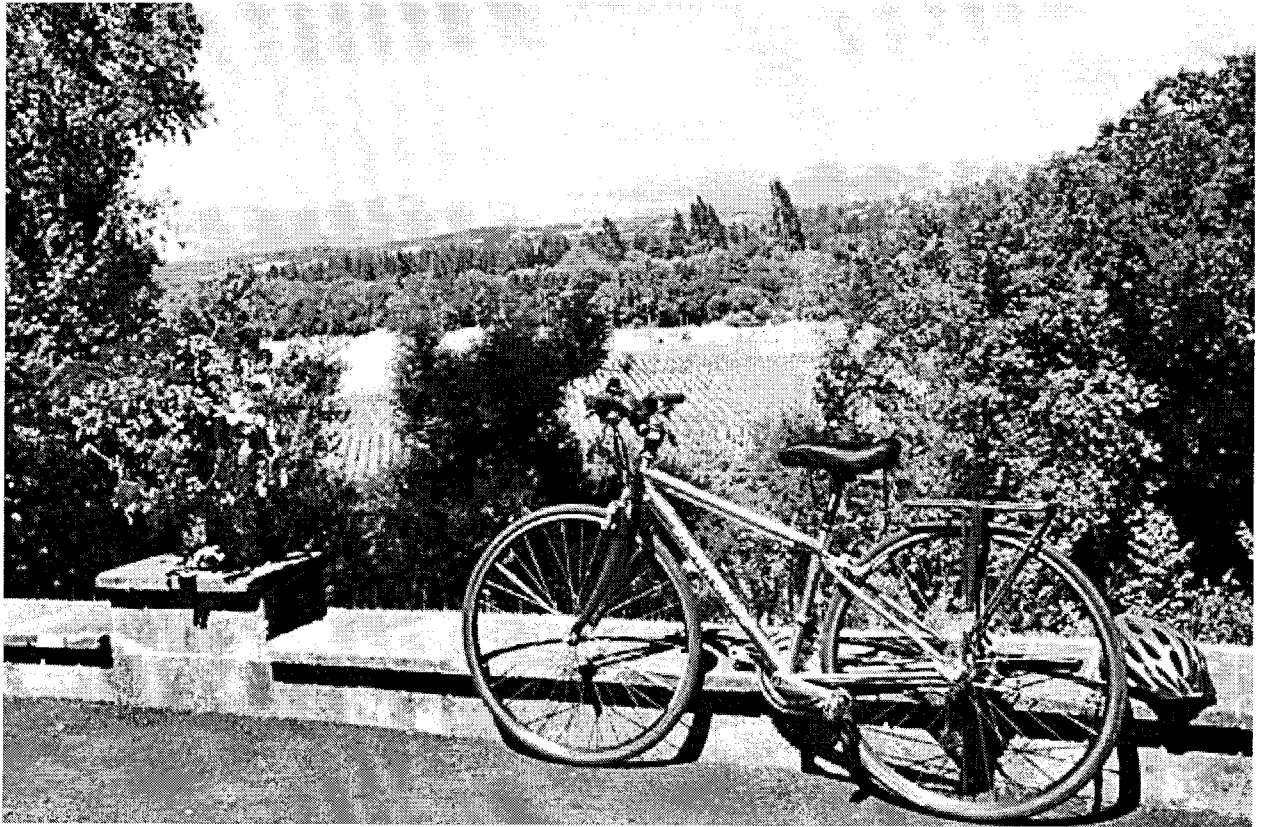


Napa tour can be geared to tired pedallers

BY DAWNA FREEMAN, POSTMEDIA NEWS



View of estate vineyards from Madrona Manor in Dry Creek Valley.

Photograph by: Dawna Freeman, for Postmedia News

When my family saw the bandage and road rash on my leg, they demanded to know if I had been drinking before I fell off my bike.

A valid question.

My husband and I spent six days in July biking through Northern California's wine country. Our 222-kilometre loop through the renowned counties of Sonoma and Napa began in the valley of Sonoma, climbed west to the Pacific Ocean, north along the misty coastal bluffs, inland through the redwood forest of Russian River Valley, northeast to Dry Creek and Alexandra valleys, and back down to Napa.

