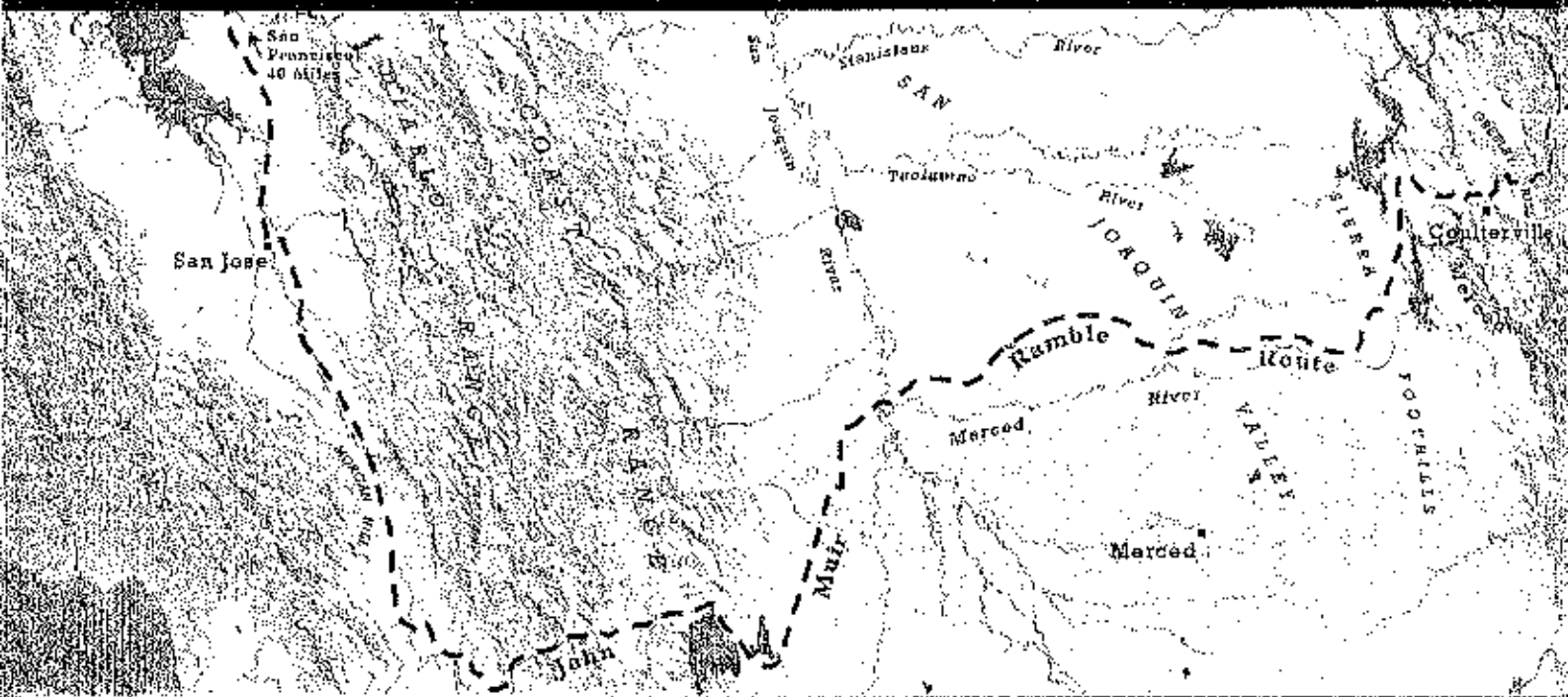




the Muir Ramble Route



Story by **Cindy Ross**

Photos by **Bryce Gladfetter**

the Bay Trail

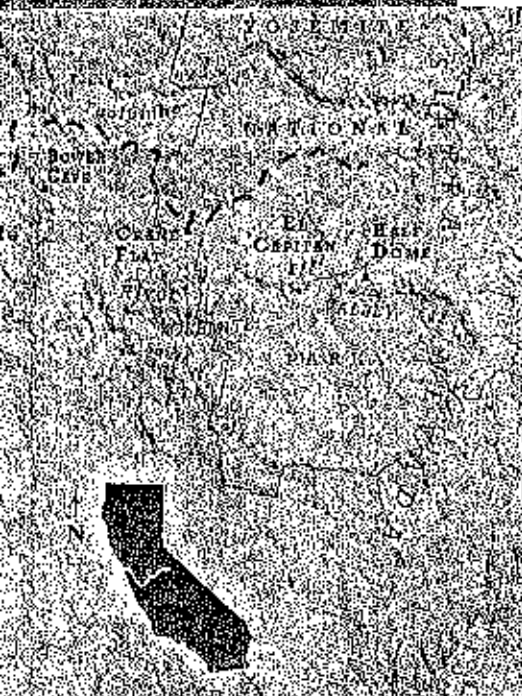
The San Francisco skyline receded in the background as the ferry cut a foamy wake in the deep blue waters of the bay. Our loaded touring bicycles glinted in the California sunshine. We gnawed on chunks of crusty sourdough bread purchased at the bakery at the ferry dock, John Muir heavy on our minds. Muir was America's most famous naturalist and conservationist. In 1868, he began an epic journey to Yosemite, traveling 300 miles to see the breathtaking valley that he had heard so much about — the new tourist attraction in the California wilderness. In Yosemite Muir realized his destiny — to protect and preserve America's most exquisite natural landscapes and to dedicate his life to writing about them. He walked there in 30 days; we would cycle the same distance in nine. It is the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service, and we were here to celebrate.

My husband, Todd, son, Bryce, and I were following in Muir's footsteps, using the *Muir Ramble Route (MRR)* guidebook written by Peter and Donna Thomas. They spent several years researching Muir's route using original source documents from the archives at the Muir Center at the University of the Pacific located in Merced, near our Ramble Route. Much, but not all, of Muir's original route has been paved over into major roads; some miles completely coincide with the route Muir took. Other stretches of the MRR seek out wild places that Muir would probably pass through if he were making his journey today. He had come in April when the wildflowers were rioting, spring rains painted the hills Ireland green, and the Yosemite waterfalls were explosions of whitewater. We rode in his spirit, seeing today's California through Muir's eyes.

