

by Margi Hoffman

JUST GOING FOR A RIDE



ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL VALLE

It is possible to tour by bicycle, in foreign countries, as a family. All it takes is 10 to 12 years of dreaming and a bit of strategy. For our family, the idea of an escape from our "real lives" had always taken the form of an adventure involving bicycles, so it was natural that when we were ready to go, cycling was our means of transportation.

After so much discussion, the decision to actually go was an easy one. My husband and I were both 40 years old. The children were becoming confident bikers and were at the age when it was easy to compensate for missed school time. We were simply tired of discussing the idea. We wanted the challenge!

Thus began a year and a half of in-depth research and planning which culminated in our departure from Baltimore/Washington International Airport for Malaga, Spain.

The keys to the success of our journey were careful yet flexible planning, our accumulation of resources, and most important our children, Rebecca, 10, and Nathaniel, 12.

Once we determined that we wished to bike in Spain and Portugal after the busy tourist season, we chose to travel independently—that is, without an organized tour or sag wagon. Checking with the Spanish and Portuguese tourist agencies,

we learned that the weather in September and October was ideal. It was then that we decided on the length of our trip. Our goal was to avoid the rainy season, and in this we were successful.

The next challenges were arranging the flight and equipping ourselves for touring and camping. While we all really enjoyed riding, only Steve had any speed or strength (from his daily commute to work), and none of us had ever gone on a trip such as this. We immersed ourselves in books written by others who had been on long-term tours. From their experiences, and from general travel guides, we garnered about 200 index cards which in-

cluded information about every facet of our trip—campgrounds, weight carried, maps to buy, even restaurants and bakeries along the way. Every time we found a book in the library, we carted it home, noted the important facts, and filed the pages in the ever-growing pile of information on Steve's night table. In the back of our minds was the puzzle of how to carry, compactly and safely, all that we needed. We decided to take our own bicycles because we were comfortable with them. The children each carried rear panniers and a rear rack with a sleeping bag and a foam pad. The adults were loaded down with front and rear bags as well as racks

with a sleeping bag, foam pad, and a three-person Eureka tent. We purchased all the necessary cookware, a butane stove, pots and pans, dishes, and utensils; clothing was the next major item on the agenda. It was a true challenge to minimize our loads yet carry all we would need. We settled on cycling shorts, two T-shirts, one long-sleeved shirt, a sweat shirt, sweat pants, a wool sweater, two pairs of wool socks, two pairs of underwear, raingear, and a bathing suit. As the date of departure neared and the boxes in our living room began to overflow with necessities (small games, journals, books, flashlights, personal hygiene items, camera, film, etc., etc.), we wondered how we would ever carry such a load.

To test our commitment (we had already booked our flight), we arranged for a trial run to an area of Maryland that we supposed was similar to the Costa Del Sol. On a sunny Friday morning in July, two months before we were ready to leave, we drove off, our Volkswagen van loaded with necessities and piled high with bicycles. Arriving at Deep Creek Lake, we packed our panniers, strapped our sleeping bags, pads, and tents in place, and attempted to cycle the five miles to the campground where we had reservations. Our bicycles wobbled alarmingly, but taking a deep breath, we set out and gained confidence as we pedaled. Once at the campground, we set up and relaxed under a star-filled sky. We awoke to the sound of raindrops, but ever the optimists, we decided to try our new raingear!

Rolling up our wet tents, we headed uphill in what became much heavier rain. Shortly we stopped to eat some bananas and evaluate our travel options. We had left the van at the home of some friends, so we decided to cycle back to that point until the rain let up. This was a wise choice, because the rain never stopped. We spent the night warm and snug inside a cozy ski chalet—drying every piece of clothing, including the sleeping bags. To the hum of the drier, we evaluated our needs, determining that heavy duty plastic bags would be a must as a liner for panniers and other bags.

The next morning we again faced the rain, but when it stopped we were able to cycle to a park 20 miles away, thereby proving our fortitude in adverse conditions and gaining a bit of balance on our bikes.

Having met this weekend challenge, we were filled with mixed feelings, but we were very positive about the upcoming trip. We were now able to visualize what it would be like to load and unload each day, and we hoped that no problem would be unsurmountable. We knew now that we were going!