This two-wheel trip was one of the first -- and still one of the most popular -- of the 150 trips offered by Backroads, an international active travel company. We had never been on a group vacation, never mind an active one. But we had heard this company, celebrating its 30th year, took care of your whereabouts as well as your what-abouts.

We chose the Premiere Inn trip, meaning we dropped our tender tushies in a cushy bed each night. By day, we visited historic wine communities, talked to grape growers, picnicked under 1,000-year-old redwood trees, sampled some pricey but absolutely yummy wines, and dined on regional cuisines at Michelin-starred restaurants.

Did I mention we had to cycle 40 km a day to do this?

Having driven to Sonoma and Napa, we were keen to visit Russian River, Alexander and Dry Creek valleys, three of 14 wine appellations in Sonoma County. For the appellation name to appear on a label, 85 per cent of the grape must be grown in that

geographic area. Napa County has 16 appellations, one of which is Stag's Leap, which put Napa on the world map in 1976 when French judges gave its '73 Cabernet the highest marks in a blind tasting in Paris.

DAY 1

Under the shade of massive live oak trees at Etude Winery in Sonoma, we meet our co-leaders and the other 24 cyclists at a wine-tasting lunch. There are serious cycling couples who pack their own pedals and saddles, two-wheeling wine lovers, back-of-the-pack pleasure riders and high-functioning cyclists who likely convinced their partners to come along for the accommodations, food, wine, spas and scenery. Everyone but us hails from the eastern States.

DAY 2

The morning riders are undaunted by the vine-stitched mountain rising from the valley floor. The rest of us opt for the shuttle to Matanzas Creek Winery for our Chardonnay and Merlot wine tasting and lunch.

Today's destination is the five-acre, lushly landscaped Bodega Bay Lodge and Spa, which overlooks bird-filled marshes at Doran Park Beach. The bay was established as a port by Russian settlers. I'm excited about cycling through the 19th-century fishing village of Bodega, made famous in Hitchcock's *The Birds*, but our back-road route bypasses the highway village. The leaders are officially off duty once they lock up our bikes and unload our luggage each day, but one of them hears my "what-about Bodega" and offers to zip me in to town to get a photo of the recognizable white church the schoolchildren ran screaming to in the 1963 classic.

DAY 3

We wake to an invisible horizon and the bleeping sound of a bleeping fog horn every bleeping 15 seconds, reminding us there are fishing boats in that misty harbour. The near-saturated air and mid-teens temperature are refreshingly cool as we wind along the coastal bluffs for 16 km. I'm glad everyone keeps stopping to take pictures of surfers or waves crashing over the rugged rocks.

Our premier accommodations do not disappoint. After a cool morning start, we relax by the pool at Madrona Manor, an 1881 antique-furnished, Victorian mansion in the Dry Creek Valley. A Russian River winemaker joins us on the veranda for a pre-dinner rosé wine tasting. Dinner seating is always open, so couples who don't ride together can dine together.

DAY 4

Another postcard day; the breeze is light, the clouds are fluffy and few. I reach my Zen place quickly, thoroughly enjoying the ride, the scenery and my husband's company. He's no longer shouting out tips to curb my spasmodic movements (... not the bigger gear, the smaller gear ... don't coast, pedal! There's another hill).

Suddenly he calls to pull over onto the other side of the road so he can take a photo. I shoulder check and veer quickly, not noticing the fist-sized landscaping-rock chips on the other side until my wheels stumble over them. I brake and the back tire shoots out from under me. I land heavily on my bare leg, the sharp rocks tearing into my skin. We stop the bleeding from the cut below my knee and cycle the remaining five km to lunch at the Robert Young Winery. Apparently, I was the third person that morning to fall down while pulling over, but the only one requiring medical attention.

DAY 5

The recorded voice on the other end of the phone at 5 a.m. tells us our balloon ride over Napa is cancelled due to fog and wind. I reset the alarm to book my one-legged, full-body massage at the Mediterranean-style spa while my husband cycles 20 km north to historic St. Helena, where homes go for six figures.

