

"The Occidental Tourist"



THE
SONOMA COUNTY
TOUR

Three to four days, 216 to 250 miles

Sonoma County is considered one of the best places to ride a bike in the United States...maybe in the world. Over the years, many professional racing teams have used the region for their preseason training camps, citing the “European” nature of the roads. Many pros choose to live here year ’round for the same reason. Virtually every touring company lists a “Wine Country” tour in its catalog, and these roads are home to dozens of organized centuries, doubles, triathlons, road races, and other pay-to-ride events. It is a very popular cycling destination, and with good reason.

There are so many wonderful roads—most of them light on traffic and high on scenery—that it’s almost impossible to hit them all in one, brief visit. Indeed, when we laid out our One-Week Wine Country Tour, we lamented all the roads we had to leave out on our way through the area. This little three or four-day tour does a good job of finding those missing roads. By staying in one place and exploring it more intensively, it actually samples more of the nice local roads than the longer tour. Think of it as a concentrated, high-powered dose of the best of what this best-of-all-possible cycling regions has to offer.

In my opinion, this is the nearly perfect Mini-Tour...at least if your goal is cycling perfection. Each of the three main routes is distinctly different, and each is an absolute gem of a ride. I have also included a little bonus ride I call the Leftover Loop. It takes a few nice roads that didn’t fit into the three main stages and bundles them together into a little 24 to 34-mile loop that may be suitable for doing on one of your travel days. Each route goes off in a different direction—north, south, east, west—and hardly any miles of road are duplicated getting in and out of town. In fact, exactly one mile of road is duplicated on the three main stages, and if you simply can’t bear that single mile of backtracking, I have an alternate route that you can use to cut your redundancy to zero. One road is duplicated on the optional fourth day. Having four rides start and finish in the same small town without a lot of overlap is almost impossible, and it’s a testament to the rich diversity and density of roads in this area that it can be done. All four routes begin and end right in the center of Occidental, within a block of all the lodgings in town.

Of course, the best thing about these routes is the scenery. Aside from about a mile of road on one route that

passes through some suburban sprawl, these stages are all rural and all spectacular, from hilltop, sheep-cropped meadows to sweeping ocean views to little lanes through the vineyards. It would be hard to imagine a four-day package that is more consistently beautiful and cycle-friendly.

However, it is challenging: these are steep, ruggedly chunky hills, and many of the little back roads scramble up and down the hillsides like mountain goats. You will need to be fit and determined to finish the longest, hilliest options each day. On the other hand—and here's another reason why this is such a great package—there are very viable short-cuts on each day that put the rides within reach of riders who are perhaps a bit less ambitious. Even the shortest routes do contain a fair bit of climbing though, and because of that, we don't recommend this tour for beginners.

Occidental is an excellent venue for staging the tour. Perhaps the only knock on the town is that there isn't a great deal to do off the bike. It's a quiet, charming village, with a few interesting shops, but the entire town can be explored in a single, half-hour stroll. There isn't much in the way of night life, aside from a decent local pub. (Actually, for such a tiny place, there are a surprising number of concerts and other nocturnal entertainments offered on an irregular basis, but you have to be there on the right nights.) There are two very nice, moderately priced restaurants with menus that virtually define the term "carbo-loading." (More about the restaurants later.) There are also a few smaller restaurants as well...coffee houses, lunch spots, bistros, and the like.

Occidental used to have a decent little bike shop too—Gianni's—but that business closed and a nice bistro opened in the same building...well worth a visit. These days, if you need a bike fix, the nearest shop is in Sebastopol: [West County Revolution](#). They will have everything you need to work on the best bikes.

While Occidental is quite eclectic and varied in its populace and commerce, there is one underlying theme that explains a good deal about the character of the place. The town is famous—in a provincial sort

of way—for its huge, Italian family-style restaurants. Most folks are familiar with the general idea of family-style dining: a limited menu, almost never varying, but offering vast mountains of good, wholesome food at reasonable prices.



Negri's and the Union Hotel stand opposite each other at the center of town, one on each side of the main street. The Union Hotel (below) is run by the Gonella family. Both restaurants have their faithful patrons and both appear to be operating near full capacity most of the time.

The [Union Hotel](#) isn't a hotel at all. Just a restaurant. However, there are two very nice guest cottages on the property offering excellent, luxurious accommodations (with prices to match). The cottages have full kitchens, or you can avail yourself of room service from the restaurant.

In addition to their restaurant, the Negris operate the Occidental Lodge Hotel, which isn't a "hotel" at all but a fairly standard motel.

Where to stay

There are only three lodging establishments in the village: the basic, relatively inexpensive Occidental Lodge Hotel, the more up-scale guest cottages attached to the Union Hotel restaurant, and one bed-&-breakfast inn that is also more luxurious and more





About the region

The village of Occidental sits like a saddle on a sway-backed notch in the wooded hills of western Sonoma County, an hour north of the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco. To the west, it's seven miles to the ocean, as the seagull flies, but over ten miles as the cyclist rides it, along the winding backroads of the coastal hills. To the east, 10 to 15 miles away over several rumples of hills, lie the bigger town of Sebastopol and the city of Santa Rosa, Sonoma County's population center. Also to the east are Sebastopol's Gravenstein apple orchards and the many valleys that are home to the county's famous vineyards. North of Occidental is the Russian River and beyond the river, rank upon rank of empty, remote, rugged, often thickly wooded hills. To the south, the contours of the terrain are somewhat gentler, and the thicker forest gives way to grassy meadows and rolling dairy country, spilling down to watery esteros and to Tomales Bay.

expensive. It is not within the scope of this guide to evaluate or rank these lodgings. However, because there are so few of them here and because the choices are so simple, I will briefly explore their differences.

The [Occidental Lodge Hotel](#) has 24 rooms, with cable TV and a pool. Its prices are relatively moderate by modern motel standards. The accommodations are very nice, but less luxurious than the other establishments in town.