Our first seven miles of trail passed effortlessly as we disembarked in Oakland and pedaled through Jack London Square and onto the Bay Trail. This multipurpose trail will someday encircle the entire San Francisco Bay for a total of 500 miles. Today 340 miles have been constructed. It is a yellow brick road to stunning beauty and wild places in the midst of one of the biggest port cities in America. For the next two days, we retreated to its peace, inhaling the salty air and watching shorebirds

dip and dive and the salt grasses wave in the wind. Had we turned back, we would have seen San Francisco receding farther and found it difficult to believe — it was merely miles away. We circled around marinas and rode long stretches around wildlife preserves and through coastal parks until the meandering

Left: Morning fog displays the layers of forest in Henry Coe State Park, a former private ranch. Below: At 89,000 acres, Henry Coe State Park is known for having some of the best mountain biking in northern California.



trail vanished. It spat us out onto urban streets and then lured us back on the trail. The handy Bay Trail route cards we obtained from the San Francisco Bay Trail Association helped us navigate this evolving trail section.

After heading south for 24 miles, we arrived in Coyote Hills Regional Park, the only group of hills on the Bay Trail. The park boasts 14 miles of trails in this wild playground, and we camped here amid the deafening spring peepers and a sea of waving grasses. The trail then followed the west shore of the bay for two days. We watched sailboats and kites catch the wind until we arrived in San Jose at the edge of Silicon Valley. An extreme juxtaposition of lifestyles was present here as the homeless set up shop under bridges along the Coyote Creek and Guadalupe River trails while mansions, manicured lawns, and gated communities

held the wealthy indoors.

The MRR guidebook suggested seeking out a "reasonable" hotel for the night in San Jose, but we opted for signing up with Warmshowers.org, a worldwide organization offering alternative overnight stays for long-distance cyclists.

Our host for the night, Bart, was recently retired on disability with Parkinson's disease. An avid cyclist his whole life, biking helps this former financial wizard stay limber and mobile. He opened up his heart and his restored Victorian home to us.

