



IT'S ONLY NATURAL

Arkansas — home of Adventure
Cycling's next route — already hosts
a unique band of bike travelers

Story by Ellee Thalheimer

Don't ask John Linck if you can have a copy of one of his multiday bike routes around Arkansas. Sure, he's traveled tens of thousands of miles around the Natural State by bike, leading the Arkansas Bicycle Club's annual six-day Bike Ride Around Arkansas (BRAA). Sure, he *would* give you a route map. If he had any.

"I never write down the routes," said Linck, a 69-year-old marine surveyor from Little Rock. "You don't need a map. I've never lost a soul on one of these rides. We aren't out here to follow maps. It's a freedom ride. We stay in general sight of each other. We figure out what roads to go down. We'll talk to someone at a café who will tell us the next road to take."

On the self-supported BRAA, Linck makes sure the group has lunch in a small town café and a place to camp. Outside of that, flights of whimsy guide the group's direction. He starts out with a general route, but never in the ride's 12 years has the group ever stuck to it.

Maybe they want to stay an extra night on the top of Mount Magazine. Maybe the mayor of Charleston revokes her permission to camp in the city park and they end up camping by Blue Mountain Lake. Maybe there's a desolate side road that lures them. BRAA is in early spring, so camping reservations are hardly an issue. Plus, Arkansas just passed an edict mandating that if someone shows up at a state park on a nonmotorized vehicle, then the park has to find a spot for them.

In this age of navigational systems, route reviews, apps like Ride with GPS, and other such tools, many cyclists calculate how miles down to the tenth they will ride. Those who cling to cue sheets and devices might think Linck's touring approach daunting. Preposterous. Old school. Intriguing. Righteous?

No matter how it's described, BRAA — and a handful of the group's shorter annual multiday bike tours — is definitely under the radar. This isn't your RAGBRAI or Cycle Oregon. The tours are free, besides paying your own way, and anyone is welcome. On any given trip, there are usually 8–12 riders mostly in their 60s and 70s, many of whom are regulars and old compadres. On

BRAA, there's possibly an odd rider from Tennessee or Virginia.

You could also say that this passionate subgroup of the Arkansas Bicycle Club is unlikely. Arkansas is not commonly thought of as a touring mecca. Many Arkansas road riders will recount stories of beer bottles narrowly missing their head or being the victim of rolling coal and/or harassment on both narrow backroads and urban streets.

"I can understand the negative stereotype," Linck said. "We don't have a culture of cycling and sharing the road. But traveling fully loaded looks different from the spandexed road riders that people don't seem to like. I don't know why. Maybe motorists think there's a reason we're riding as opposed to just taking up space to exercise. There's not much heckling like there is on regular road rides. People are more curious."

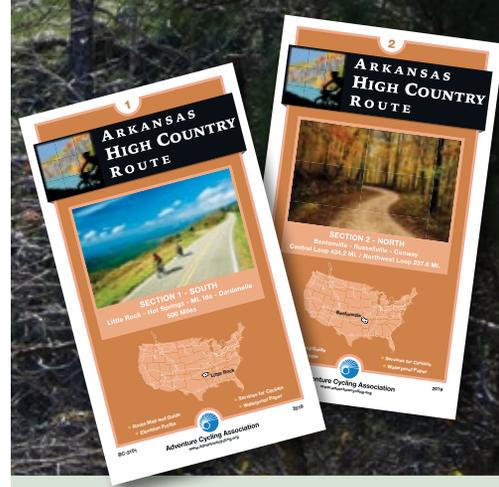
John Britt, a veterinary pathologist and president of the Arkansas Bicycle Club, has been a stalwart of these multiday tours from the beginning and describes the "last tour we did" as his most favorite. Even the harder ones.

"On the first day of the first BRAA, four of us left from North Little Rock," Britt said. "I don't remember where we were supposed to go. But 95 miles later we set up camp. I remember Corinne was ahead climbing a hill. I hoped she would get off and walk so I could. The restaurants we passed all had ribeye specials that got cheaper and cheaper as we went further into the country. By the time I ate my ribeye special, I was too tired to chew."

Don't be fooled into thinking that this group of older bike travelers plans easy-breezy rides. On BRAA, Linck aims for 40–50 self-supported miles per day, rain or shine. And Arkansas ain't flat. When planning, he usually throws in some dirt roads and a good sustained climb. The group mostly camps, with a very occasional night at a motel.

"Younger folks aren't tough enough to go on this trip," Linck said. "That's all there is to it. I never make it easy."

For sure, you can see strapping young people whizzing along Little Rock's robust bike trail system while decked out in Lycra and hunched over aggressive bike fits. But many of these riders decline to do BRAA, blanching at carrying gear and camping.