The Inn at Occidental (images this page) is in a large, exquisitely renovated Victorian on the slope of the canyon behind the Union Hotel. It works hard at being the swankest, poshest joint in town, and is priced accordingly. This inn is very nice, with beautiful appointments, great cuisine, and superb service. If living in the lap of luxury is important to you on your holiday, then you'll probably get what you pay for at this quality establishment, or perhaps with one of the Union Hotel's guest cottages. For what it's worth: neither of the fancier establishments offers a swimming pool, which the more basic motel does have (*image, page 2*), but they do have hot tubs. For much more info on this beautiful inn, go to www.innatoccidental.com.

There is one more possibility that might work for some of you. The Union Hotel will allow RV's to park overnight in their fairly secluded back lot (no hook-ups), provided you eat each evening in the Union Hotel.

Look at the little inset map of Occidental (on the Northern Loop map): Bohemian Highway runs through town on a more-or-less north-south line, while two roads each leave town to the east or to the west...Graton and Occidental Roads to the east and Coleman Valley and Bittner Roads to the west. If this sway-backed notch in the hills really were a saddle, and if a giant were to sit down on the saddle, he would face either east or west, and his legs would trail downhill along the north-south line of Bohemian Highway. Those are the two downhill routes out of town. The other roads all climb away from the central hub. (Well, to be accurate, Bittner drops a bit at first, but soon climbs a lot.)

Straddling the saddle in the ridge the way it does,





the vision of an agrarian nirvana. Some of the most celebrated and notorious of the hippie communes called these hills home, and while things have settled down some since those halcyon days, there are still numerous extended families living out their alternative dreams up at the ends of the long, dirt driveways you'll pass on these stages. The atmosphere is not one of outrageous freakiness, but rather of a cheerful, vigorous creativity and a quiet spirituality.

While the locals may see themselves as somewhat different and set apart from the city folks out on the flatlands, there is nothing insular or standoffish about folks here. This is an easygoing, friendly community, and you shouldn't have any problem feeling at home or welcome during your stay.

Occidental sits at the top of two watersheds. Within a block or so of the middle of town are the headwaters of two streams that flow off the ridge in opposite directions, eventually dropping to valleys on opposite sides of the mountains. Dutch Bill Creek flows to the north alongside Bohemian Hwy and empties into the Russian River, while Salmon Creek drains away to the south—also along “Boho”—before curling around to the west and the ocean.

Weather here can range from cool fogs rolling in off the ocean to oven-like heat in the interior valleys. Generally speaking, this area has a very moderate climate that is ideally suited to cycling. Being nestled down amongst the hills seems to have a beneficial influence on the local climate, and Occidental often appears to be basking in sun while the surrounding ridgelines are cloaked in drippy fog.

Occidental sits at the center of a region known locally as the West County—meaning the hills and valleys of Sonoma County west of the Santa Rosa plain, extending to the ocean. Although the entire region is distinctly and pleasantly rural, little of it is actual wilderness: there are homes scattered throughout the woods. The population density and the style of the homes always reminds me of Hobbitville. These hills are home to apple farmers, sheep ranchers, organic gardeners, winemakers, artists, and many others who just like living in the country, from plain folk to yuppie commuters to unreconstructed back-to-the-land flower children, most of whom migrated here from San Francisco over the past 50 years, pursuing

The rides

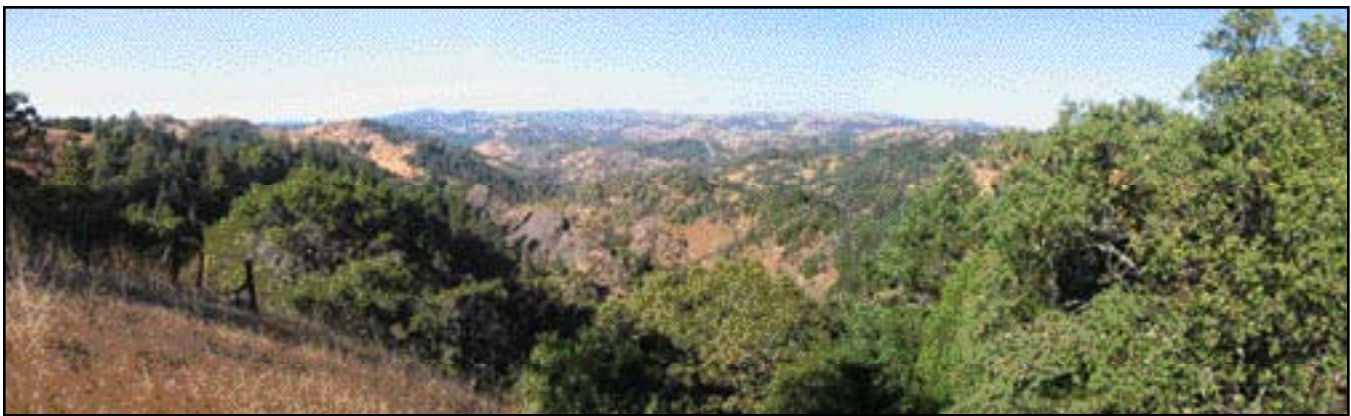
I've tried to come up with some plausible logic for doing these tour stages in a particular order, but I have failed in the attempt. Shuffle them around any way that makes sense for you. The only feeble rationale I can put forward is that I have placed the hardest stage first, when you're freshest.

I have all rides beginning and ending at the corner of Bohemian Hwy and Coleman Valley Road, which is the exact center of town.



The Northern Loop 74 miles, 6000'

King Ridge Road is considered by many to be the crown jewel of North Bay cycling roads. Numerous articles have appeared in bike magazines extolling its charms. One writer called it “the land of dreams,” “the best ride ever,” and “God’s cycling theme park,” while another stated, “without a doubt, the most beautiful road I’ve ever ridden.” I suspect those writers—condemned by their jobs to live and ride mostly in Los Angeles—were blown away by their first exposures to the North Bay hills, and that any of several other roads might have elicited the same euphoric rapture and the same florid prose. It is a beautiful road, but the most beautiful road in the world? Well...



