue so vibrant it looked like water drew me. I had to stop to take a photo. And when I was stopped, I noticed all the other colors. It was an artist's palette of pinks, purples, yellows, and whites. I wanted a closer photo but a barbed wire fence stopped me.



San Antonio Valley

I stopped to say thank you to a man from the radio club that was helping track riders today. He thanked me for giving him the opportunity to get out today. Not only did he appreciate the flowers and the birds, but simply the silence. In the bustling world, silence is something we rarely have.



Up close and personal

Today was definitely a day of contrasts. Beginning in the bustling Silicon Valley, passing through the silence and beauty of San Antonio Valley, and ending in Livermore, a small town that is growing. A day to appreciate nature and what it offers us.



An artist's palette on San Antonio Valley Road

Wednesday

Today was the Mount Diablo diversion. It's not part of the official ride, but doing it makes me feel like a real athlete—dare I say, like a stud? Emily invited me to join the group from last year. She, Maggie, Bonnie, Jim and I were joined by two newcomers, Jamie and Margie. We left Livermore at 7:10 a.m. The traffic seemed worse this year: so many SUVs bringing children to school. I guess kids don't walk or take school buses any more. I actually welcomed the ascent. It was a chance to get out of the traffic.



Flowers on Mount Diablo



A satisfied post-descent pose

It was cooler this year. The flowers were remarkable, though, particularly on the descent. I wanted to stop and take a photo, but no way was I going to mess up the fun part, not after all that climbing. Then it was onto Kirker Pass, not as steep uphill and the descent was straight and smooth, allowing you to build up speed. I was looking forward to that. I wanted to beat my record from last year: 52 m.p.h. But it wasn't meant

to happen. I only managed 51 this year. But I can't complain if that's my biggest disappointment.



Wind generates and consumes power

When we reached Antioch, we were hungry. Emily spotted a hot dog joint and announced that she was going there. I haven't had a hot dog since fifth grade and didn't particularly feel like changing that now. Fortunately, the sign said "Jerry's Gyros and Hot Dogs." A gyro didn't sound so bad. The line was actually quite long. As I was heading to my seat, I chatted with one of the locals, who was impressed that we had cycled from Livermore. She thought it funny that we had just stumbled upon Jerry's. She said it's the best lunch spot in town. Serendipity: one of life's pleasures.

From Antioch, we headed across the bridge to Rio Vista. There, we shared an apple fritter at the local bakery. By then the endorphins were kicking in. We were laughing spontaneously—at the unfunny memory of cutting cantaloupe by a waste disposal site and then eating it, at other's laughter, at anything. Life was good.



Montezuma Hills

On we headed, through the serene Montezuma hills. There, we faced a fierce headwind. The windmills seemed to be generating enough power to combat what remained of California's energy crisis. The wind also drained our legs. At the rest stop, I consumed a Clif Shot and was energized—enough to pull the group all the way back to Fairfield, blocking the wind for the others and ensuring that we got to that night's stop before the showers closed.

And that night, chocolate chip cookies had never tasted so good.

Thursday

After yesterday, the ride was bound to get easier. We started with a breakfast of pancakes and fresh strawberries, followed by a press conference at Wooden Valley Winery. The Greenbelt Alliance discussed Solano County's transportation

tax, on the ballot in the fall. The Greenbelt Alliance wants taxes like this to include funding for projects that support alternative means of transportation, including bike paths and mass transit, in addition to highways. Alternative modes are essential to any long-term transportation plan.



Wooden Valley

From the winery, we rode through the rest of Wooden Valley on our way to Napa County. The green hills were covered with hairy vetch, a purple flower often mistaken for lupine. In Napa, we headed for Stag's Leap Vineyard, where we had a wonderful lunch at their private grounds next to a lake: smoked turkey and tofu sandwiches along with a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. The food, the setting, and the warm sun were enough to lure me asleep. Why hurry?

After I woke, it was on to St. Helena and Spring Mountain Road, a very steep road that leads in to Sonoma County. It's the steepest road of the ride, but by this point, it's just another hill—a hill with some beautiful flowers: Steve pointed out the fairy lantern, a rare yellow flower.



Siesta time

Of course, with every hill, there's a fun descent, and this was no exception. Calistoga Road leading into Santa Rosa was fun. I didn't remember this last year. It must be that there were no cars in front of me this year.



Coleman Valley

Friday

This morning started with a pleasant ride from Santa Rosa to Graton, where rumor had it there was a nice little place to have breakfast. Turns out that the locals call Willow Wood Market one of the best restaurants in Sonoma County. I found a peaceful place to sit out back, where I was

lured by a fragrant jasmine plant. The egg salad sandwich with pesto, melted fontina, and fresh tomatoes and basil was wonderful.

From Graton, we headed to Occidental. The generous volunteer staffing the rest stop shared his birthday cake—a scrumptious carrot cake topped with blackberries. Fully charged with a morning of wonderful food, I was ready to tackle the hills on Coleman Valley Road. At the top of the ridge, the wind was howling, and at the coast the surf was roaring. Fortunately, it was a tailwind.

The tailwind was so strong, it actually pushed us up one small hill on Whitaker Bluff Road in the farmlands of western Marin. Leaving Tomales, however, the wind changed direction, and became a fierce headwind, a wall of wind stronger than anything we encountered near Fairfield. Pedaling as hard as I could and barely moving 5 m.p.h. was a weird experience.



Wind sweeps across Marin farmland

As I reached Olema, our destination for the night, I felt as if I hadn't ridden enough. I wanted a longer day. The beach beckoned me. So, I started the trek to Limantour Beach, part of the Point Reyes National Seashore: A short journey over another small hill. Descending toward the beach, I encountered a strong crosswind, strong enough to push me into the other lane; fortunately, there was no oncoming traffic. At the near empty beach, I paused long enough to take a snapshot and breathe in some of those feel-good negative ions before attacking the steep grade back. An hour and a half and 18 miles later, I returned to Olema. Emily and Maggie didn't know what sort of monster they were creating last year when they took me on their Mount Diablo diversion.



Limantour Beach

The most challenging part of the day was putting up a tent in the fierce wind. I had never considered the windproof quality of a tent before.

Saturday

The final day started with some wonderful sticky buns fresh from the Freestone bakery. Excellent fuel for our last climb: Mount Tamalpais. From Highway 1, we ascended Fairfax-Bolinas and Ridgecrest roads, which featured great views and more wildflowers.



Flowers on Mount Tamalpais

At the top of Tam, the group assembled for a group picture, and then started the bittersweet final descent to San Francisco. Back to civilization, and back to traffic.



Top of Tam



Group photo

The 500-mile trip offered me a chance to smell the roses: a chance to slow down and see what's around me, including earth's largest mammals, beautiful vistas, colorful flowers, and simple silence. Nature and open space rejuvenate us. Throughout this trip, we were never more than a few hours drive from home, though it often seemed like thousands of miles. Open space is worth saving and protecting. That is why this ride and organizations like the Greenbelt Alliance are so important.



I made it!