I thought of Muir settling in for the

night on his journey over 100 years ago. He often rolled himself up in a blanket and slept wherever night overtook him, but at times he slept indoors in taverns and lodges and with folks along the way, much as we did in San Jose.

the Diablo Mountains

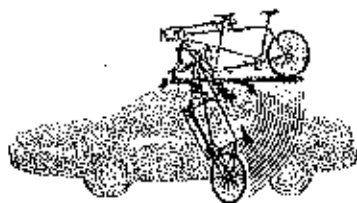
As we cycled south, the ever-present Diablo Mountains converged with the Coastal Range at Morgan Hill. We finally turned east, pushing our bikes up much of the eight miles of the serpentine, dead-end East Dunne Avenue. Olympic racers train here, and they flew past us at lightning speed as if sporting hollow bird bones. At the road's zenith, where the pavement gave way to dirt, sits the 87,000-square-foot Henry Coe State Park. The Coe family, who operated the Pine Ridge cattle ranch here until 1913, gifted this rugged and remote park to the California people.

We snaked down fun singletrack to China Hole,



TOPPER RACKS

Roof top carriers for singles tandems recumbents



Pivoting & non-pivoting styles available

A NEW DIVISION OF ATOC



Receiver hitch carriers for singles tandems trikes recumbents

ducking through twisted manzanita forests whose burgundy-colored branches looked like capillaries in muscle tissue. These dirt tracks were built before anyone invented a switchback. We rose and dropped over steep hillsides shaped like egg cartons — the land seemed right out of a Dr. Seuss illustration. Gnarly live oaks extended their arms, bands of wild turkey crossed our tracks, and tangerine-colored poppies littered the fields. Although the ride across Henry Coc was our most challenging, it would become our favorite day of the entire Muir Ramble.

Our friend, Tom Hanks, has been a national park ranger for most of his life and occasionally portrays John Muir in monologues with a Scottish accent. Besides deeply relating to the philosophy of America's most famous conservationist, Tom shares a birthday with Muir. It happens to fall on April 21, the day we crossed Henry Coe State Park and ended at historic Pacheco Pass where Tom came to celebrate with us.

Over dinner, Tom recited famous Muir quotes as we watched the full moon rise and listened to coyotes call. On this very pass, Muir first laid eyes on the Sierra Nevada in the far distance and exclaimed that it should be called the "Range of Light" instead of the Snowy Range.

the Central Valley

You might think that crossing the pancake-flat San Joaquin Central Valley on the far side of the Diablo Range would prove to be boring cycling — it was anything but. Indeed, we found every section of the MRR to be unique and beautiful in its own way.

Across the Central Valley, we followed the smooth-as-glass California Aqueduct Bike Trail. This asphalt pathway parallels a man-made river with concrete sides, carrying water from the Sierra to San Francisco. The velvety green hills jumped up from the waterway's far side, and on the other side Black Angus cows munched grass in the sunlight. We watched red-tailed

Before we began our trip, we visited the John Muir National Historic Site in Martinez (jnm.gov/john), the home where Muir lived with his family, and wrote most of his books and articles. Visitors can see Muir's Scripps calendar and his original letters, and read the letter writer on which Muir's daughter wrote about all of his longhand manuscripts. Public transportation is easy from San Francisco. After our cycling trip, we visited Hetchy Hetchy in Yosemite National Park, the last environmental fight Muir would wage before his death. Muir's great-great-grandson, Robert Hanna, is continuing Muir's work by restoring Hetchy Hetchy and bringing down the dam (hetchy.org). Like his robes of Hetchy, he also works in California's redwood forests, trying to preserve our natural resources in open spaces.

hawks dive for scurrying mice while vultures feasted on a dead cow. The big sky was wide open, displaying a dramatic cloud theater. A swift tailwind pushed us along. We marked our rapid progress along



Carver All-Road touring frame
\$1399.00

Carver Bikes

Heavy duty welded rack mounts and fender eyelets.

Disc brake, cantilevers or caliper braking

Sliding dropouts to accommodate virtually any drivetrain setup, including internally geared hubs

Optional travel couplings

44 mm road tube to accommodate any fork

Longer fixed tube for all day comfort

These water bottle bosses

File clearance for up to 44 mm tires

Low bottom bracket for flat comfortable, stable foot

Long 22.2 x 1.2 mm chainstay for stability

- 3/2.5 aerospace titanium for durability and comfort
- 11 sizes to fit any rider (or custom for \$200.00 extra)
- Maintenance free brushed finish
- Heavy 38 mm downtube, swaged at the BB and head tube

