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Riding the Trail

by J.J.(John) Castner

One August Sunday morning my wife and I couldn't sleep. So, rather than roll-out of bed, make a cup of coffee, and go for a walk on the beach at Marco Island, we decided to drive to Miami for breakfast. During that drive, I enjoyed the sights to be seen on the Tamiami Trail through the Everglades, and so spawned the idea....."I think I'll ride my bike from Marco to Miami on my 35th birthday."

About as far as you can get from what could be called an avid cyclist (the farthest I have ever ridden is 30 miles, and I really only bike a couple of times a month), I did a little research in preparation for the day. By most accounts, the simple answer was--- "Don't do it" ! However, with the stubbornness of my father, I resolved that I was going to go for it, no matter what was said about the dangers of the road. To be honest, being a Southern Californian for most of my life, I was less concerned about the cars and more concerned about getting eaten by a gator!

And so it was that at 7 a.m. on the morning of Sept. 3rd, I waved goodbye to the Gulf of Mexico, hopped on the Trek 420 that I've had for 17 years, and headed East to Miami.

For those of you who plan to ride from the west, I suggest you go at dawn, as the sunrise over the Goodland Bridge and the Everglades is spectacular. The first 25 miles of the ride or so, from Marco to Port of the Islands was really quite easy and stress-free. The shoulder on 41 is about 4-feet wide and smooth. I stopped to snap a few photos of the sites and the landmarks, many of which are detailed at "Places to visit on the ROGG" on www.evergladesrogg.org. From Port of Islands to the entrance of Big Cypress Preserve, at about 25-35 miles, was a bit rough and the shoulder has lots of bumps/grates. Still the scenery here has a wide open view of the Everglades and many beautiful birds.

The Big Cypress Preserve was the most desolate

part of the ride, and has only about a 1-foot shoulder, but it was a very smooth road, and really was quite peaceful during a mid-week morning ride. To keep myself feeling safe I checked over my shoulder frequently and then rode into the middle of the road and waved my hands like a wild banshee to get the attention of cars coming from the rear. It seemed to work, because I never really felt that the cars got too close. I even got a good Florida rain shower to cool me off after about 3 and half hours in the saddle. Some of the best parts of the Preserve were the bridge crossings, with crystal clear water and a look back deep into the mangrove and cypress trees emerging from the water.

I don't know whether it was because my arms, legs, neck, and back were aching so much, or whether it was just the change of the land, but once I exited the Big Cypress Preserve and started to get into Miccosukee territory, I did find the beauty of the sites to diminish a bit. That being said, after a long, desolate journey, it was good to get back to "civilization", and I must say was tempted to stop and hop on an airboat tour instead of finishing what I had started.

Nonetheless, with my wife now usually driving about 10 miles ahead of me and acting as a check-point, I did push on. Overall, this section of the ride was the busiest (maybe it was the time of day or the location), but with some new road construction that is going on, the shoulder was pretty wide. I did stop at the Miccosukee Indian Village, Safari Airboat Tours, and Coopertown (where one of the workers chatted to me about his adventures cycling the trail) for a rest and to see what the hub-bub was all about. After about 7 hours and 90 miles, I pulled into the Miccosukee Indian Casino and my wife drove me the rest of the way into Miami. At first I had planned on riding that section, but after driving it, I would suggest that perhaps this be avoided. There is a LOT of traffic and no shoulder at all.

So there you have it. Although I did see a gator and lots of snakes, I made it through unscathed (besides not being able to walk for a day or two). And the birthday beers have never tasted quite so good!