

Astoria to Lewiston – the Columbia and Snake Rivers

Introduction

As you may have read, Jeanne, Chico (our dog), and I have had a bike adventure. They followed me from the mouth of the Columbia River for five days as I rode solo up to Lewiston, Idaho in June. We were unable to put together the “dream team” of Kevin, Bob, and myself like we did for the coast ride last September, so I decided to ride alone. I hoped to pick up other riders along the way to ride with, but was sorely disappointed. In the five days and 485 miles, I saw one other rider going my way, and he was loaded down with touring gear and incompatible with my program. Overall, I would highly recommend the ride, as the route was borrowed by Jeanne from Trek Travel. Kevin McTighe did much of the same route two years ago as the start of his cross-country journey.

I will give more of a day-by-day description of the route, road, etc. than Chico was able to provide in his daily reports. This is more of a cycling log, whereas Chico gave a broader overview of the region, history, and culture, all from a dog’s point of view.



The Coast Guard is VERY big in and around Astoria, as the treacherous Columbia Bar at the mouth of the river frequently necessitates their services and makes an excellent training site.



Overview from Astoria Column of Astoria, the bridge to Washington, the mouth of the Columbia, and Cape Disappointment in the distance. Cape Disappointment was so named by English Captain John Meares, who concluded there was not actually a river there after all!

Day One --Astoria to Portland

US 30 runs from point-to-point on this leg. On a summer Sunday, however, it was quite busy, with lots of RVs and trailers. The road quality was fine, scenery good, and the shoulder pretty decent, but this was not my favorite route with that much traffic. Fortunately, Jeanne had cooked up a scenic alternate that was a big improvement. From Westport, we took a cute little ferry across the Columbia to Puget Island. The road crosses this bucolic island for 4 miles, and then a bridge gets you to the north bank of the Columbia. The 30 miles on this highway on the north (Washington) side were the scenic highlight of the day. And there was less traffic on this side of the river. At Longview, I crossed back over the river to Rainier, back to US 30, which seemed better now, possibly due to the brisk tailwind which was developing! I cruised into Portland after 108 miles and 4500 ft of elevation. The hills were mostly rollers earlier in the day, culminating in Clatsop Summit at **676** ft above sea level!!



This little ferry from Westport to Puget Island provided a scenic alternate to busy US 30.



The Port of Longview, from the bridge to Rainier. It's all about TIMBER, and LOTS of it!

Day Two -- Portland to Hood River

I made my way over the beautiful St. John's Bridge and across town to a nice bike path along the riverbank past the airport and headed east towards Troutdale. Very scenic, easy riding, some on paths, and some on the levee road. Troutdale is the start of the Historic Columbia River Highway (HCRH), or Historic US30. This renowned route definitely lives up to its reputation. First it climbs up through a couple villages to a couple of spectacular viewpoints looking up and down the Columbia Gorge. Then down near river level to a series of fabulous waterfalls and winding highway stretches. Most of the falls were viewable with a short "clomp" around in my bike shoes, and the others didn't need viewing! The HCRH is narrow, with minimal shoulder, but I wasn't bothered, as most folks were going quite slowly, stopping a lot, and being very considerate. In a few places, stretches of the HCRH have been converted to bike paths, and these are quite nice. And then there is the FREEWAY (better get used to it!). Sometimes the HCRH and paths disappear altogether, and you're on the shoulder. I-84 has a nice wide shoulder, and is a scenic ride, but it's still a freeway! In a few places (mostly on Day 3, I think) there are bridges where the shoulder shrinks uncomfortably, and extra care is required. Bonneville Dam area and its navigation lock and fish hatchery are in a beautiful location and are worth visiting, even though they don't let bikes into the dam/powerhouse area any more. Once again the brisk tailwind was a welcome boost in the afternoon (after all, Hood River IS famous for its wind surfing and kite boarding). I found the day a bit disconcerting; the constant stopping for sights and pictures seemed to interrupt my "rhythm". I covered 87 miles and 4750 ft.



This floating subdivision east of Portland was kind of cool.



Upriver view from the Portland Women's Forum State Park, allegedly the best view in Oregon, or some such claim.

Day Three -- Hood River to Boardman

With the forecast of a hot afternoon, I was in a bit of a quandary: start early to beat the heat OR start late and maximize the tailwind advantage in the afternoon? I decided to start early, as there were over 100 miles on the agenda, and was thrilled to find that I got BOTH the cool morning AND the 20 mph "push"! The first climb out of town is to the last of the dedicated, bike-only stretches of the HCRH, and it's FABULOUS! In Mosier, I discovered fresh cherries make a wonderful bike snack, just dumped straight into my jersey pocket. Great for snacking, and I got a lot of practice spitting the pits at the highway reflectors! Could be problematic in a large group, with pits ricocheting and flying all over I guess, but for a solo rider it was fun. The HCRH continues to The Dalles, but after that it's 70 plus miles of freeway! With the tailwind, though, it wasn't too bad "highballing" down the road close to 30 mph for hours on end. I spun up to 37 mph on a flat stretch, and could have surely hit 40, but the shoulder was starting to look a bit sketchy at that speed. The scenery continues to be nice, though not up to the premier standard of the gorge west of The Dalles; miles of wide river (actually a series of reservoirs) lined by basaltic volcanic bluffs. Just west of Boardman, it flattens out and large center-pivot irrigation "crop circles" take over the landscape. With the tailwind, it was a relatively easy 108 miles and 3,400 ft.