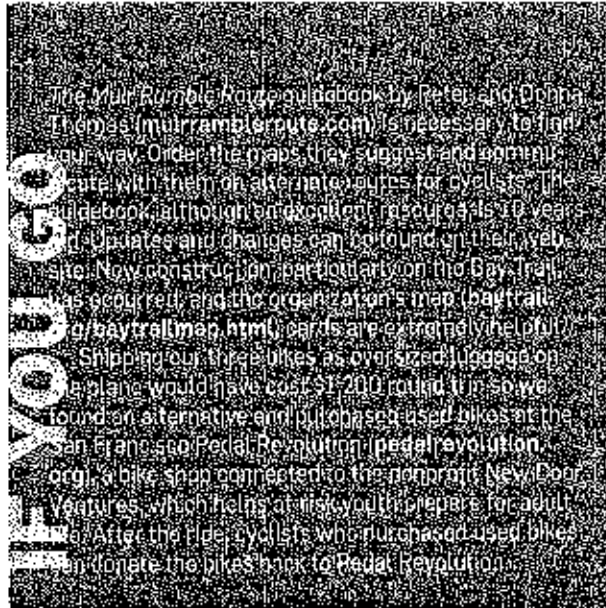
Carver Bikes
Woolwich, Maine
1-800-BIKEMAN (245-3626)
www.carverbikes.com
dave@bikeman.com

the aqueduct by counting off the half-mile signs painted on the sloping walls.

After nearly 20 miles on the aqueduct, we hung a right to Newman (which was called Hills Ferry when Muir came through) where we found some of the best authentic Mexican food. The obscure restaurant was attached to a bar with no sign out front. A friendly local patron pointed it out to us.

We turned onto the dirt maintenance road paralleling the Main Canal, which carries irrigation water to this agricultural mecca. Black irrigation hoses snaked like anacondas throughout the orchards and shot mists of water up onto the sweet-smelling almond trees. Parallel rows of grapevines, owned by large wine-maker Gallo, were planted in a precise grid, and tiny yipping dogs raced along fences surrounding modest homes. A dead raccoon was draped over an orchard's no trespassing sign. Orchard workers in high rubber boots zipped about on four-wheelers. We passed by cheese factories, dairy farms, and orchards, places where folks work hard to grow and package much of America's food. Strawberries were in season, and we stuffed our faces with the sweet crimson fruit -- one of the gifts of cycling the Central Valley.

Throughout the valley, we camped at the state recreation areas, which were a little tired looking and neglected but still provided a good place to pitch our tents. When we reached Fields Road on the east side of the valley, we noticed



The Muir Rambler Route guidebook by Peter and Debra Thomas (muirrambleroute.com) is necessary to find your way. Order the maps they suggest and communicate with them on alternate days for cyclists. The guidebook, although an excellent resource is 10 years old. Updates and changes can be found on their website. Now construction is particularly on the Bay Trail, has secured, and the organization's map (baytrailmap.html) cards are expanded (vibel.com). Shipping out three bikes as oversized luggage on a plane would have cost \$1,200 round trip so we found an alternative and purchased used bikes at the San Francisco Pedal Revolution (pedalrevolution.org), a bike shop connected to the nonprofit New Door Ventures, which helps at-risk youth prepare for adult life. After the ride, cyclists who purchased used bikes donate the bikes back to Pedal Revolution.

the land beginning to rise ever so gently. We rode this second-most-favorite stretch of our route, across the grassy ranchlands with cattle running alongside us like "The Running of the Cows." They crashed through creeks like wildebeest in the Serengeti. Beyond the foothills loomed the snow-covered Sierra, and the sight stirred me. Muir felt eerily present. He herded sheep in these very same hills the year following his walk to Yosemite, so drawn was he to this beautiful place.

the Sierra Foothills

Before dropping into the historic mining town of Coulterville, we climbed up Penon Blanco Road for a startlingly beautiful view of Horseshoe Bend on the Merced River. Muir sketched along his journey, and my favorite drawing was done from this ridgetop, a place he referred to as the "First Bench" in the Sierra foothills.