For another perspective, ask the pros: this loop was the centerpiece of a stage on the late, lamented Coors Classic road race. (The stage did essentially what you’ll do today, but it started and finished in Santa Rosa, making it something like 110 miles. After you’ve finished this ride, think about putting all that together in a 110-mile package, and then think about averaging over 25-mph, as they did.) They did it in a chilly, pea-soup fog, so they probably didn’t have occasion to notice the scenery much, but as for the challenging terrain, they formed very decided opinions. Ron Keifel characterized it as “a death march,” while Alexi Grewal termed it “fucking scary!”

Clearly, this ride makes a vivid impression on people, whether for its eye-popping scenery, its quad-popping climbs, or its daunting descents. If it’s not the most beautiful ride ever, it’s certainly on a short list of such rides, and as for the terrain, if you tackle it at something less than pro-race pace, it needn’t be a death march. And if the whole production seems like a little bit more than you want today, I’ll point out three different bailouts that can soften the overall impact.

This ride is much more than just King Ridge though. That celebrated road only accounts for 16 of the day’s

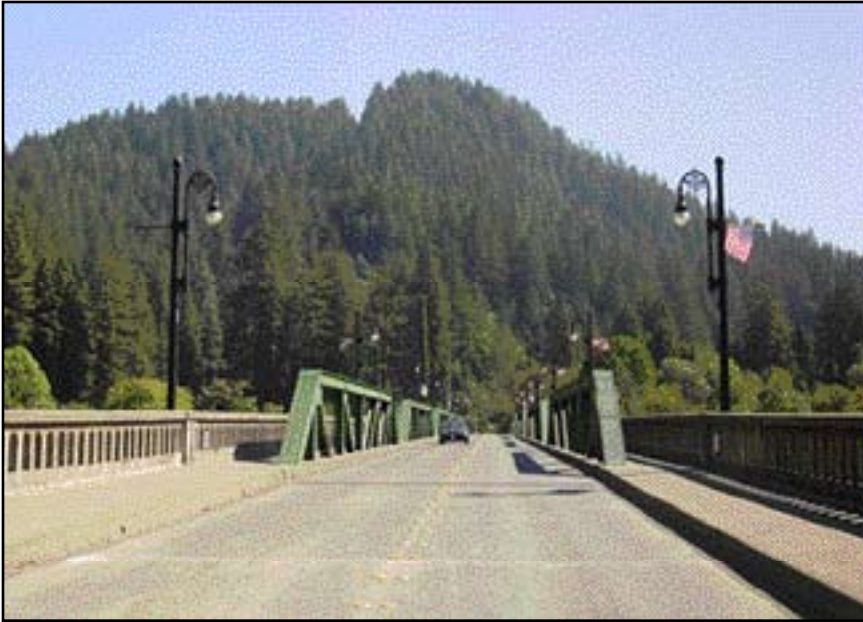
74 miles, but the remaining miles are every bit as entertaining. I think when people refer to the great experience of riding King Ridge, they implicitly include all the other roads that make up this loop. There is hardly a mile all day that isn’t a gem, and the good stuff starts as soon as you get on the bike...

You leave Occidental on Bohemian Hwy, heading north. Hope for a balmy morning: you’re going to begin with a downhill, and the only thing that could detract from this excellent descent is doing it when it’s too cold, first thing in the morning. This is an absolute blast of a downhill, with one snappy curve after another to challenge your handling skills, most of the time on silky smooth pavement. After about three miles of this fun, the grade eases off, but still stays mildly downhill, as you follow Dutch

Bill Creek all the way to the riverfront town of Monte Rio. Along the way, the surrounding countryside consists mainly of forest—a mix of fir and broadleaf trees—with a few isolated houses and some summer camps scattered along the creek.

Boho Hwy becomes Main Street as it slides through Monte Rio, past the Pink Elephant Bar, a roughneck, biker hangout. This is a scruffy little resort town, with the laid-back, river-rat ambience common to river towns everywhere. The Russian River is usually a placid stream with a flow so slow it often resembles a linear lake, but every few winters, it gets up on its hind legs and floods everything in sight. Many of the resort cabins in and around Monte Rio are sunk ten feet underwater on a semi-regular basis, and that tends to keep the local real estate values rather depressed. Low rents attract low-income residents, and the result is a mellow but sometimes mangy patina. Andrei Codrescu, the National Public Radio commentator, once remarked that in Monte Rio, food stamps are considered the primary form of legal tender.

And yet right in the middle of all the down-at-heels riff raff and run-down cabins is one of the most exclusive, prestigious, affluent enclaves in the world: Bohemian



and head downstream some more along the Russian River to the charming Victorian village of Duncans Mills. This is a great place for getting off the bike and exploring. The entire town is pretty, with all of the nicely renovated turn-of-the-century buildings housing galleries and better quality gift shops. There is a very nice coffee house that's a regular pit stop for cyclists, and you'll often see a handful of riders sipping their lattes and mochas on their sunny deck.

After browsing the town, take Moscow Road and head back upstream to Monte Rio, reconnecting with Bohemian Hwy right in front of the Pink Elephant. From here, just retrace the morning's

Grove. This men-only retreat caters to the ultimate old-boy network...Presidents, Secretaries of State, generals, governors, CEOs, and others of the same plutocratic fraternity who feel it to be their right and duty to rule the world. When the summer encampment is in session, Santa Rosa's little airport fills with corporate jets and a steady stream of stretch limos rolls down Bohemian Highway, transporting the movers and shakers to the Grove for a week of moving and shaking. You won't even know you've passed the place. It's very, very private. But I think it's interesting to know it's there.

