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Bicycle Tourists: Staying Connected at Public Libraries

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Each year thousands of bicycle tourists stop at public libraries throughout the United States. They are looking for a place to relax, access to computers and Wi-Fi, and a knowledgeable person that can provide information about the area. In this article, public libraries situated along transnational bicycle routes or statewide bike rides share their experiences in providing services to bicycle tourists passing through their towns and using their libraries.

An Introduction

Peter McLaren, a bicycle tourist from Scotland, describes himself as a huge fan of the U.S. public library service. In 2011, during a bicycle tour across the United States, Peter made frequent visits to libraries to update his online journal, check email, and talk to the librarians about the area. One day in Colorado he was delayed in crossing Hoosier Pass by a big thunderstorm. Peter figured the Fairplay Public Library was an excellent place to wait until the weather passed. His stormy entrance to the library resulted in staff and patrons rushing to his rescue. Soon the librarian was phoning the nearby Breckinridge Library to check on the weather on the other side of the pass. Other people were working to find Peter and his cycling companion alternative accommodation for the night. One library patron offered the use of her cabin in nearby Alma, only six miles down the road. As Peter remarked, "That kind of micro-information is sometimes hard to find . . . a library can be an oasis."¹

Bicycle tourists such as Peter are people that travel by bicycle. They may be on a short overnight trip, a week-long ride across the state, or a three-month journey across the United States. They may be travelling by themselves or in the company of thousands of other cyclists. Some bicycle tourists ride self-

contained—carrying all their camping gear and other necessities on their bikes. Many bicycle tourists bypass cities for quiet rural areas or remote scenic locations. In these locations, cell phones or modems may have difficulty in picking up a signal. And although some towns are too small to have a McDonalds or coffee shop, most of them do have a public library. For bicycle tourists, libraries provide beneficial services such as a place to relax, electricity to recharge electronic devices, access to computers and the internet, and the opportunity to speak with a local person knowledgeable about the area.

Adventure Cycling Association: Supporting Public Libraries And Bicycle Tourists

One group that has recognized this special relationship between bicycle tourists and public libraries is the Adventure Cycling Association (ACA), a nonprofit advocacy group for people traveling by bicycle. Over the last thirty-five years, ACA has researched and produced more than 41,000 miles of routes for the bicycle tourist. Their maps list services such as bike shops, hotels, campgrounds, restaurants, grocery stores, and post offices. Around 2001, users of these maps requested that Adventure Cycling begin to include sites that provided Internet access as well. According to Carla Majernik, routes and mapping director for Adventure Cycling, she and other staff members realized potential problems in listing Internet cafés on the maps because of the transient nature of such businesses. According to the ACA staff, the logical choice for connectivity was local public libraries. Beginning in 2003, Adventure Cycling began to list libraries on their maps. Today the ACA maps include an estimated 1,500 public library locations throughout the United States.

Although some bicycle tourists create their own trip itinerary, many follow the Adventure Cycling routes. The most popular cross-country Adventure Cycling route is the TransAmerica Trail, established in 1976 to celebrate the U.S. Bicentennial. This route stretches 4,241 miles from Astoria, Oregon, to Yorktown, Virginia. One library along this route is the Damascus Branch Library of the Washington County Public Library System in Virginia, notable for serving both cyclists riding the TransAmerica Trail and through-hikers on the intersecting Appalachian Trail.

A second cross-country route is the Northern Tier route, spanning 4,294 miles between Anacortes, Washington, and Bar Harbor, Maine. The Jesup Memorial Library in Bar Harbor is just down the street from the Village Green, the center of community activity in busy downtown Bar Harbor. According to the library director, Ruth Eveland, they see many bicycle tourists ending or just beginning the Northern Tier route, as well as bicyclists seeking information about cycling the carriage roads in nearby Acadia National Park.