We get serious about uberwine tasting in the afternoon, joining two other couples in a private tour and cheese-paired tasting at Duckhorn Vineyards in St. Helena. We sample four of their 2006 estate-grown Merlots and Cabs.

DAY 6

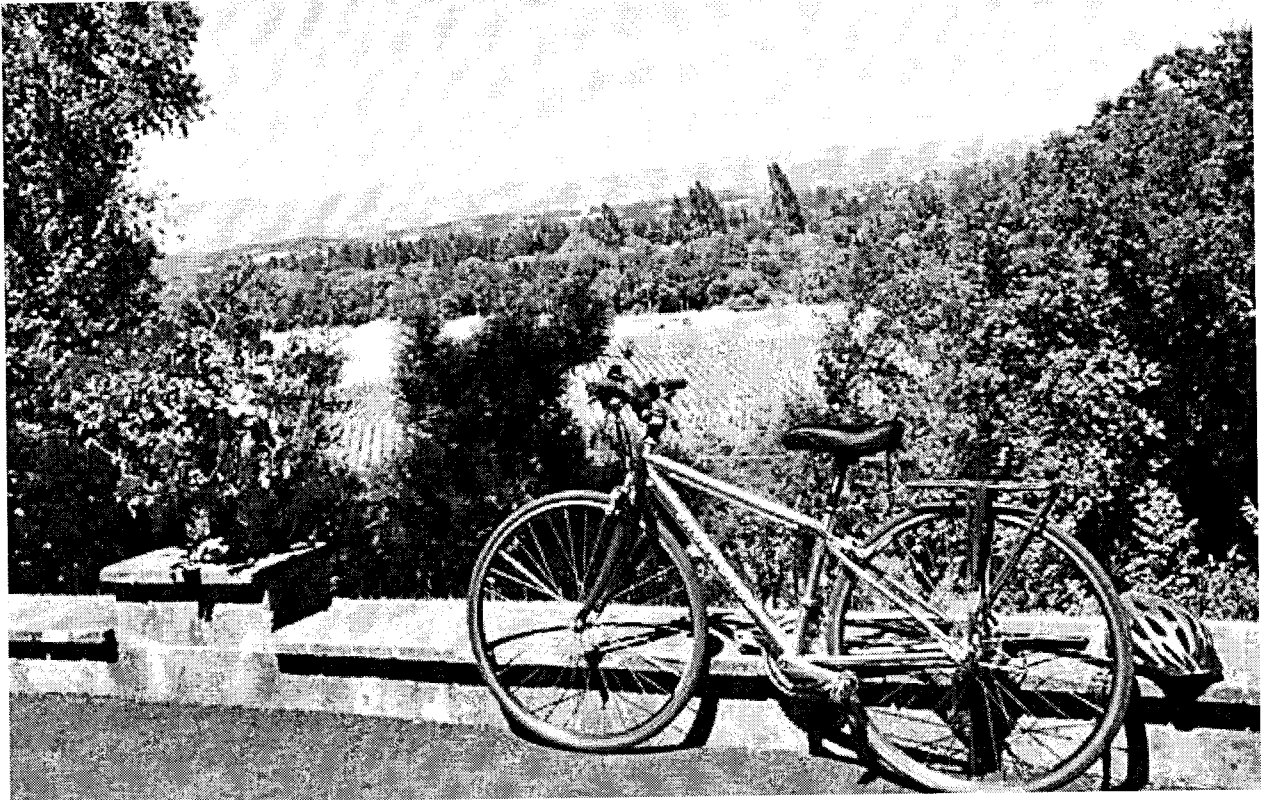
My husband takes the final "heart in your throat" morning ride -- a 244-metre rise in elevation over 1.5 km. He seems to grow more serene with each day and I'm not taking it personally. In cycling through wine country, we've shifted down to life's easier gear, slipping into rhythm with nature herself. Who knew this two-wheeling adventure would be a meditation in motion.

For more information on this and other active vacations, visit backroads.com.

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