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Bicycle Tourism

Providing Economic Development Opportunities for Montana

by
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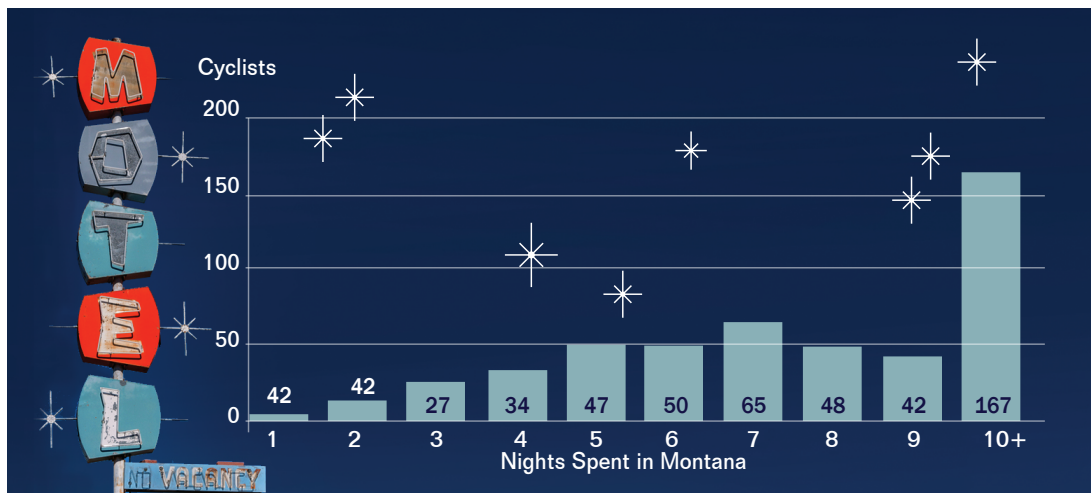
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Bicycle tourism is gaining momentum in Montana, and not just on the downhill segment. In fact, it could be the new phenomenon in the travel industry. And it's definitely an economic boon: Multiday bicyclists take longer to get anywhere, thereby showering the communities they stop in with outside dollars.

From the 1890s, biking was the means for independent transport until motor vehicles took over in the 1920s. By the mid-1960s, the surge of air travel redefined what it meant to travel. Today, bicycle tourism is starting to receive the attention of researchers, destinations, and entrepreneurs. It is a form of travel that slows the pace down to a level where travelers can view, hear, smell, and feel the countryside in which they are traveling.

A recent study by the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) at the University of Montana in cooperation with the Adventure Cycling Association found that bicycle tourism offers economic development potential for small businesses in towns throughout the state. Bicycle travelers spend an average of \$75.75 per person per day and stay eight nights or more in the state. In contrast, the average 2013 nonresident Montana vacationer during July, August, and September spent \$69.12 per person per day and stayed 6.17 nights. This equates to an additional \$180 spent per person by cyclists in Montana during the eight-day average stay. However, this is a conservative estimate. Figure 1 shows that the majority of bicyclists spent 10 or more nights in Montana.

Figure 1
Nights Spent in Montana by Touring Bicyclists



Source: Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, University of Montana.

ITRR always uses the conservative estimates from survey data though. Table 1 displays the average amount spent per category. The “All Cyclists” column averages the spending of all respondents even if they completely skipped writing down any expenditure amount. We replaced all missing data with a zero, which inherently reduces the average. The second column provides the average amount spent by all cyclists who reported spending in at least one category, with

zeroes in remaining categories where spending amounts were not recorded. The results indicate that bicycle tourists in Montana spend between \$75 and \$102 per person per day.

