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On a roll, year-round

Pedaling for fun or fitness, hills or no hills, to win or see the sights is what they like to do



Bikers celebrate completing the 202-mile Seattle to Portland ride. (Kari Bodnarchuk for The Boston Globe)

By [Kari Bodnarchuk](#)

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SEATTLE - As the rising sun set Mount Rainier ablaze one Saturday last July, a man with bronzed, muscular legs pedaled past me, his red dress fluttering in the breeze. Three women followed, one with a rubber ducky tied to her bike helmet, the other two in colorful T-shirts that said, "My sister made me do this!"

If You Go

Tulip Pedal (360-428-3236, www.skagititems.com) April 4. A 20-, 40-, or 60-mile route through the tulip fields of Skagit County, one hour north of Seattle; \$25.

Daffodil Classic (253-815-9061, www.twbc.org) April 19. Offers 40-, 60-, or 100-mile loops through forests and farmland in the shadow of Mount Rainier; about 2,000 riders; \$16.

Flying Wheels Summer Century (206-522-3222, www.cascade.org) June 13. The largest century ride in the state; scenic loops of 24, 45, 70, and 100 miles; \$30.

Cycle Oregon (800-292-5367, www.cycleoregon.com) July 17-19. Routes from 17 to 65 miles; begins at Western Oregon University in Monmouth and cuts across open prairie, rivers, and rolling hills; 1,600 participants; \$150.

Group Health Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic (206-522-3222, www.cascade.org) July 11-12. Taking 10,000 participants this year; \$95.

Ride Around Mount Rainier in One Day (RAMROD) (206-781-3903, www.redmondyclingclub.org) July 30. Eight-hundred bikers climb 10,000 vertical feet in 154 miles; \$80 (register until March 31).

Courage Classic (253-403-4374, www.courageclassic.org) Aug. 1-3. A 172-mile ride over three mountain passes in the Cascades; 575 riders; \$60 to register, plus \$500 in pledges.

Ride Around Washington (RAW) (206-522-3222, www.cascade.org) Aug. 2-8. A 412-mile ride around the North Cascades; 215 participants; \$870.

Ride from Seattle to Vancouver and Party (RSVP) (206-522-3222, www.cascade.org) Aug. 14-15. Follows 183 miles of picturesque back roads to British Columbia; 1,300 participants; \$90.

Ride 542, Mount Baker Hill Climb (360-303-1717, www.norkarecreation.com, ride542.com) Sept. 13. About 1,000 riders climb 4,300 feet in 24 1/2 miles from Glacier to Artist Point bordering North Cascades National Park; \$35-\$60.

Chilly Hilly (206-522-3222, www.cascade.org) late February. A 33-mile route around Bainbridge Island off Seattle with 2,675 feet of climbing; draws 4,000 riders; \$27.

Worst Day of the Year Ride (503-287-8786, www.communitycyclingcenter.org) February. An 18- to 40-mile route around Portland with hot food and cider stops; \$30.

Not all the riders were in drag or decorative wear, but everyone was joined in the spirit of fun and camaraderie for one of the country's largest recreational bike rides, the Group Health Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic, STP for short. The 202-mile event, which celebrates its 30th anniversary on July 11-12, draws participants from as far away as Japan, Australia, and Serbia. Some of them pedal standard hybrids, old-time cruisers, even unicycles. Others zigzag down the road on oversized skateboards. And many glide along on souped-up carbon-fiber frames worth more than the combined cost of my first three cars.

The participants, who numbered about 9,500 last year, are as diverse as their wheels and come in all shapes, sizes, athletic abilities, and ages. Typically more than half are first-time STP riders.

"You'll see people who've never ridden a bike 50 miles and now they're riding 200 miles; it's very empowering," said Jerry Baker, 67, who has ridden the STP every year since it started in 1979. Baker won the event that year, the only time it was staged as a race. (It wasn't held in 1980 because of Mount St. Helens' catastrophic eruption that May.) "For me, it's a big social event now. I meet people I haven't seen in a year and I like seeing the scenery along the way."

