



Tour with the Pros California

By Robbin McKinney, founder and president of Great Explorations

It's not often that I am able to go on one of our trips as a participant, but I couldn't resist our Tour with the Pros California inaugural trip in May. The Tour of California is North America's largest race, attracting many top riders and teams such as Team Radio Shack, Garmin-Cervelo, Trek Leopard, HTC-Highroad, Liquigas-Cannondale and others. I've been to the Tour de France many times in the last decade (where we are an official tour operator) and I was looking forward to see how this experience would compare. I was also keen to experience cycling between San Francisco and LA, as our guide for this trip had cycled this route previously and told me it would be one of the better rides of my life. I'm happy to say that my expectations were exceeded on both counts. Our trip started in San Francisco at the swank Hotel Vitale, located in a prime position on the Embarcadero not far from Fisherman's Wharf. On our warm-up ride we joined locals cycling along the Embarcadero and over the Golden Gate bridge to the headlands and back. Before dinner we reconvened at the Market Bar not far from the hotel to sample some local wines. Then it was off to Pier 23, for a casual and fun seafood dinner. Ride Distance: 30 km



Day 2, we departed at 9:00am for the 1 hour drive south to Halfmoon Bay where we would begin cycling. This was an ideal starting point, because Hwy 1 is quiet here, with a wide cycling shoulder and miles of beautiful coastline to enjoy. We passed by countless strawberry farms and stopped to taste some at Swanton's Organic Berry Farm, the oldest in California. We arrived in Santa Cruz and visited the Surfing museum, fittingly located facing a prime surf break. After lunch at La Super Taqueria (a favourite Mexican restaurant of Julia Childs), we continued to Monterey- the last 15 km is a superb bike path winding over and around sand dunes. Although we had planned on dining at Montrio Bistro, we elected to go to the Cannery Brewpub, as there were some in the group keen to sample California's brews (and the Canucks/San Jose hockey game was on). Our hotel, the 4-star Monterey Plaza and Spa, was located on the waterfront in the historic section of Cannery Row. Ride Distance: 80 km



The next morning we cycled from Monterey to Seaside along dedicated bike paths to watch the start of Stage 5. We were able to get front row viewing right at the start line as the lead riders were introduced. Swag was being handed out by sponsors and it was fun to stroll past the team buses, support cars, and race bikes. After the race start, we cycled south through Pacific Grove to Carmel along the beautiful 17 Mile Drive that is lauded as one of the most luxurious and beautiful stretches of roads in California. It passes through the affluent Pebble Beach community with its mansions, golf courses, and cypress forests. Clint Eastwood was the mayor of Carmel between 1986 and 1988 and it was nice to see how much of the character has been retained here (the Hog's Breath Pub, which Eastwood owned is still open). The race route was supposed to follow the coast passing Big Sur, but a rock slide had closed the highway and the route had been changed to go inland to finish at Paso Robles. As it turned out, this was fine by us as we could shuttle on secondary roads to see the race again at Lake Nacimiento and then again at the finish. From Paso Robles, we cycled back down to the coast dropping 600 meters over just 20 km to San Simeon and the Morgan Hotel. For dinner, we went into Cambria, a picturesque village lined with wine tasting rooms and cafes. We dined at Indigo Moon, a superb, unpretentious restaurant. Ride distance: 80 km



Day 4, we shuttled to Lompoc and then cycled Santa Rosa Road, famous from the movie, ‘Sideways’. There were lots of local cyclists on this road, and vineyards as far as the eye could see including Sanfords, where the wine tasting scene from Sideways takes place. As we neared Solvang in the centre of the Santa Ynez valley, we passed AJ Spurs and the Hitching Post, also famous from the movie, and continued to our hotel, the Haldsten House to swim, shower and change in time to walk over to watch the time trial. Solvang is a Danish town with windmills, and eclectic architecture. Frommers describes the Santa Ynez Valley as,

“(this region) presents a soothing and intriguing blend of Arabian horses standing beside pristine vineyards, rolling pastures dotted with spreading oaks, graceful Victorian farmhouses and barns beside cutting-edge wineries, all surrounded by imposing mountains. This is beautiful country, where the clear blue sky achieves a brilliance rarely seen ... In the Santa Ynez Valley, the pace is slower and the locals friendlier...”