In addition to spending more time and money in the state than the average vacationer, these cyclists spent nights in various towns throughout the state. The map (Figure 2) displays how many of the respondents to the ITRR survey spent nights in each of the listed communities. This was a

Table 1
Average Daily Expenditures of All Cyclists and Only Those Who Spent Money in Montana

Spending Categories	All Cyclists (n= 468)	Only Cyclists Who Spent Money in Montana (n=373)
Accommodations (hotel/motel, B&B, hostel, etc.)	\$22.23	\$28.23
Restaurants and Bars	\$15.66	\$19.03
Adventure Cycling Association Guided Trip	\$12.01	\$17.47
Groceries and Snacks	\$7.53	\$9.08
Bike-Related Retail Purchases	\$3.31	\$5.52
Camping (Private & Public)	\$4.00	\$5.40
Other Retail Purchases	\$3.32	\$4.71
Transportation Fares (e.g. bus, plane)	\$2.09	\$3.73
Fuel/Gasoline	\$2.02	\$2.99
Bike Repairs/Service	\$1.35	\$2.03
Other Guided or Outfitted Trip (e.g. rafting/fishing)	\$0.59	\$1.70
Services (e.g. rentals, massage, showers, medical)	\$0.64	\$1.33
Fees/Licenses/Admittances (e.g. park fees, movies)	\$0.78	\$1.14
Other Expenditures	\$0.22	\$0.55
	TOTAL = \$75.75	TOTAL = \$102.92

Source: Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, University of Montana.



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Figure 2
Overnight Location of Touring Cyclists in Montana



Source: Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, University of Montana.

sample of 497 cyclists who said they spent nights in Montana over the past three years on a cycling trip. Adventure Cycling Association has three major routes – Trans American route, Lewis and Clark route, and Northern Tier route (Figure 2). Specialized maps for each route guide cyclists through Montana. As shown, these routes are not the only places cyclists spend their nights. It is entirely possible that every community in this state could become an overnight location for cyclists.

One great Montana example is the Twin Bridges bike camp. This unique camping facility meets the needs of cyclists traveling through the Ruby Valley. The camp, situated next to the Beaverhead River, is located one block from town and has showers, an indoor eating area, outdoor sinks, and storage. Twin Bridges built the facility in 2009 and depends on donations to keep it maintained. Donations have ranged from as little as 76 cents with a note saying, “Sorry, that’s all I had” to \$100. Cyclists then spend additional money in town at restaurants, stores, the self-service laundry, and, of course, the bars.

The Twin Bridges success story could be emulated throughout Montana by any small town where residents desire to keep travelers in their towns a little longer. As one bicyclist wrote, “The Twin Bridges bike ‘hostel’ at the city park was FIRST RATE. One of the best of my 59-day ride across the USA. More towns along the TransAm route should build one!” Roger Hutchinson, owner of the Main Street Market in Twin Bridges, said that if a group comes through, they might spend a couple hundred dollars over a day or two. Bicycle tourism can include special catering to this type of visitor: Often, cyclists arrive after closing hours, and he opens the store just for them.

The ITRR study also discovered challenges that come with bicycle tourism. Time and time again, cyclists mentioned that road conditions made their travels in Montana difficult. One cyclist summed it up by saying, “Get rid of those ‘rumble strips’ on the edge of some roads! They [usually] do not leave enough room to cycle to the right of the rumble strips, thus forcing cyclists to be in the main part of the road. PLEASE,



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get rid of the strips. Or, at least allow 2 feet of paved shoulder to the right of the rumble strips. The traffic engineers (I'm guessing most do not ride bikes) think they are making it safe for the car drivers. But, in fact, they have created a very dangerous traffic hazard for bicyclists!"

In 2003, the Montana Department of Transportation conducted a study that determined the reduction in interstate highway off-road crash rates attributable to shoulder rumble strips was 14 percent. This finding increased the installation of rumble strips, much to the dismay of cyclists who are forced into the main roadway and motorists who suddenly come upon a biker in the main lane of travel. A November 2012 MDT memo, however, addresses this concern with statements on how and where to place rumble strips based on consideration of bicycle travel. The question is whether the transportation department will change the current rumble strips to appease cyclists and the motoring public.

Other concerns highlighted in the study related to food and lodging availability. One cyclist wrote, "Of course I need good food. Not fast food or deep fried food. Wholesome food. Or as much in that direction as possible." This sentiment was echoed by many. Cyclists said that certain stretches of Montana lacked the availability of food, be it grocery stores, local cafes, or restaurants. This is a serious concern



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since very little can be carried on cycling trips. One person even suggested placing drinking fountains along some of the desolate highways in eastern Montana. Accommodations can pose a similar problem. One cyclist commented, "I found that the infrastructure to support cycling in eastern Montana, along U.S. route 2, was quite poor. I had expected to camp a few nights, but the campgrounds were rudimentary at best, seldom had showers, and were often right next to the railroad tracks with trains going by all night long." Another said, "I thought it was a long desolate stretch from Lewistown to Glendive. I would have appreciated more motels and/or a state park."