There were numerous HUGE loads of future wind turbine towers, heading down the highways. They weren't a problem, however, as there were plenty of pilot cars and with the light traffic, they were able to give me a wide berth.



The gorge and bluffs gradually diminish in depth/height as you proceed upstream.

Day Four -- Boardman to Walla Walla, WA

This was the low point of the ride. Not a bad ride really, just a letdown when compared to the scenery of the rest of the ride. And NO TAILWIND, which was becoming an expectation! For the first 20 miles or so, you couldn't even see the river, also an expectation! Then it got better at McNary Dam and Lock. This was a beautiful area, impeccably maintained by the Army Corps of Engineers with our tax dollars, and had the excellent Pacific Salmon Visitor Center. Here the scenery improves, with nice river/lakeside views, bluffs, and some mountains. Just after the Washington state border, I met US 12, heading east and leaving the Columbia. There are some nice river valleys, rolling hills, and vineyards as you approach Walla Walla's booming wine country. The highway is fairly busy, but the shoulder is a comfortable width. The day's stats were only 78 miles and 2,200 ft, but it felt tougher without the wind!



The Corps of Engineers has beautiful parks at each of their numerous dam/lock sites up and down the river. This dam had a “water slide” - a part of an elaborate “water park” to facilitate fish migrations down the river as they try to mitigate the impact of all the dams and reservoirs.



The scenery changed once the route left the Columbia.

Day Five -- Walla Walla to Lewiston, ID

The rainy morning wake-up was an unwelcome surprise, especially for a planned 100 mile day! But by 10:00 a.m. it had stopped, and by 10:30 it was dry enough to ride comfortably. Tearing myself away from the Germany vs. USA World Cup match, I set off, worried about more rain. I stayed on US 12 all day, even though there was a tempting shortcut, since it was unclear whether this alternate was paved all the way. The wind was back, but not as strong. It was mostly favorable during the day, but for a few miles I found myself looking at the BACK side of a row of wind turbines, NEVER a good sign. The scenery was nice, mostly rolling hills until near the end of the day when I hit the Snake River, which is back to the Columbia dry lava bluff/butte landscape. Alpowa Summit, at 2,785 ft was the high point of the whole ride, but was no big deal, even though I hit it 80+ miles into the day. Even though the hills weren't that steep, with the tailwind, I found myself braking to keep the speed under 40. Braking on a downhill is something of a novelty for me, but a behavior I'm trying to cultivate in the interest of longevity!! By the time any of y'all do this route, they will presumably be done with the "**ROAD CONSTRUCTION NEXT 13 MILES**" heading into Clarkston, but that was certainly a nasty way to end the day! Gravel flying everywhere; from vehicles, from my wheels, etc. I got a rear flat after 10 miles of that nastiness. But the weather held out, and the afternoon was very nice, as I finished the day with 102 miles and 5,500 ft elevation. The highway quality was a mixture of very wide, spacious shoulders and some stretches where the shoulder was minimal.



Not a welcome sign when you have 14 miles to go at the end of a long day!



Not much of a summit, as summits go!

Conclusions

- BYOB - Bring Your Own Buddies, because you'll be disappointed if you're hoping to pick up other riders to team up with along the way.
- At least at this time of year, the West wind is often formidable. Research as to wind trends at other times of year would be advisable, because I think this is often a windy place. Maybe I'm just a wimp, but fighting an all-day headwind can be sort of a "deal-breaker", especially if you're alone.
- The Gorge, Troutdale to the The Dalles (dumb name for a place, no?), is the heart of the ride, with the best scenery. The rest of the ride varies from average to very nice to great scenery.
- My mileage on CHERRIES is between 40-60 miles/pound....
- On the eastern section of the ride (last 2 ½ days), the opportunities for services (food, water, bathroom) are sometimes limited. I was in the habit of not carrying much food and only one water bottle, as centuries (and even our Coast ride last year) have rest stops every 20 miles maximum. This became awkward a couple times, as there were a couple of "barren" stretches of at least 30 miles. Support from my "SAG partner" was not an option, as she was usually nowhere near (having told me "you're a big boy"). In fact, she was often in a different state, as she was exploring both sides of the river, and the limited number of bridges makes it difficult to be very responsive!