

Free Wheeling in the Yellowstone Valley

Finding adventure by bicycle

As Ernest Hemmingway said: “It is by riding a bicycle that you learn the contours of a country best, since you have to sweat up the hills and coast down them.”

By Jackie Swiesz
Photography by Phil Bell

As a child, her purple banana seat bike carried her along the Montana country roads. Later, as a college student, she used her brother’s hand-me-down 10-speed to ride to work and back, 30 miles round trip. As a young mom, she traveled the Minnesota back roads by bicycle with her one-year-old daughter in the baby seat, who loved to tip her head sideways to let the wind blow on her face.

Somewhere along the way, she forgot how much she loved cycling.

Then, three years ago at age 41, Nancy Brook rekindled her joy of bicycling. As a single mom with her daughter leaving for college, she sought an activity that would keep her busy and help avoid the “empty nest” syndrome. Armed with a brand new Trek road bike, she toured around Billings until the snow fell. After that, she attended a winter indoor cycling class to “up” her endurance



and skills, readying herself for the next outdoor season. By the end of April the next year, she had completed a “century ride” (100 miles) in just one day!

Although some people might think it’s incredible to ride that many miles in a day, Nancy says getting there is as simple as carving out time each week to do something you enjoy. In Nancy’s words, “Just like everyone else, I’m busy. I work full time, have a house to keep up and two dogs to walk. I just make the time to pursue my passion for riding.”

“There’s an intimacy of the journey that happens when traveling by bicycle,” says Nancy. “I’m amazed with how much more attuned I am to the rhythms and seasons of Yellowstone Valley since I’ve started riding.” She notes that spring brings

strong winds, and the midday heat in summer can be unbearable. Fall is a great time to ride because the weather is still warm but not sweltering. Even winter cycling can be fun if the roads are clear and a person doesn’t mind bundling up.

Freedom takes many forms and the mobility that bicycling provides is one of them. Although the route may be familiar, one never knows what the day’s journey has in

store. "It could be a stunning sunset, wild turkeys alongside the road, or a lively conversation with a biking buddy," Nancy explains, "Still, the best part of cycling for me is freedom. There's something about leaving my troubles behind, hopping on my bike and riding into the world. Cycling makes me a child again: free, happy and adventurous."

Nancy's love of cycling - partnered with her passions for traveling and writing - took her to unfamiliar roads abroad. Last year, she rode her bicycle across France with a cycling tour group. The trip was a culmination of a lifelong dream to bike through the French countryside. Coupled with her other passion - writing - she recorded the adventure and every rpm along the way. The story grew into a soon-to-be-published travel memoir titled "Cycling, Wine and Men - A Midlife Tour de France." Her humor and insight into the human experience - and experiencing a new world by bicycle - will be well worth the read.

Most of us only dream of the freedom of which she speaks - traveling the world, wind in our hair, sun on our backs, rushing headlong down the hill toward our future. But, we can experience at least a small piece of adventure anytime we jump on our bikes.



Check out great places to hit the trail around the Yellowstone Valley on page 40.



Jackie Swiesz is a human resources professional by day. Although her job is demanding, she is determined to advance from "closet writer" to published author. Her passion for writing has found its voice from the business arena to club newsletters and now in YVW. When she's not coaching employees or writing, she can be found enjoying outdoor activities on the rivers or in the mountains of Montana.



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