

The New York Times

Over The Alps On a Bike With A Boost

Cycling Swiss mountain passes with battery power (and some breath to spare) isn't a bad way to cheat.

BY TIM NEVILLE

THE road east out of Sörenberg rears up into a series of steep turns that climb the Glaubenbielen Pass, the high point of a road the Swiss Army punched through the Alps more than 60 years ago. Though the occasional car and bus make the journey to the top, these days much of the road belongs to cyclists.

On a cool afternoon in mid-July I was one of them. I hadn't ridden much all season, yet something primordial kicked in when I spied another biker just ahead. His calf muscles were swollen like Salamanca hams, and he was stooped over the bars, sweat dripping onto the pavement.

Easy pickings, I thought, as I tore after him. Within moments I'd reeled him in. He, gasping, me, hardly out of breath: I felt, well, guilty. "You're cheating!" he panted in German as I sped by. "You'll be out of power soon!"

He was right: I was cheating. With the mash of a button on my handlebars, a 250-watt electric motor had spun to life and increased the power of my pedal strokes by 150 percent. Suddenly I had my own domestique, a 26-volt brute that seemed to grab the saddle and shove me onward every

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Over The Alps in a Bike With A Boost

From First Travel Page

time I pedaled. In a few minutes, I had reached the summit, taken a short walk and realized that cycling big Alpine passes with some breath to spare might not be such a bad way to cheat.

Here in the United States electric bikes are slowly becoming more popular — you can, for instance, take e-bike tours in San Francisco and Napa Valley. In Europe, the trend is more developed with robust rental schemes in places like Britain's Lake District, Versailles and Amsterdam. But it is the Swiss who have embraced the concept with the most imagination.

For 50 Swiss francs a day, about \$62 at \$1.25 to the franc (with discounts for multiple days), you can rent an electric bike from one of 400 rental stations around the country and then set out on some 3,600 miles of well-marked bike paths. With hundreds of places along the way to obtain fresh batteries free, you don't need to be a whippet-thin racer to roll for days through the spectacular Swiss hinterlands — up steep mountain passes and past soft meadows, bubbling creeks and curious cows. You're free from untangling train schedules and away from the tourist hordes but still have access to all the traditional Swissness you can take at any time and in any place. And since affording is cheap, a famously expensive country just became a little more affordable.

No doubt traditional cyclists are rolling their eyes. Electric bikes go against the very idea of what makes a bike a bike, they say, and I agree. Two mountain biked along some of the hardest stretches of Colorado's Continental Divide, and pedaled across Iowa (not by the way), up thigh-numbing climbs in New Mexico and, yes, even across most of Switzerland.

THE physical accomplishment of doing those trips under my own, fleeting power certainly helped seat them in my memory. With e-biking, the indelible pride of conquering my own limitations would, I know, vanish with the push of a button. But the benefits were too intriguing: Electric bikes and motor cycles — I'd still find plenty of exercise and reap the pleasure of watching a country unfold beyond the set of handlebars. Maybe the bikes would be even greater since I'd be able to look around without a burning, gasping body to distract me.

With that in mind I rented a Swiss-made Flyer C series electric bike from the main train station in Bern. It looked like any other bike for the most part but weighed a crushing 60 pounds, a good 40 pounds more than my road bike at home. There were four power settings — high, standard, eco and no assist — controllable through a digital console mounted near the left-hand grip. A torque sensor near the crank would tell an electric motor how much to assist me based on the power setting and how hard I was mashing on the pedals. It, it was no free lunch: no work, no help. My plan was to spend four days on a

TIM NEVILLE, who recently returned to Oregon from several years in Switzerland, was frequently asked at the outdoors.

150-mile, inn-to-inn route that would take me along the rolling heart of the Emmentaler valley, through the Entlebuch Biosphere, and up and over a series of Alpine passes — a fine mixture of pastures, mountains and forests in regions that many foreign tourists know little about. I'd have flatlands and hills and the chance to find out whether the benefits of an electric motor outweighed its driving rain.

My British friend Tom Stephens joined me on the inaugural leg toward an inn I had booked, 45 miles away in Fischbach. As it happened, we set out into driving rain.

"I suppose the weather could be worse," he said. "It could be halting." But weather or not, our bikes charged ahead. We cruised through soggy forests and past farms selling free-range eggs. We drafted off each other, from which seemed more Nascar than Tour de Suisse. On the flats I often left the motor on "eco," a 50 percent boost to my own pedal power, unsure of how quickly the batteries' 20-mile range might dwindle in hilly terrain.