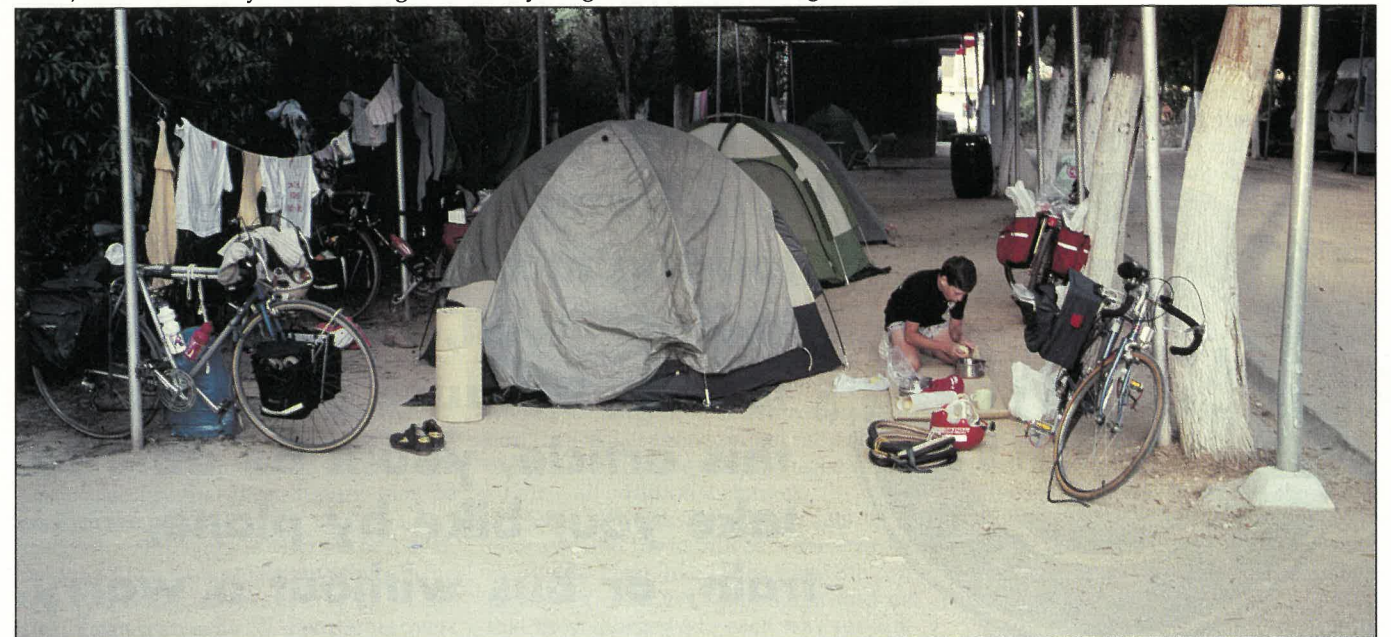
We found a neighbor to stay in our house and care for our dog, hired interim replacements for both my husband's dental office and my position as director of a private middle school, and turned our checkbook and other major responsibilities over to our parents. We packed our bicycles in large airline boxes, loaded everything else into duffel bags, kissed

everyone goodbye, and left for what turned out to be a five-month excursion. (Because of all the intricate planning necessary for two months, we decided to fly to Israel for three additional months, where my husband served as a dental volunteer on a kibbutz.)

After the years of dreaming and planning, it was both frightening and thrilling to get off the plane in Malaga, Spain. To our great relief, the bikes arrived with us in good condition. Exhausted though we were, somehow we generated enough energy to assemble our bikes under the watchful and curious gazes of airport guards, who clearly wondered about our sanity. (Perhaps they were right to do so!) An hour and a half later, we were actually biking in Spain!

The trip through these two beautiful countries proved to be all that we had hoped for. It was a thrill for us to watch the children meet each daily challenge with new found determination. We all grew stronger and more self-confident. As we pedaled up mountains and through small farming villages, often along the Mediterranean Sea, we knew that the planning, dreaming, and risks were worth it for our family. Cycling with your children can be done!

Margi Hoffman is the director of a private middle school in the Baltimore area, as well as an avid cyclist.



Nathaniel, 12, helps prepare a meal at a campsite in Spain.