Cross the Russian River (above) and turn left on River Road. You've used up your downhill for now, and for the next few miles, you'll cruise downstream along the river and then, after a turn onto Austin Creek Road, upstream along that pretty creek (below). River Road is nearly flat, well paved, and quite busy. Austin Creek is a bit more up-and-down (rollers...photo, next page), has funky old pavement, and is very quiet...hardly a car to be seen. Most of these riparian miles are done in deep forest—at this point mostly redwood trees. There are modest vacation homes plunked down here and there along the water's edge, but nothing in the commercial line.

At 13 miles, Austin Creek Road hits Cazadero Hwy. This marks the first of my official bailout points for the day. If you want a very easy ride, turn left and follow Caz Hwy back downstream, along the other bank of Austin Creek. When you get back to River Road, turn right (west)





Just beyond the town, you come to a junction. Caz Hwy ends and three roads fork off into the mountains. To the right: Old Cazadero Road (virtually abandoned, often unpaved). To the left: Fort Ross Road. In the middle: King Ridge. This is where the second shortcut peels off. Fort Ross Road cuts across the vast, empty hill country, bisecting the King Ridge loop. It eventually re-connects with the basic circuit at Meyers Grade. Doing Fort Ross will save you 19 miles, leaving a wonderful 55-mile stage. It will still be very challenging (hilly) and extremely scenic. Having to choose between Fort Ross Road and King Ridge Road is an embarrassment-of-riches conundrum. Both are superb roads and you hate to leave either of them unriden.

When you look at them both at the beginning, Fort Ross looks tougher than King Ridge. (It

is tough, but King Ridge is tougher.) It starts climbing right from the intersection at a pretty intense rate. For the next few miles, it stairsteps up to Black Mountain, with many short and sometimes quite steep pitches broken up with small flats and even a couple of minor downhills. Over the top of Black Mountain, there is a long, technical descent into a canyon formed by the San Andreas Fault. The road then climbs up to the Meyers Grade ridgeline through a beautiful, enchanted forest of mossy oak trees, with wildflowers, boulders, and split-rail fences thrown in as decorative accents...one of my favorite spots.

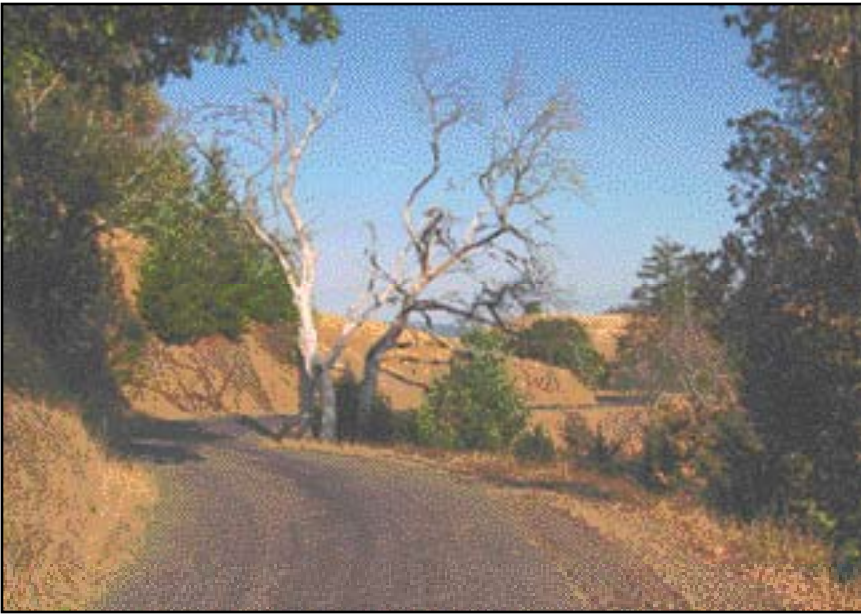
Having dispensed with our first two shortcuts, it's time to finally tackle the main course on today's menu. After about two miles of rollers along Austin Creek, the first (but by no means only) climb on King Ridge begins with a moderate, one-mile grade, followed by a mile of down—back to the creek, briefly—and then a really brutal climb of 1.3 miles (both photos), at which point there is a clear summit.

downhill run on Boho...now a mild uphill pull to Occidental. This shortcut will give you a very pleasant and not-too-strenuous 31-mile ride.

You can do two things to minimize the amount of backtracking. In Monte Rio, you can cut over to Old Bohemian Hwy and head back uphill that way, on the opposite bank of Dutch Bill Creek. You have to return to Boho Hwy for awhile, but then, in Camp Meeker, you can again detour onto another little-used road on the other side of the creek. I've always thought of this as another chunk of Old Bohemian Hwy, but some of my maps call it Occidental-Camp Meeker Road. One last comment on this shortcut: if all you're trying to do is avoid the big climbs, you can add to those 31 miles by continuing on the main route into Cazadero and onto King Ridge Road for a few miles. It doesn't get steep immediately. The flat or mildly rolling terrain continues for about five miles (from the Austin Creek Road junction), so continuing to the base of the first big climb on King Ridge and then turning back would add another ten miles to this easy ride.

Back to the main route... Turn right from Austin Creek Road onto Caz Hwy and cruise up this slightly busier, smoother, flatter road to the tiny hamlet of Cazadero, which arrives at mile 15.5. There is a decent little general store here where you can get sports drinks. If you had bundled up in arm warmers and jackets at the start of the ride, this is probably a good place to shed them, because you're soon going to be working very hard and heating up rapidly.





don't think it needs any add-ons. However, I'm going to list one anyway. In our one-week, Wine Country Tour, this King Ridge Loop is only 53 miles (because it starts and finishes in Duncans Mills instead of Occidental). For folks who want more than 53 miles, I offer an optional loop to take the miles up to 68. Because I have this extra loop all plotted out and have all the copy written, I figured I might as well throw it in here for the rare ultra-riders who aren't happy unless they're beating themselves like rented mules every day. I'll discuss it later. For now, let's follow the basic route and turn left on Hauser Bridge.