Occasionally we followed State Route

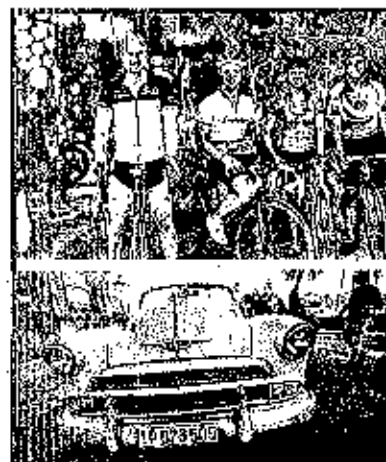
132, officially designated as the John Muir Route, with signs designating its importance. It was the original wagon road and later automobile route into the park and one Muir often utilized in his later journeys. When he descended into Coulterville, Muir bought himself a horse for the remainder of his journey and a gun because he was warned of the bear population in the valley. Coulterville still remains one of America's most authentic western Gold Rush towns with wooden sidewalks and the oldest saloon in California. Theodore Roosevelt also stayed in Coulterville during

some of his visits to Yosemite.

We rested up in Coulterville at the John Muir Geotourism Center, hosted by the organization's director, Monty Thornburg. The nonprofit operates a gallery where elaborate, floor-to-ceiling, handmade tapestries tell the history of the Yosemite Valley, from prehistoric times to Muir's first visit to the creation of the National Park Service.

On quiet, meandering Dogtown Road, we exited Coulterville and climbed higher into the Sierra. We made a stop at Bower Cave, a gated natural wonder that Muir also visited on his journey. Local historian Kris Corey accompanied us, sharing how an elevated wooden platform was once suspended at the cave's opening, providing space for the live band as they played for their dancing guests at the base of the cave.

We stayed at Dawn's Cottage (via Airbnb) in Greeley Hill, owned by two colorful artists -- Jim, who paints



MENTION ACA AND GET \$200 OFF PER PERSON!

BIKE CUBA

Join us on the **only legal** people-to-people bike tour for the American traveler. See authentic Cuba while you still can!

Cuba Unbound

CubaUnbound.com | 800.624.0482

landscapes, and Dawn, who works in collage. They delivered freshly ground coffee in the morning, lively conversation, and a much-needed rest after near-constant pushing since we left San Francisco. Across the road from their place was a lovely view of the Bean Creek Preserve. The tract was donated to the Sierra Foothills Conservancy by the founders of the John Muir Gentleman's Center.

We seemed to have ascended into another world at what Muir called the Second Bench. The air smelled crisp and spicy, filled with the aroma of pine. The cozy rural roads were blanketed with soft, peach-colored needles, and the trees grew in astonishing girths, eluding us in to what lay ahead in Yosemite Valley. In the Kowana Valley, we rode past an historic, weathered-looking building in a resident's backyard that was once Black's Stage Stop. This stone and wood building was Muir's probable overnight stay when he passed through.

Our climb up to Crane Flat was remarkably painless, for on this ninth and final day of our ride, we had finally acquired our cycling legs. When we stopped for a cold drink at the gas station, the clerk warned us of the dangerous 18-mile descent.

It was with some anxiety that we sped down the John Muir Highway into Yosemite Valley, pumping our brakes so they wouldn't overheat and riding fairly close together so vehicles and motor homes could pass all three of us at one time. We stopped at pullovers to rest our aching hands and absorb the spectacular views. When Half Dome and the other granite guards of the valley burst into view, my eyes welled with tears at the overwhelming beauty of Yosemite.

In 1903, out of the blue, President Roosevelt wrote a letter to John Muir, whom he had never met, asking Muir to lead him on a visit to Yosemite. Roosevelt had been reading Muir's books and wanted to see Yosemite with the famous author. Roosevelt and Muir talked "Forest Good" among the towering giant sequoias and thundering waterfalls.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 49

Adventure Cycling Association

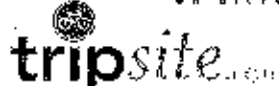
THANK YOU

Thanks to the supporters of May's "Build it. Bike it. Be a Part of it" fundraising campaign — our generous members, sponsors, and partners — Adventure Cycling raised over \$150,000 for the development of the U.S. Bicycle Route System (USBRS). Learn more at adventurecycling.org/USBRS-support.

SURLY



cascade
BICYCLE CLUB



Colorado Heart Cycle | Valley Spokesmen Touring Club

Bike Touring News | Blackburn | Burley |
Club Ride | Cygolite | Jones | Orillie |
Osprey | Road Holland | Salsa |
Sinewave | SKS



The U.S. Bicycle Route System now has 11,243 miles of officially recognized and numbered bicycle routes. When complete, the USBRS will incorporate more than 50,000 miles of safe and scenic routes connecting people, communities, and the nation.