THE ARKANSAS HIGH COUNTRY ROUTE

"In 2015, when I was buying maps to ride the Tour Divide, I noticed that Arkansas was the only state* in the lower 48 that didn't have an Adventure Cycling route going through it," said Chuck Campbell, Arkansas native and science teacher at Russellville High School. "So after my epic failure on the Tour Divide, I called Adventure Cycling and asked, 'Where's the love?'"

Campbell advocated for a route in Arkansas. He was tenacious and wowed Adventure Cycling with pitches and PowerPoint presentations on the undiscovered gravel and trail riding in Arkansas. After the funding was secured, he led the charge for the Arkansas High Country Route, which debuts in the Adventure Cycling map store this spring.

The route is mostly in the northwestern quadrant of the state and consists of three distinct loops that are all connected. Riders can choose to do a giant loop using parts of all three smaller loops or tackle a more bite-sized individual loop. All in all, there will be over 1,200 routed miles with 85,000 feet of climbing.

Along the way, you can explore the secluded waterfalls and see wandering elk in the Boston Mountains. Or wade in the crystal waters of the Upper Buffalo River. Climb Mount Magazine and stay at the lodge on top. Check out the Hawksbill Crag, a rock that juts straight out over a verdant forest valley. Ride the famous Womble Trail. I know, you've hardly heard of these places. That's the point.

Campbell, the only known rider to have done the whole route, is organizing an unsanctioned gravel grinder using the route called the Arkansas High Country Race. It's on June 8 if you want rub tires with local riders.

The Adventure Cycling maps — print and digital — are scheduled for release in late April.

*Ed. note: Technically, Delaware also lacks an Adventure Cycling route.

ARKANSAS BICYCLE CLUB'S ANNUAL MULTIDAY BIKE TOURS

The tours start revving up just as the popular summer/fall cycling season is toning down. The goal is to avoid heat and mosquitos.

October

DeGray Ride (four days) The ride goes around the 13,400-acre DeGray Lake, which is a popular getaway in west-central Arkansas situated between ridges of the Ouachita Mountains.

November

Spa Run Ride (three days) A group rides from Little Rock to Hot Springs the Friday before Thanksgiving. Participants run the 5k or 10k Spa Run in Hot Springs on Saturday then ride back on Sunday.

December

Petit Jean Ride (two days) This noncamping overnighiter climbs from Conway to the historic mountain lodge at Petit Jean State Park before returning the next day.

January

Mountain View Bed and Breakfast Ride (two days) From the Narrows at Greers Ferry in north-central Arkansas, the group rides to Mountain View (famous for its folkways and traditional music), stays the night in a B&B, and returns the next day.

February

Lake Ouachita (three days) The tour circumnavigates Arkansas's largest lake, located in the Ouachita National Forest. This lake, known for being pristine, is dotted with more than 210 islands and circled by 975 miles of tree-lined shore.

March (or early April)

Bike Ride Around Arkansas (six days) The route highlights a different part of Arkansas each year.



In a state where bike travel is uncommon, this group of intrepid riders is an anomaly left to explore a state full of unsung natural beauty and gorgeous backroads. As a curiosity — and not an intimidating one — the riders are usually welcomed with a full helping of Southern hospitality.

When there are no camping facilities, they've been invited to camp in agricultural airport hangers, Boys and Girls Clubs, and fire stations. Small town mayors let them sleep in city parks and open up bathrooms for them.

Once, headwinds were so strong they stayed in the backyard of someone's mother in the town of England. She made them pecan pies, and they took her out to the local drive-in. Another time, the cold was bitter riding into Jacksonville. Someone in the group had a local friend who was out of town. But the friend had pointed them to her hidden key, and the group arrived at the house as golf ball-sized hail started to fall.

Recently, Linck called a little trailer park on the east side of El Dorado before BRAA, and the owner said they could camp in back. The owner mistakenly thought they were a group of motorcyclists. When they rolled in,

he was floored and cooked them all an étouffée dinner. The group stayed an extra night and still keeps in contact.

Near the Buffalo River, the group camped in Buffalo City, which isn't a city at all — really just a fishing camp. They chatted with a fisherman, asking futilely about nearby restaurants and lamenting ramen noodles made on a camp stove. He came by later that night with freshly cooked trout with potatoes and corn.

"The road will provide," said Janice Peters, a 72-year-old rider who has traveled with this touring pack for many years. It's a group motto.

Besides the food people offer out of the goodness of their hearts, these riders love to eat at small town cafés. And to eat good food, like the famous BBQ in Marianna or the acclaimed pie from Marion.

"We are a mobile economic recovery unit," Britt said.

"We have a good time," Peters said. "And it's empowering to carry everything you'll need. I've been all over the world, but nothing is better than riding around my own state." **AC**

Arkansas native Ellee Thalheimer lives in Portland, Oregon. Her cycling life began mountain biking in Camp Robinson outside Little Rock.

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