Things really kicked into gear after a lunch of thick goulash at a tavern in Burgdorf, when we picked up Route No. 99, also known as the Heart Route, designed for e-biking. Peter Hasler, the



ABOVE LEFT Installing a battery on a Flyer bicycle. ABOVE Riding electric bikes in Madiswil, where there is a place to swap batteries. RIGHT An e-biker crosses a stream along the Grosse Scheidegg Pass. TOP RIGHT Hotel Rosenlaui, on the Grosse Scheidegg Pass. BOTTOM Cows at Glauenbühlens Pass.

route's architect, mapped the first 37 miles of it in 2003 by following narrow, mostly car-free paths originally used by farmers. It ran and then to see what he meant in any cyclist knows, on a bike you not only feel the landscape but smell and hear it too. Yet, with an electric bike, instead of worrying about the next grueling climb, I could relax and inhale misty patches of Russian olive trees and wonder whether cows or sheep would be around the bend based on the tone of their bells. We sped around weathered wooden chalets with geraniums bursting from window boxes. The path itself was paved and no wider than a sidewalk, a rolling ribbon that rose and fell with the surge of the land.

We stopped about 20 miles outside Burgdorf in Lütschberg, which seemed to be no more than a couple of farms, one of them run by the Plücker family. Ursula Plücker emerged from the kitchen, wiped her hands on an apron, and sold us glasses of plum pie and two cold slices of fresh milk. "How do you get that to taste so good?" Tom asked and ordered another round.

We never made it to the bed-and-breakfast. Our batteries were down to about 40 percent by the time we reached Madiswil, a village about 10 miles short of our goal, and we decided it was time for us to make our first swap for a fresh battery. We followed a red sign with a bike and a battery on it. Another sign with a battery and a bike on it, 900 swap points around the country. The hotel tavern was cozy, with wood tables and tidy windows lit with rain. A young woman disappeared behind a wooden door and returned with two fresh batteries. I was just about to leave when Jürg Ingrid, the owner, offered us rooms that had suddenly come open. It was an easy decision. We took hot showers and headed for the pub, where we tore into plates of entrecôte and chicken, and lingered late into the night with a small bottle of Swiss-Italian wine. The salwar-kameez was sorted in a bike saddle and the bread was served in a fender.

The 11-room exposed-timber inn, built in 1798, is made of stone and wood. The e-bikers who, at least in Switzerland, seem to gravitate toward finer food and finer views than more budget-oriented long-distance cyclists. On a busy day Mr. Ingrid said he would get 100 cyclists coming by to change batteries. "Some order something to eat or drink, others spend the night, some swap and go," he said.

The next morning Tom returned to Bern, leaving me alone for Day 2. The Heart Route also offer self-guided day trips along a portion of the bike route, including bike rental and a three-course lunch, for 59 Swiss francs per person (41-52-939-55; herzeuche.ch).

sought to highlight "exceptionally beautiful" aspects of the country. He found them at their best in the Emmentaler. It took me time for Tom and me to see what he meant in any cyclist knows, on a bike you not only feel the landscape but smell and hear it too. Yet, with an electric bike, instead of worrying about the next grueling climb, I could relax and inhale misty patches of Russian olive trees and wonder whether cows or sheep would be around the bend based on the tone of their bells. We sped around weathered wooden chalets with geraniums bursting from window boxes. The path itself was paved and no wider than a sidewalk, a rolling ribbon that rose and fell with the surge of the land.

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FROM TOP Lamb salad at Gasthof Bären in Madiswil; cheesemaker at the Obwaldner Dairy farm in Glauenbühlens Pass; apricot pie, at Hotel Rosenlaui.

"high," which increased my own power by 50 percent; eventually the motor turned off at about 16 m.p.h., the legal limit for an electric bike to still be considered a bike. (Other models go faster but they require plates, like mopeds.) But I was in no rush. I stopped at the crest of a small rise and settled into a pleasant wooden bench perched under a colossal linden tree. The Alps soared behind manicured hillsides to the south; the gentle, rounded backs of the Jura mountains rolled to the west. There was no way a tourist could come here without a bike, and I relished the serene beauty I'd found before me. Five Flyer riders rode by and waved. They were all well into their 50s, the largest age group of Heart Route fans. Mr. Hasler had told me. Then two small tractors carrying four farmers rumbled by.

"Grüeziach miteinand," I said, a linguistic cue that I'd crossed into the Lucerne canton and another of the Swiss-German dialects. About 10 miles down the road, in Willisau, population 7,200, I carbo-loaded on chocolate-dipped Florentines and swapped my battery near the train station. From there the path shot along a small lake, the Sempacher, before it turned to gravel and then concrete. A red sign pointed out a junction I'd come to dread. The Heart Route was wonderful, but I couldn't stay on it. Another friend was waiting for me in the south, so I headed for the front wheel down Route No. 31 and headed for the best.

I REGRETTED it at first. No. 24, the Emmentaler-Entlebuch route, followed the Little Emme River along a busy stretch of road. When it finally narrowed into quieter country roads, it turned into a steep climb up a 600-foot hill. I actually broke a sweat. Near the top, a sign announced I was entering the Entlebuch Biosphere, a 250-square-mile UNESCO reserve of high-land marshes, alluvial forests and karst formations. The air hissed through my spokes as the path became level. The long, toothy spine of the 6,800-foot-high Schträttelröte rose to the south. Far below church steeples stood the exclamation marks above the villages of Entlebuch and Hasle. I ground around a corner and a woman gazing across the lake fields spontaneously smiled and waved to me from her window.