In the study, cyclists were asked to describe their degree of satisfaction on a variety of aspects of Montana. Overall, these are travelers happy with Montana. Cyclists were most satisfied with the hospitality of local people, historical sites along the routes, local breweries, signage on highways, signage in towns, and availability of camping areas. Cyclists were least satisfied with cell phone coverage, width of shoulders, availability of cycling stores/equipment, availability of bike repair service, and quantity of debris on shoulders/road.

Business opportunities catering to the cycling tourist can be part of any community with a desire to keep visitors in town. One interesting finding

in the study is that cyclists love local breweries. It's a great way for them to add carbs to their diets and social interaction to their days. Could local breweries in small towns become the "lost" schoolhouse gathering place of the early years in Montana? The new Lolo Peak Brewing Company in Lolo is hoping that is the case. In a March 9, 2014, *Missoulian* article, brewery owners Patrick Offen and Al Zepeda said, "The biggest thing is Lolo doesn't really have a place where people can go and socialize and meet their brewers and learn about the person they've been living next to for the past 10 years. That's what the brewery is going to be too. We don't want a formal setting. We want a setting where people can come in, chat with each other, [and] meet new people. It's about bringing the community together. This is definitely going to be the spot to do it."

Other entrepreneurial opportunities include the addition of bicycle accessories in hardware stores, markets, or other retail outlets. There is a need for restaurants that have more than French fries and burgers, as well as accommodations that are moderate in price. Cyclists need laundry facilities, wireless Internet availability, and perhaps a massage. The more services they find in a community, the more likely they will stay an extra day.

Why should small towns consider these business opportunities? According to ITRR nonresident studies, an average of 500,000 nonresidents have indicated road touring/ biking in Montana while on vacation each year for the past four years. These numbers are likely to increase as bicycle tourism grabs hold in North America. Montana has the opportunity to rival Oregon for biking experiences. We have the scenery, low traffic highways, and the friendliest people. Our only need is the attention to highway infrastructure and the desire by entrepreneurs to start or expand a business in rural Montana. According to the folks in Twin Bridges, the grapevine within the cycling community is unbelievable. Once a few riders stopped in and found out what was available for them in town, the word spread like wildfire.

If that has not convinced the reader that bicycle tourism is an exceptional investment, read what cyclists wrote about their most memorable experience in Montana.

"Riding up Logan Pass in the early morning was one of the great experiences of my 30-year life as a cyclist. Breath-taking! We spent the night at the campsite on the other side of the

climb and then rode up into Waterton. We plan to explore more of the state by bike in coming years."

"Met a local fellow in Jackson who invited my son and me to dinner at his cabin along with some of his other friends. From my journal: "Elk steak, fresh green vegetables, corn on the cob, homemade beer, and barley wine! THE BEST MEAL we've had in 5 weeks! The scenery, hospitality, and discussion were wonderful ... not a NY experience for sure!"

"The most memorable day cycling in Montana was climbing up to the town of Wisdom and spending the night in that location. It was not one of the largest climbs of the trip so far, but we were unsure whether the snow had melted from the previous night's storm up top. When we arrived the snow had indeed melted, making it safe for travel with skinny tires. The town of Wisdom and the absolutely breathtaking scenery was the most memorable experience of the three-month cross country trip."

"After a long hot day riding and arriving in Helena, MT, just ahead of a thunderstorm, we stopped for supplies at the local grocery store. While waiting out the rain under the wonderful awning, two different people asked us about our trip and offered us a shower and a place to stay. This was quite welcomed as we were planning the end of the trip for my son as he had to return to work while I would continue on to Minnesota. The family we stayed with helped us get his bike to UPS and took him to the airport as well as putting us up for two days! We had not only had a great time cycling in Montana but had made some great friends."

"Can't say just one [memorable experience], but to put the one out, [it was] after Jackson on the road to Dillon. Beauty, infinity of the sky, freedom." □



Photo by Chuck Haney

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The full report on Cycle Tourism in Montana can be found at: <http://www.itrr.umt.edu/Research2013/Multi-dayCyclingStudy.pdf>