The shortest transnational route, at a “mere” 3,058 miles, is the Southern Tier route between San Diego, California, and St. Augustine, Florida. Travelling the Southern Tier route, bicycle tourist Marti Fine said the library staff at the Washington Municipal Library in Washington, Louisiana, went out of their way to welcome her and her husband Dave. The couple had just finished checking email and updating their online journal when one of the staff invited them to the back room where, in Marti’s words, “she placed on the table a container of something that smelled great. It was a delicious dish of shrimp creole from one of the town’s best lunch spots, the Cafe Opera. What a wonderful treat!”²

Crazy Guys (And Gals) On Bikes

A popular website that offers insight into bicycle tourism is called crazyguyonabike. Here you will find more than 7,500 journals (personal diaries that describe bicycle trips), along with more than one million pictures of bicycle adventures from all over the world. The online journals make it clear that bicycle tourists are using public libraries. Searching for the keywords library or libraries in the online journals resulted in 9,948 hits. The journals are full of anecdotes of librarians helping cyclists in unexpected ways—locating medical care, offering a place to spend the night, and even feeding hungry cyclists.

The journal of Jim and Dianna Devisser reads like a travel log of public libraries. In the summer of 2012, the Devissers bicycled part of the Northern Tier route from Kalamazoo, Michigan, to Seattle. They made the trip without a mobile phone and used libraries to update their online journal, check email, ask directions, use the restrooms, obtain water, find town information and camping choices, and to take an occasional nap. In total, they stopped at thirty-three public libraries on their forty-two-day journey.

Reading the online journals gives an idea of what it is like to be a bicycle tourist. Your trip may be in the middle of the summer, in 100+ degree heat, or you may be cycling into a strong headwind or cycling in the rain or cold weather. You cycle forty to eighty miles a day, often passing through small towns in rural areas of the country. At times it can be quite lonely. People often ride routes solo or with one other person. Communicating with spouses, family, and friends back home is an important part of the journey.

Using Public Libraries To Stay Connected

Bicycle tourists are using public libraries for a variety of communication needs. Will Stein, reference librarian for the Washington County (Va.) Public Library System, says bicycle tourists use their computers for blogging and checking email. For those bicycle tourists who travel with smart phones, tablets, or laptops, public libraries usually provide free Wi-Fi access. At the La Crescent Public

Library in Wisconsin, Director LaVonne Beach says they provide twenty-four-hour Wi-Fi access both inside and outside the library. They even provide outdoor seating for after-hours Wi-Fi users.

A surprising number of bicycle tourists travel with no phone or only a “stupid” phone, as bicycle tourist Chuck Harmon refers to standard cell phones. A cyclist from Ohio, Chuck sees bicycle touring as an opportunity to get away from nonstop email and Internet dominating his day. Instead he stops at public libraries to use their computers to upload photos and update his journal. Because he does not like to pre-plan his trips, he also uses libraries to plan his route and camping stop for the next day. Josette Coffman, who travels without a cellphone, says libraries are her primary source of connectivity. Libraries are so woven into her daily schedule that her mother once asked her “is this a bike tour or a library tour?”³

Ease of computer access is of primary importance to bicycle tourists. Marti Fine said they used libraries regularly to update their online journal and to check email along the Southern Tier Route. Only once did they feel the Internet access fee was prohibitive (five dollars). Usually access to computers was free or at a very minimal charge. Jim Devissier thought the public library in Bismarck, North Dakota, had the best computer access rules: no games or Facebook, and email was on separate computers at the cost of twenty-five cents for fifteen minutes. Jim feels that this made it possible for computers to be available at all times.

And the difference between stopping in a public library or stopping at McDonald’s for Wi-Fi access? Chuck Harmon says he always feels obligated to buy something anytime he stops at a place of business, but not at a library. He also spoke highly of the atmosphere of public libraries: “You’re made to feel welcome, and there are so many little things that you can do there that seem small and trivial but are very important to a self-contained cyclist.”⁴ Iain Cullen, a bicycle tourist from Scotland, says McDonald’s and public libraries complement each other. He likes libraries for their quietness, comfortable seating, space, and access to electric outlets. On the other hand, he feels more comfortable talking aloud on Skype in McDonald’s, plus there is food available for purchase.