We almost always take a break here for a snack and a breather...this is at around mile 22. A mile of easy, slightly uphill rollers leads to another very stiff climb of just under a mile. At this point, you've reached the real world of King Ridge... the part that everyone raves about (both photos).

Although there are several more significant climbs ahead, for the most part now, you're riding along the ridgeline, with views off one side or the other. At one point, the road tiptoes along a spine of ridge just a few feet wider than the narrow road. There are panoramic views off both sides of the road at once: to the west out over the far, blue Pacific, and to the east spanning rank upon rank of empty, serried hills. Sometimes you're riding through woods of redwood, oak, and bay laurel, and sometimes you're crossing open meadows of waving grass. Every inch of this ride is beautiful, but up on the ridgeline, the vistas are so stunning, so transcendent, even the most hardened hammerheads slow down and gaze in awe. This is it: purest bike heaven. This is why we ride.

In addition to all the buffed-out climbing one does on King Ridge, there are also a number of exciting descents. If you were riding this road in the opposite direction, your cyclometer would record 1400' of elevation gain, and for you that translates into 1400' of twisting, slinky fun.

Eventually (at mile 33), King Ridge ends at a junction with Hauser Bridge Road and Tin Barn Road. The basic ride today is tough enough that I

Over the next 22 miles, the road you're on will change names from Hauser Bridge to Seaview to Fort Ross to Meyer's Grade without really making any turns. It's all good stuff though, whatever it's called. Hauser goes downhill the way elevator shafts do: a wild, corkscrew, one-mile white-knuckler, culminating in a 20% plunge to a one-lane, iron-grate bridge over the Gualala River. (It was here that Alexi Grewal rolled a sew-up off the rim in the Coors Classic, prompting his colorful assessment of the conditions.) Pavement on this descent ranges from mediocre to dreadful, so you really have to treat it with respect. An authentic 20% pitch with loose gravel, potholes, and tree roots buckling the pavement is a serious piece of work.

After the bridge, you have to climb back out of the canyon into which you just dropped...a steep pitch of 1.7 miles, followed by five miles of more moderate ups and downs (mostly ups) along Seaview, where





you hardly view the sea at all (above). The only place to refill your water bottles in the 40 miles between Cazadero and Jenner is at the Fort Ross elementary school on Seaview, just beyond the Timber Cove Road junction... don't miss it. At mile 44, you arrive at a junction with Fort Ross Road, coming up from the coast. This is where folks who did the extra loop will rejoin. Half a mile later, the other portion of Fort Ross turns left (heading for Cazadero) and you continue straight on Meyers Grade. This is the point where our shortcut from Cazadero on Fort Ross Road rejoins the basic route.

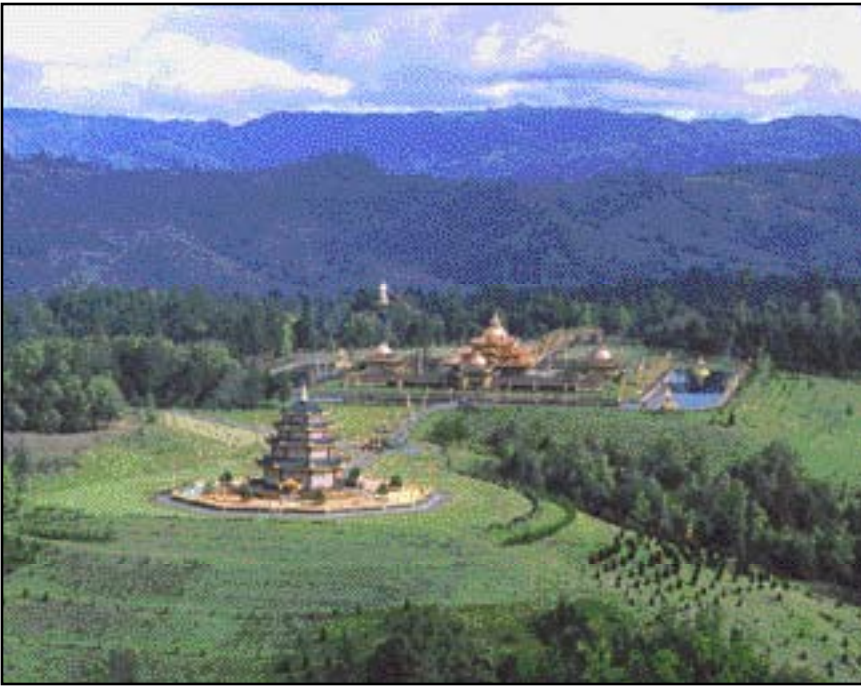
Throughout the climbs on Hauser and Seaview, you've been riding in the trees—close-up scenery without any panoramas—but once you hit Fort Ross and Meyers Grade, you emerge onto a ridge above the ocean with views to forever. For me, this is almost as wonderful as King Ridge. It's not as long—only five miles, as opposed to 16—but it makes up for it with silky-smooth pavement and stunning views (right). On a clear day, you can look all the way back down the coast to Tomales Bay and to Mt. Tam

in the far distance. But you may forget to notice the view, once you begin the hair-raising 16% downhill to Hwy 1.

This is a really thrilling ride. You're screaming downhill, thinking, "Boy, this baby is steep!" and then you fly over a ledge and it gets even steeper. You think it can't possibly get any steeper, and then it does the same thing again...and then again! And the beat goes on when you turn onto Hwy 1, with another couple of miles of descent so dizzily twisted the locals call it Dramamine Drive. The grade on Hwy 1 isn't as steep as the pitch on Meyers Grade, but is probably more fun because of that: you can really let it all hang out. If you encounter any traffic on the busier highway, it's just as likely that you'll be passing the cars as holding them up. You drop all the way to the beach, climb a small hill, and then traverse the cliff face above the crashing surf, arriving in a couple of miles at the mouth of the Russian River and the town of Jenner. If you look down at the sand bar by the mouth of the river, you ought to be able to see a large colony of seals basking on the sand. There is a small store in Jenner and water is available across the street in a little park. There are also a couple of cafes or lunch counters, should you wish to take a longer break and restoke your boilers.

