

The Skinny on Cycling
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“Is this the fella who rode all the way to Shreveport on his bah-sickle?” is what I heard from the true Texas cowboys who were practicing their ropin’ for an upcoming rodeo. The doggies were running and dust was flying while cowgirls in tight jeans and ten gallon hats watched their men work lariats around the feet of young Longhorn calves.

“That’s gotta be over a hun’rd miles in one day!” exclaimed Gary, who sat high on a sweaty horse so big that his saddle has to be special ordered from a catalog. Among these folks, I was the topic of conversation for an entire week.

Earlier in the year, as my wife was planning this week-long vacation to visit her Uncle and Aunt who live in Atlanta, Texas, I wasn’t thrilled about the idea of a week in such a remote area with nothing to do. I was concerned that I wouldn’t be able to find enough to eat among Aunt Josie’s famous southern deep fried dishes. I was concerned that, with only a few weeks left to prepare for the RAIN ride, I wouldn’t be able to put many miles on my bike in this remote and deserted area of Eastern Texas. I was even concerned that parading around Texas in spandex pants might gain me some “unwanted attention” from the more conservative residents. But, in the end, my desire to stay on track with my RAIN training won out and my wife agreed to pack a little less luggage so that I could take my bike.

As we arrived, I noticed a sign at the foot of the driveway at Uncle James’ house that said “Shreveport, LA 50 miles”. That sounded like an invitation to an unsupported century to me and the next day I headed toward Shreveport. To my surprise, the ride took me through some really beautiful country. I rode past oil rigs and rice farms. I spent some time on a bridge overlooking Black Bayou watching for alligators. I counted armadillo roadkill and took a nice nap in Oil City, a small boomtown where the area’s first oil well was drilled in 1904.

I was surprised at how fascinated people were with my bike and that I was riding 100 miles in a day. I stopped at a grocery store for lunch and everyone who walked by my bike stopped to ask questions and look over my equipment. In little towns, kids would stop playing to wave and smile. And, although the two-lane roads I used had a speed limit of 70 miles per hour, none of the hundreds of log trucks crowded me to the shoulder or seemed impatient as they waited for me to finish climbing a hill or rounding a corner.

That night, as I sat eating dinner with Uncle James and Aunt Josie, it hit me like a ton of bricks: I had been worried about being able to find anything to eat that was suitable for my Sugar Busters diet. I had been worried about food while we traveled and was worried about all the fried, fatty, southern food that is so closely

associated with this area of the country. But food was not a problem on this trip. I enjoyed green beans with water chestnuts and hot peppers, boiled squash with onions, a marvelous pot roast and my personal favorite, stewed onions and carrots—all within Sugar Busters' guidelines. On the road to Texas and back, my family ate at buffets so that my daughter could enjoy macaroni and cheese while I ate a nice salad with grilled chicken.

As I sit and write this column, a strange realization has come over me. Two years ago, I was an overweight guy who would never consider cycling 100 miles in a day in a strange area of the country. I used to eat whatever I wanted and didn't think about exercise at all. When I left for this vacation, I was worried about being out of place and away from my routine. To those Texans, I was certainly an object of curiosity, but not because of my weight loss or my diet. To them I was just someone who really enjoyed cycling.

In the end, it seems that it took a trip hundreds of miles away from home, some unexpected southern hospitality and careful selection from some great southern cooking to complete my transformation from Fat Guy to Cyclist.

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Wade Wingler, the author of "The Skinny on Cycling" is the father of one adorable little girl, the husband of a beautiful & talented librarian, a Yogi and an avid cyclist. His web site, www.HowILost100Pounds.com features common sense advice on losing weight without suffering and improving your cycling through healthy living.