International Outreach

Many of the bicycle tourists are international visitors discovering and using American public libraries. Toni Thompson from England says that public libraries are great for keeping in touch with family and friends, plus speaking with someone about the region: “I can update my web site . . . one of the bonuses is getting to talk to some of the local people including the librarians, lots of good information about the area.”⁵

Cullun said that “United States libraries are superb. No matter what other facilities a small town was known to have or lack, if it had a library, I looked forward to getting there. Friendly staff, a comfortable seat away from the heat or the cold and rain, access to books, Wi-Fi, and toilets. Most of a touring cyclist’s immediate needs taken care of right away.”⁶ Another Scot and self-proclaimed U.S. library fan, Peter McLaren, remarked that given the state of the economy in Scotland, many of the libraries have closed or have limited hours. He noticed that is not the case in the United States, and even the smallest towns had libraries opened regular hours—a service he came to depend on.

Often hearing accents among bicycle tourists, Cliff Croxford, a desk clerk at the Madison County Public Library in Berea, Kentucky, said the library started displaying a world map, asking cyclists to pin their home location. This library recently hosted a large group of international cyclists riding through Berea, including bicyclists from New Zealand, Netherlands, Lithuania, Poland, and parts of Asia. Bicycle tourists from outside of the United States are accustomed to paying for Internet access at cyber cafés. Being unacquainted with American public libraries, Cliff remarked that international bicycle tourists often inquire about the cost of computer access.

Statewide Bike Rides: RAGBRAI and GOBA

In addition to self-supported bicycle touring, cross-state group bicycle rides are sponsored in more than forty U.S. states. Two such rides are the Register’s Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa (RAGBRAI) and the Great Ohio Bicycle Adventure (GOBA). The RAGBRAI is the oldest and largest such bike ride, with its inaugural ride dating back to 1973. In 2012, the weeklong RAGBRAI ride included more than ten thousand official cyclists accompanied by an estimated five to ten thousand unregistered rogue riders. The week-long GOBA ride is smaller, limited to three thousand riders. Each of these rides is supported, meaning that the organizers carry riders’ gear and camping equipment, leaving the cyclists with less weight to carry.

The Day The Cyclists Came To Town

Many of the towns selected to host RAGBRAI contain far fewer citizens than the ride’s estimated fifteen to twenty thousand bicycle tourists. In 2012, several small towns in Iowa hosted RAGBRAI—towns such as Cherokee (population 6,000), Lake View (1,142), Webster City (8,070), and Anamosa (5,600). During the day of RAGBRAI visit, the population of these towns increased by 200–1,000+ percent. The public libraries in each of these communities found themselves hosts to hundreds of hot, tired cyclists looking for electricity, computers, and an escape from the weather.

Libraries in both Iowa and Ohio reported huge increases of library users during the 2012 statewide bike rides. During RAGBRAI, the Lakeview (Iowa) Library reported an estimated four hundred cyclists using the library, while the Marshalltown (Iowa) Public Library hosted two to three hundred cyclists. Despite being smaller than RAGBRAI, the GOBA ride resulted in the largest number of cyclists visiting a public library. That honor goes to the Floyd E. Younkin Branch of the Pickaway County (Ohio) District Public Library in Ashville (population 3,200). This library branch hosted more than six hundred cyclists during GOBA's visit, in comparison to their usual seventy-five daily library users.

Library Services For The Hot And Tired Cyclist

Since both of these rides take place in the summer, the weather can be brutal, with high temperatures and thunderstorms. Many of the riders are seeking refuge from the heat, with temperatures often above 100 degrees. According to Joy Jewett, branch coordinator of the Floyd E. Younkin Branch Library in Ashville, Ohio, "Many cyclists took advantage of our air conditioning, and simply relaxed around the library reading books, newspapers, and magazines. We even had several fall asleep on our floor."⁷ In addition, libraries reported cyclists playing board games usually reserved for younger library patrons, playing with the Nintendo Wii stations, and researching local information.