A view just as good today as it was for John Muir in 1868, looking toward Yosemite Falls.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23
MUIR RAMBLE ROUTE

This event convinced Roosevelt to save Yosemite, part a movement that contributed to the birth of the national park system.

There is no finer place in America to finish a cycling adventure than Yosemite. The valley hummed with the booming voice of the waterfalls and burst with snowmelt from the high country. The white dogwood flowers decorated the trees like ornaments. It was indeed a place to celebrate the fact that John Muir first took his long walk from San Francisco to see this glorious place with his own eyes. Along our ramble, we gained a much deeper appreciation for the beauty of America, its preserved lands, and for Muir himself, the "Father of our National Parks." ☉

Cindy Ross loves riding her bike almost as much as she loves writing about it. Read about her travels at cindyrosstraveler.com.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 40
MECHANICAL ADVANTAGE

Back to our quest for the ultimate performance touring bike. The answer now should be obvious: ditch the rear load and you can use the frame of a racing bike for touring. I am not suggesting to have a sag wagon follow you. Instead, carry the load on the front.

Letting the front wheel carry your load has many advantages. You can use a racing frame with the same inherent flex characteristics, since the frame doesn't actually carry anything. The front wheel isn't dished (unless you use disc brakes), so it's stronger than the rear, yet it carries much less weight. Have the front wheel carry its share, and reduce the burden of the overworked rear wheel!

A front load handles better, too. Bikes are balanced by moving the front wheel from side to side to keep it underneath the bike's center of gravity. To balance a front load, you simply move the front wheel. However, to balance a rear load, you first have to move the front wheel and wait until the rear wheel follows. This lag means that a rear-loaded bike weaves much more as it rolls down the road than does a front-loaded bike. Carry your load on the front, attached to low-rider racks, and your bike's handling will be much more precise. Ideally, you'd adjust the front-end geometry for the load's inertia on the bike's steering, but at least with low-rider racks this is secondary. (It's more important when you carry a handlebar bag.)

Does it really work? The answer is an emphatic "Yes!" My own randonneur bike has an ultralight steel frame (with tubing walls that measure a mere 0.4 mm). It is completely unaffected by a 40-pound camping load. It's easy to ride out of the saddle. It steers with precision. Rolling on supple, high-performance tires that are 42 mm wide, I enjoy gravel roads. Yet on smooth asphalt, the same bike feels like a good racing bike and flies along with the same speed. It's a win-win situation.

You don't need to get a custom steel randonneur bike to experience the joys of "performance touring." Many

modern gravel bikes are equipped with fork eyelets that make it easy to add a low-rider rack. Gravel bikes are basically racing bikes with added tire clearance. For *Bicycle Quarterly*, we tested a Specialized Diverge by taking it camping on gravel roads near Mount Rainier. On the way back into town we engaged in an impromptu race with a pair of triathletes. On traditional touring bikes we wouldn't have stood a chance, but on that day the only thing that held us back was the air resistance of the front panniers. And even that is less than you'd think, because the panniers shield the rider's spinning legs. (We've tested that in the wind tunnel.) As a result, the triathlon guys had to swallow their pride as two bikes with front panniers paelined off into the distance.

Obviously, you'll have to pack lightly to fit everything into two panniers, but it's doable. Many of today's "front" panniers are a bit small, and the larger "rear" models have a trapezoidal shape for added heel clearance that you don't need on the front. As "front-load only" touring becomes more popular, more bag makers will offer larger front panniers. (In the photo on page 40, you see Gilles Berthoud panniers that are ideal for this application.)

The traditional touring bike with front and rear racks still has its place for extended trips that require carrying lots of gear. Yet many of us have tighter schedules and just want to camp at the end of a mountain road before returning the following day. The new breed of gravel bikes offers the tantalizing prospect of combining the performance of a racing bike with the ability to go touring. And thanks to their wide tires, these machines are true "allroad" bikes that don't shy away from gravel roads. They combine a road bike, a gravel bike, and a touring bike all in one. That makes them pretty much the only bike many of us need. ☉

Jan Heine is editor of *Bicycle Quarterly*, the magazine about the culture, technology, and history of cycling. More information is at bikequarterly.com.