South of Jenner, Hwy 1 meets River Road. This is the last of my official bail-outs. Take a left on River and ride up to Duncans Mills on an almost level run (except for one small hill near the start). This is perhaps the most attractive stretch along the entire length of the Russian River, at least that can be seen from a road. Often the river is far from the highway or is obscured by trees and brush, but on this section, there are many





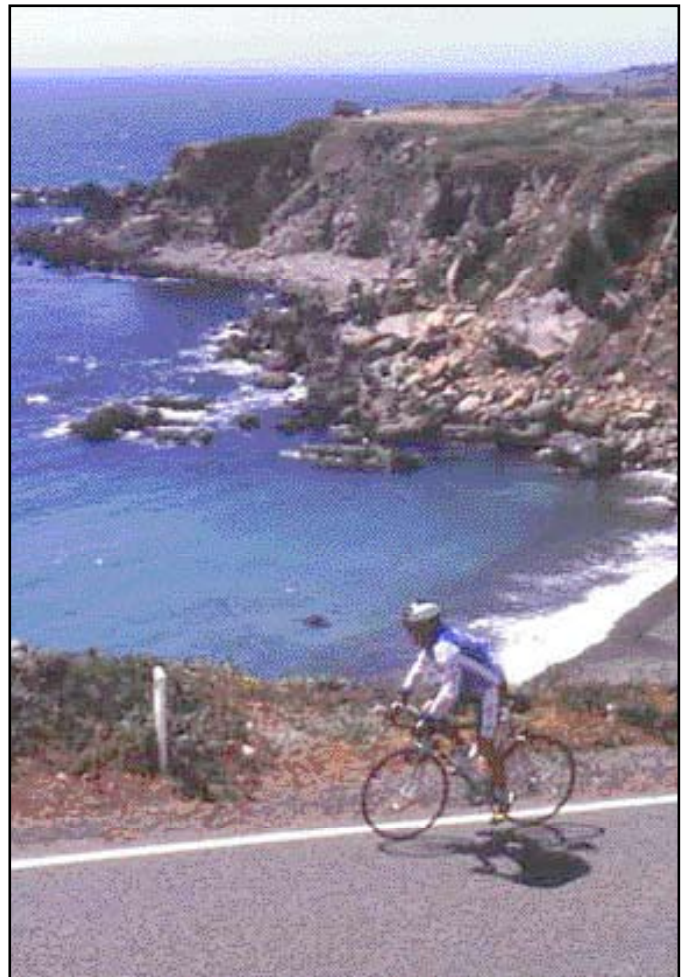
and I've never encountered any sense of welcome or cheer from any of the folks I see here, although usually the place looks deserted. From the Tin Barn-Stewarts point junction until you rejoin the basic route at Fort Ross/Meyer's Grade, you'll be following the path of the infamous Terrible Two Double Century. Once again the road plunges steeply downhill through the trees on a fast, technical run to another crossing of the Gualala River, and then it climbs again— about 300'—before dropping to the Stewarts Point store at the junction with Hwy 1. This is a great place for a rest stop. The market has typical convenience-store fare. There are bathrooms and a nice deck overlooking the sea.

pretty prospects of water and rock and beach right next to the road. If you're interested in birds, you may be able to spy out osprey here, several of which roost in the tall trees on the far shore and dive for salmon and steelhead in the river. Once up to Duncans Mills, all the comments I made vis a vis the first shortcut apply.

Before heading south on Hwy 1 on the basic route, let me backtrack to King Ridge and insert that copy about the totally superfluous, gratuitously punishing add-on. Instead of turning left on Hauser Bridge, turn right on Tin Barn. Heading north from King Ridge, Tin Barn Road climbs and descends a series of small hills, topping out in a couple of miles in front of a structure so unexpected and strange that you'll have to stop and gape. It's Odiyan, a vast Buddhist temple, with copper and gold roofs gleaming in the sun (above). It looks as if it were picked up whole in southeast Asia and airlifted to this remote mountaintop. The people who maintain the temple are almost as jealous of their privacy as the fat cats at Bohemian Grove, and a hedge of evergreens and cyclone fencing keep the curious at bay. Those doing the basic route might consider riding just this far on Tin Barn to see this astonishing temple before returning to Hauser Bridge, although as the years go by and the hedges grow, less and less of the temple is visible from the road.

For those continuing, the far side of this summit turns abruptly into a screaming, 50-mph downhill chute through the trees, followed by more woody rollers. At the end of Tin Barn, bear left and follow the signs to Stewarts Point. There is an tribal rancheria spread out around this junction. It's a very poor community,

The run south on Hwy 1 is especially beautiful...one of the prettiest sections of California coastline (below), rivaling anything Big Sur has to offer. Sometimes you're on the cliff above the surf and sometimes winding away back through the coastal for-





est. It may seem almost level after the steep mountain roads you've been on, but it actually gains almost 1000' in the 15 miles down to Fort Ross. At the Fort Ross junction, you can either turn left and begin climbing, or you can turn right and become a tourist. The attraction is Fort Ross, the old Russian fur-trapping post (above). It was the only Russian colonial settlement on the California coast, or indeed on the entire west coast. It has been carefully and extensively restored. This is a big deal, with a large visitors' center, rangers and docents, and all the old buildings filled with period furnishings. You walk from site to site carrying a radio-telephone, and as you near some point of interest, the nifty little radio begins telling you all about it.