Around 3 p.m., I began the slow, steady climb toward the top of the mile-high Glauenbühlens Pass. It was harder than I'd expected, and after reaching the top I noticed I'd drained the battery to just 20 percent in seven miles. "It was all downhill from there, so I switched the motor off and hit 45 m.p.h., flying down the eastern side of the pass with the hiss of Lake Sarner shimmering below.

The sun was slipping behind the mountains and the temperature began to drop dramatically. I stopped, pat on a windshield and checked my watch. It had been seven hours since I'd left Madiswil. It suddenly struck me that I probably could have made the ride in about the same time with my road bike. I was certainly getting there more comfortably — I had a big cushy seat, supportive front shocks and an upright riding position — and with less effort, especially on the ascents. But on the descents, I reckoned that my sleeker road bike would have been faster.

A few miles down the road, I hit the brakes at Eggihütte, a mountain hut near Mörtschli run by Wisi and Rita Enz, two dairy farmers who allow hikers, bikers and anyone else who makes it that way to sleep in their hut's loft. Ms. Enz served me coffee in a bowl and opened a bottle of kernobststrawwin, a stone fruit brandy, for me to add at my discretion. "Do keep you warm," she said. A crude, wooden megaphone that farmers once used to offer evening prayers across the hills hung from the wall. Mr. Enz, with untanned eyebrows and a gentle demeanor, strapped a small, one-legged stool to his rear and began to milk his 20 cows for a radelette cheese in the valley. Meanwhile, I dined on Alpkemmagroten, a hearty pasta and cheese dish, cooked in an iron pot over an open fire. The three of us sat up late talking about avalanches and farm subsidies, with my hosts speaking in the thunderous tones of people who spend their lives shouting across pastures.

That night, I slept soundly, awestruck in wood blankets atop a bed of clean hay, and set out the next morning with a thick wedge of homemade cheese and cheese, cooked in an iron pot over an open fire. The three of us sat up late talking about avalanches and farm subsidies, with my hosts speaking in the thunderous tones of people who spend their lives shouting across pastures.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM NEVILLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



"THERE YOU ARE!" shouted my friend Dale Bechtel when I finally rode into Gröwil, a village on the far side of the pass. Dale and his new Flyer had been waiting for me at an outdoor café, ready to tackle Day 3, a 35-mile push over the Brügg Pass and up half of the Grosse Scheidegg Pass.

Under bright skies Dale and I worked our way up Route No. 9, the Lake Route, toward a row of serrated peaks. It was on this route, when the road tipped up to a 12 percent grade, that I learned that I had been riding the bike all wrong. On a normal bike you want to find the perfect cadence that balances effort and speed. This doesn't work so well on an electric bike. Instead you want to shift into a higher gear (harder to pedal) and then resist the urge to stand on the pedals and push hard. The trick: stay steady, and let the engine pick up your slack and ferry you up steep pitches with about the effort of a brisk walk down a flat city street.

Finding this "sweet spot" on the e-bike allowed us to cruise up the 3,300-foot Brügg Pass so fast that at the top we'd completely drained our batteries: 1,200 vertical feet in less than 8 miles. On the summit, we found what must have been one of the most spectacular swap points in the country: the Hald Brunig Kulms, an amusing chaise-style inn. Neither of us could resist ordering beer. The three of us sat up late talking about avalanches and farm subsidies, with my hosts speaking in the thunderous tones of people who spend their lives shouting across pastures.

Originally I'd planned the last day of this journey to be mostly an easy 20 miles downhill through Grindelwald into Interlaken, where I'd catch a train back to Bern. Those miles went by in a blur, and before noon I was standing on the platform among hundreds of tourists, wondering what I was doing there. It didn't take us long to decide to ride another 20 miles together to Thun, where Dale turned south for home, and I found myself contemplating a sign that pointed to a new section of the Heart Route that Mr. Hasler had just completed this year. I could follow it back toward Bern, though it would mean an eight-hour, 88-mile day. My battery was still nearly full, the sun was still high, and my map showed a swap point well within range. I bumped the motor into both and sped off around a bend.

Marlary (Arthur Conn Doyle and his wife were guests of the hotel.) There we picked up route No. 61, the Bernese Oberland route, and the start of the climb up the 6,400-foot-high Grosse Scheidegg Pass.

Rising nearly 4,500 vertical feet in less than 123 miles, the pass was supposed to be the most challenging on our route, but at this point I'd thoroughly mastered this sweet spot business and left Dale trailing behind me. As I climbed, the Engelhörner fangs appeared to the east, a series of impossibly sharp pinacles. The icy blues of Rosenlauer Glacier rose overhead.

We slept that night in a cramped room in the seven-room chalet at Schwarzwald, knowing that in the morning we would have just another half-hour of steep riding to reach the top of the pass. And that would mark the near end of my trip.

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