The mostly level route - there's only one daunting hill with a 335-foot climb - takes riders out of Seattle at dawn along sleepy streets that skirt Lake Washington and cut through upscale

neighborhoods. Over the next two days, bikers ride through lush farmland, shaded forests, residential neighborhoods, small towns, and past some of the region's awe-inspiring mountains.

"I always get a thrill out of seeing Mount Rainier in the beginning of the ride and views of Mount Hood coming into Portland," said Cynthia Snow, 64, of Brookline, who did her third STP ride in 2008. "Those are the high points of the trip, literally and figuratively." It's also possible to see majestic Mount St. Helens.

What draws so many people, besides the scenery, are the topography (the highest point is just 463 feet above sea level) and the outstanding support crew that helps get nearly 10,000 riders safely from Seattle to Portland in often-steamy temperatures. More than 1,000 volunteers work the event, including medics, bike mechanics, motorcyclists with the Gold Wing Touring Association who monitor the route for cyclists in need of assistance, and hundreds of other people at rest stops along the way.

"My husband blew a tire, not just a tube, on the second day," said Teresa Swango, 33, of Somerville, who did last year's ride with her husband, Todd, 31. "There was a group of four or five guys in red jerseys right behind us [a roving medical support team]. They pulled over and one of the guys had a spare tire that he gave us. They were like a pit crew. They changed and fixed everything in just a couple of minutes and said, 'There you go.' "

Volunteers at rest stops, which are spaced 10 to 20 miles apart, also provide mechanical support gratis, hand out free food, answer questions, and offer medical assistance. Many civic organizations pitch in, too, from Boy Scout troops to church groups, and senior centers host pancake breakfasts and spaghetti dinners for calorie-craving riders.

Just over one-quarter of the participants complete the ride in one day, while the rest take two. Overnight riders, who must arrange their own accommodations, stay in hotels or motels, or at campsites. Locals open their doors to riders on a prearranged basis for private residence home-stays, or cyclists can bring their own mattresses or camping gear and stay on school or church grounds. The Seattle-based Cascade Bicycle Club, which organizes the STP, arranges for U-Hauls to carry riders' luggage to their chosen midpoint stops.

"We've always stayed overnight with families and that's a great way to go," said Snow. "We've been really well fed and had a good place to stay, and that makes it easier to get on the road the next day."

At Centralia College, in Centralia, Wash., the official halfway point and most popular stopover place, riders can stay in the gym or camp outside. Centralia has hot showers, live music, and a beer garden, not to mention free ice cream for everyone staying or passing through.

The ride ends at Holladay Park in Portland, where there's a Finish Line Festival with food, another beer garden, more live music, much-needed massages, and exhibitors promoting other Northwest rides.

"I do think the weather here is more conducive to biking year-round," said Chuck Ayers, originally from Pomfret, Conn., who serves as executive director for the Cascade Bicycle Club.

Hundreds of fully supported one- to multiday road bike events take place in Washington and Oregon throughout the year. The season rolls into action in February with Portland's Worst Day of the Year Ride and Seattle's Chilly Hilly, when more than 4,000 riders gather on Bainbridge Island, across Puget Sound, for a 33-undulating-mile ride.

Summer favorites include the Ride Around Mount Rainier in One Day, or RAMROD, when bikers circumnavigate one of Washington's most recognizable landmarks on a 154-mile roller-coaster route, and the Mount Baker Hill Climb, which is similar to the Mount Washington Hill Climb but three times longer. Riders test their legs and lungs while climbing nearly 4,300 feet in 24 1/2 miles on their way to Artist Point, about an hour west of Bellingham, which offers 360-degree views of North Cascades National Park and the surrounding mountains.

You can schedule a trip here around a bike event and then spend the rest of your vacation exploring the area on foot, by car, or by bike. The Cascade Bicycle Club also organizes 1,300 daily rides a year in Greater Seattle, all of them free, and welcomes nonmembers to take part. Whether you are interested in exploring the Northwest on two wheels or looking for a way to recycle an old red dress, you can find a ride that suits you.

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