At the finish area, although there were VIP tents, the views from the street were just as good and there was a huge screen tv that we could watch also. It was really exciting to watch the pro’s race by throughout the afternoon. Afterwards, we cycled the course, (somewhat slower than the pros- we had to stop to take pictures, the scenery was so outstanding). We tasted wine before dinner and then proceeded to the Los Olivos Café, which is one of the best restaurants in Southern California. Los Olivos is a really charming village, filled with historical buildings and wine tasting rooms. So much wine, so little time.

Ride Distance: 65 km



Next morning, as the peloton tackled Mount Baldy, we cycled another gorgeous route through vineyards north of Solvang and Los Olivos and then made our way south to Santa Barbara along an old stage coach route (we passed an inn/bunkhouse from 1860) and on to the Old Mission Santa Barbara, established in 1786 and one of 20 in California. From here we continued through funky and hip Santa Barbara (shopping for any who wanted) and then along the coast to Ventura on superb bike paths and roads better suited for cycling than Hwy 101. In Thousand Oaks/Westlake Village we stayed at the Westlake Village Inn, a luxurious hotel with lush grounds and large swimming pool. For dinner, we went to the Napa Grill, a recently opened restaurant that boasted an extensive wine list. Ride Distance: 100 km

On our last cycling day, the pros were riding from Santa Clarita to Westlake Village and our hotel was about 1 km from the finish line. Before watching though, we wanted our own ride and had planned a route down Potero Road to the coast at Point Mugu (dropping 500 meters in 20 km) and along the ocean towards Malibu – a prime coast line for surfers and kite boarders. Near Leo Carillo State Beach, pods of dolphins skipped across the water. At Mulholland, we turned back towards Westlake Village climbing 550 m in 15 km and then finished with a twisty-turning-descending road (300 m over 5 km) that had me grinning from ear to ear. As we coasted into Westlake Village, we joined in the throngs at the finish area. The peloton did several laps and we were in ideal position to watch. American Chris Horner of Team Radioshack captured the GC category and yellow jersey with Levi Leipheimer, also of Team Radioshack in 2nd just 38 seconds behind. Third place was Thomas Danielson of Garmin-Cervelo. Other category winners included Peter Sagan of Team Liquigas-Cannondale who won the Sprinters Jersey; Jonathon Patrick McCarthy (USA) of Team Spidertech was awarded the King of Mountains Jersey; Tejay Van Garderen (USA) of HTC Highroad was given the Best Young Rider Jersey. After the riders crossed the

finish line, they coasted over to within 20 feet of us and posed for photos and congratulated each other. It was a great moment. Later that night, we celebrated our week of riding through the gorgeous scenery that is California, tasting its wines, and enjoying warm sunny weather. Ride Distance: 90 km

We all vowed to come back next year and do it all over again. See you in May, 2012



Guiding next year's trip will be San Francisco resident, wine connoisseur, and cyclist Brynn Powell who has lead trips for us at the Tour de France, and one-time LA resident Guido Martini, who has lead trips for us at the Tour of California, Oregon Coast, British Columbia and his birthplace, Italy.

Tour details will be published as soon as the race route is announced, likely in early 2012. Dates of our trip are expected to be May 17-23; there will be both a Classic (3-star hotels) at US\$2450pp and Luxe (4-star hotels) trip at \$2950 offered. VIP access will be available at a modest supplement. We are accepting 'first right of refusal' registrations at this time and are offering 10% discounts to any registrations received in 2011.

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