Whether you visit the fort or not, the next piece of road you have to ride is the big climb on Fort Ross Road (right). It gains 1500' in 2.5 miles (11% average) and is one of the toughest climbs on any tour we offer. It's only one lane wide in most places, so shoelacing your way up the steep sections isn't an option. You just have to get after it. Most of it is tree-covered and very quiet, with occasional glimpses of the ocean below, especially near the top. It would be extremely pleasant if it weren't so darn hard!

When you finally get to the

top, you rejoin the basic route at the Seaview Road junction.

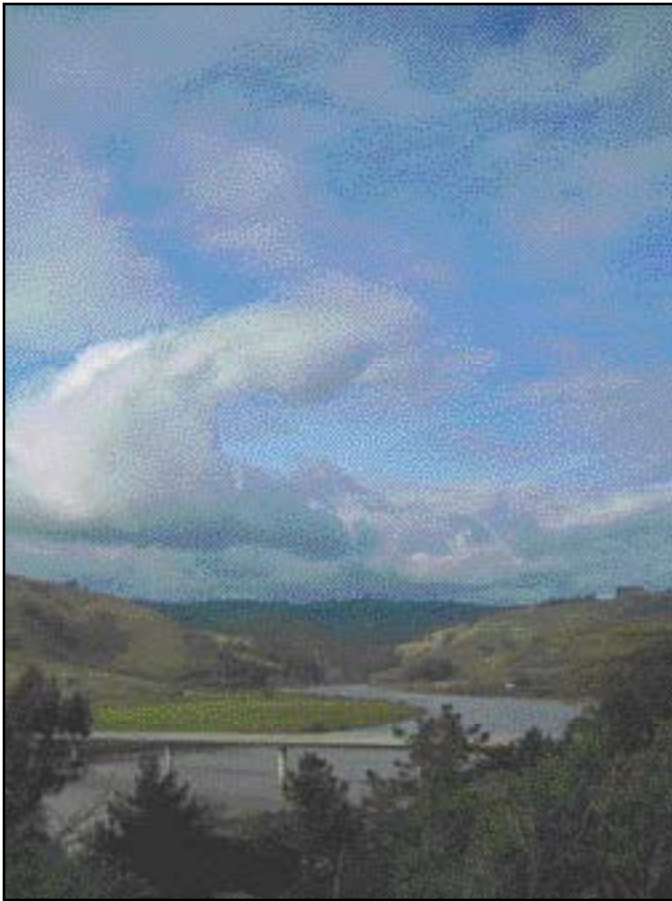
It is possible to shoot straight down Hwy 1 from the fort and avoid this climb. You would cut down on the steep climbing, but the main highway is by no means flat itself, and it carries much more traffic...and you'd also miss wonderful Meyers Grade. When this section of Hwy 1 was closed for repairs a few years ago—with all the traffic detouring along Meyers Grade—local cyclists liked to ride along the empty section of the main highway. The views are great. Normally though, when the bulk of the traffic is on Hwy 1, recreational bike riders opt for the less-traveled route up Fort Ross to Meyers Grade. (Fully-loaded cycle-

tourists heading down the coast will invariably stay on Hwy 1. Even if they know about Fort Ross Road and Meyers Grade, they wouldn't want to haul their loads up and down the steeper roads, regardless of traffic load. If you choose to, you can make this same decision.) Adding this loop to the already challenging basic ride would bulk this stage out to almost 90 miles, with at least 7500' of climbing. Staying on Hwy 1 will eliminate about two miles and will replace 1500' of steep climbing with 500' of easier climbing.

Back to the basic route, at the junction of Hwy 1 and River Road, south of Jenner...

Head south on the coastal highway. Cross the Russian River* and climb gently for about a mile to the





and in Levi's Gran Fondo, a fund-raising ride hosted by Levi Leipheimer, which essentially follows the route of that old Coors Classic stage.

It's a butch bit of work, but once you're up on the hill-tops, after the climb, you'll agree it was worth the price of admission. The turn onto Coleman Valley from Hwy 1 is very easy to miss. It's not well marked and comes in the middle of a little downhill. You need to keep your miles in mind as you head south down the coast and start looking sharp for an obscure turn into an avenue of cypress trees. If you get to Miwok Beach, you've gone too far.

The worst comes first on Coleman Valley, as the road kicks up 800' in the first 1.5 miles, switchbacking up the steep mountainside before leveling off for a run along the ridgeline...great views (below). More climbs follow—



headland overlooking Goat Rock State Park (wonderful views back over the river and ocean...above). This run down the coast is great fun, as long as you don't get tangled up with too much traffic. If you're lucky, you may catch a tailwind along the ocean bluffs and be blown down the shore at an impressive clip. It isn't a straight run though: the road dips and dives into and out of numerous little canyons where small streams plunge to the beach. This makes for a constantly varying dance on the pedals, as you zoom down into the arroyos and then stand and sprint up the other side over the next headland. Sometimes the road tiptoes right along the edge of the cliff, and the huge surf explodes on the jagged rocks just yards away. In places, the shore is jumbled with massive standing stones, some carved into arches, with the water surging through.

At mile 62.4, you leave the coast for the last big challenge of the day, the hilly run back to Occidental on Coleman Valley Road. This road is considered a local cycling classic, almost on a par with King Ridge. It has recently come to the attention of the wider cycling world by being featured in the Tour of California (twice)





less severe this time—and the road tops out at 1100’ among high, hilltop meadows and stately stands of huge old oak and bay trees.

Give one last, backward glance to the panorama of ocean and coastline (above) and then plunge downhill between split-rail fences on a steep, technical dive through the woods into the little valley that gives the road its name. Just beyond the old one-room school house (below), the road tilts up again and you have to climb another couple of hundred feet getting out the other end of this pretty pocket valley before a final, fast, smooth, and deceptively treacherous descent into the town of Occidental.

You’re done! Now—while you recuperate and chow down at one of those nice restaurants—you can rehash the ride and decide whether all the things folks say about this loop are true.