Not surprisingly, many cyclists need a place to recharge electronic devices or want to use the library computers. According to Marcia Hummel, assistant librarian at the Lakeview (Iowa) Library, RAGBRAI cyclists "made use of every electrical outlet available for charging cell phones and using their laptops. We have five public use computers that were also in constant use during the hours the library was open."⁸ The Marshalltown (Iowa) Public Library and the Floyd E. Younkin Branch Library in Ashville, Ohio, both reported issuing more than one hundred daily computer guest passes for the day.

Libraries—Above And Beyond Expectations

Many of the libraries along the RAGBRAI and GOBA routes provided services for the bicycle tourists above and beyond traditional library services. The Marshalltown Public Library welcomed the RAGBRAI riders by opening up their big meeting room and kitchenette. Bicycle tourists were sleeping on the carpet and cooking ramen noodles for lunch. Sarah Rosenblum, the library director, even went a step further: she volunteered to host a cyclist-librarian and her husband at her home for the night. Sarah remembers the day of the cyclists as a very calm and positive experience: "They were all very considerate and actually vacuumed the room before they left. It was a very quiet and peaceful day in the meeting room."⁹

Jennifer West at the Hillsboro (Ohio) Public Library (GOBA hosts in 2006 and 2012), went online to the Unofficial GOBA Message Board to personally invite cyclists to visit their library, promoting their library services. Clearly she understood the needs of cyclists when she posted the following: “We have Internet access computers, a wireless hot spot, air conditioning and public restrooms!”¹⁰ They also provided cyclists with local information about restaurants and interesting places to visit.

The Carnegie Public Library in Washington Courthouse, Ohio, coordinated with the chamber of commerce prior to the GOBA ride and prepared a full slate of activities and services for the bicycle tourists. The library created the GOBA Lounge in their meeting room, a place to “Read, Relax, and Recharge.” There they set up several tables equipped with power strips and USB-capable charging adapters, board games, and a cart full of honor books (paperbacks that do not require a library card to check out). They filled their new books shelves with books about cycling, fitness, and local historical and tourist information, all heavily browsed during the GOBA visit. They even created bookmarks to distribute to the cyclists. Sarah Nichols, head of adult services, said that even with the lounge, there was not a free seat to be had for those few days: “We have a generous amount of seating and accessible outlets throughout the library and rarely was there a free spot.” Her response to the GOBA ride was extremely positive, stating that “this was a fun and exciting experience for us.”¹¹

Bicycle Tourists And Public Libraries: Of Mutual Benefit

A special relationship exists between public libraries and the bicycle tourist. For the bicycle tourist, the library serves as travel agent, cyber café, rest stop, electrical recharge station, and tourist information center. Often libraries are at the center of town, both figuratively and literally. For bicycle tourists like Peter McLaren, visiting the public library meant being included into the community and “being welcomed into that community felt special as a visitor.”¹²

Small-town libraries are especially appreciated by bicycle tourists. According to many cyclists, the importance of the library is often related to the size of the town. The smaller the town, the less likely it is to have alternative Internet resources, such as a McDonald’s or coffee shops. The library is often the primary source for connectivity, local information, and entertainment.

In return, bicycle tourists offer public libraries the opportunity to extend library services beyond the local community. There are many ways libraries can attract bicycle tourists to their doors. They can create policies that ensure computer and Wi-Fi access for nonresidents visiting for the day. They can also provide a place for bicycle tourists to safely and securely park their bikes. They can adopt the American Library Association’s National Library Symbol and display it on exterior signs appearing on streets and highways.

If a town has been lucky enough to be selected as a host for a statewide bike ride, the library can work with the chamber of commerce or city council to plan a full day of services and programs geared towards the cyclists. In preparation, it is a good idea to publicize the library through online forums, signage, and personal invitations to the cyclists. Library supporters can take advantage of the occasion to organize library fundraisers. The end result can be publicity for your library, improved cooperation between town agencies, and increased support for libraries in general.

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