*On the south bank of the Russian River on Hwy 1 is a junction with Willow Creek Road. There is a discussion of this road in the copy for the Left-over Loop, and you may find it relevant for the Northern Loop as well.

The Southern Loop 66 miles, 4000’

This stage of the “Sonoma County Tour” actually spends 40 of its 66 miles in neighboring Marin County. So much for truth in advertising! In my defense, I had to call the tour something, and I couldn’t think of another name that encompassed both counties. More to the point: this re-

mote, unpopulated corner of west Marin County has more in common with west Sonoma County than it does with the expensive, congested suburbs of eastern Marin. To a cyclist, it all feels like the same landscape, except that the pavement gets a little better when you cross into Marin.

You begin by heading out in the opposite direction from the Northern Loop: south on Bohemian Hwy, and once again you begin with a smooth, sinuous downhill through the trees. Once the zippy part of the descent peters out, you roll easily through meadows and scattered woodlots to the quaint village of Freestone. If you can’t stop here, at least slow down, sit up, and look around as you pedal through. It’s a lovely village...a designated historic district.

There’s a wonderful bakery in Freestone—Wildflour Bakery—where they will be pulling hot loaves, sticky buns, and cheese fougasse out of their wood-fired brick ovens just about the time you roll through town in the morning. It’s a little early for a rest stop, but it’s hard to pass by, with the baking smells wafting out into the road.

After Freestone, you have to endure one mile of busy, no-shoulder Bodega Highway before escaping onto another little road to another little town, Valley Ford. This is a quiet little village serving the needs of nearby farms. This is a spot where cyclists often take a break, sitting on the porch in front of the store. One of Valley Ford’s few claims to fame is that it was the site of Christo’s Running Fence, one of that artist’s more successful projects.





tiny, few, and far between. Except for the little seaside resort of Dillon Beach, which we bypass, there is nothing out here to attract tourists. There are no creekside vacation homes, no coastal condos, no roadside attractions, in fact no commercial enterprises of any sort, except ranching. All of the roads carry very little traffic. In short, it's just about an ideal place to ride a bike.

You head south out of Valley Ford along Middle Road and then double back on Marsh Road to Franklin School Road. Cross the Estero Americano (the Marin County border), tackle a fairly ambitious climb, and then descend and turn left on Whitaker Bluff Road. Stop for a minute up on the bluff just after the turn. It's a lovely, quiet spot, with the Estero San Antonio scrawling lazy loops along the little valley below. Sheep graze the meadows, egrets and

herons stalk the shallows, and hawks circle overhead. I've even seen a fox scampering across the road here. These streams are tidal estuaries. Although you won't see it, the ocean is just one hill away to the west.

After having zigged west on Marsh, Whitaker Bluff zags you back east, back to another stretch of Middle Road (above). Head south on Middle, gently uphill to a junction with Dillon Beach Road, which carries an ever-so-slightly heavier load of traffic. You'll whiz downhill on Dillon Beach Road all the way to the town of Tomales, at a junction with Hwy 1. Tomales is a bit more of a metroplex than Valley Ford or Freestone, boasting a few residential side streets, a grade school, a lovely carpenter gothic church, a few cafes, an old hotel, a market, and, best of all, an excellent bakery and deli (below), complete

There are two roads south out of Valley Ford, heading in the direction we want to go. The first is Esstero/Franklin School Road and the second is Middle Road. The route ends up on the former, but starts out on the latter and then doubles back on a little connector road. If you study the map, you may come to the conclusion that I have you doubling back like this a couple of times. I do. I'm not going out of the way to be needlessly confusing or to pad the miles. It's true, I haven't chosen the straightest path, but I have chosen the one that offers the best combination of scenery and easy climbs.

Valley Ford marks the departure point for the first shortcut of the day. Just south of town, where the basic route turns right from Hwy 1 onto Middle Road, the shortcut continues straight on Hwy 1. I'll discuss both optional shortcuts at the end of this section.

I love this empty, tranquil corner of Marin County. It has a different look from the steeper, more heavily wooded hills on the Northern Loop. Here, the lower hills have a softer, more pillowy feel and are generally free of dense forest. (One would never call this terrain "rugged.") There are isolated stands of eucalyptus and cypress here and there (photo, page 1), and gnarled creek willows cluster down in the gullies, but most of the hills wear only grasses and wildflowers. The bulk of this stage runs through prime dairy country, and your constant companions today will be thousands of grazing holsteins, placidly converting those hillside grasses to butterfat. Herds of sheep also call these hills home, but very few humans do. The ranches are large and the towns are





with a covered streetside patio, filled with comfortable chairs. At 17 miles, this is the perfect spot for a rest stop and regroup. This area is very popular with cyclists, and they all make it a point to stop at the Tomales Bakery. On any weekend day, you're almost certain to find a few of your velo fellows taking their ease here, soaking up the sun, munching pastries, and swapping bike yarns. Check the upstairs window above the bakery to see if the resident iguana is also soaking up the sun on the windowsill. If you need water, you can buy it at the store, or there is a hose bib up the alley alongside the old hotel, caddy-corner from the bakery. There is also a drinking fountain in the little park just south of the hotel, and a porta-potty up in the trees at the top of the park. Patrons of the bakery may use their restrooms.

Speaking of water... Once you leave Tomales, you'll have trouble finding another convenient source for drinking water on the entire route...almost 50 miles to go. There may be a few commercial establishments along Tomales Bay, but that's only a few miles beyond Tomales, so not really much help. There is a one-room school house at mile 39, but it's always locked up behind a tall fence on the weekend. The best solution would be to carry enough water for 50 miles. If you find yourself in a desperate state of dehydration, you'll find a drinking fountain and rest rooms at Helen Putnam Regional Park, three miles east of the Wilson Hill-Chileno Valley junction (off the route) on Chil-

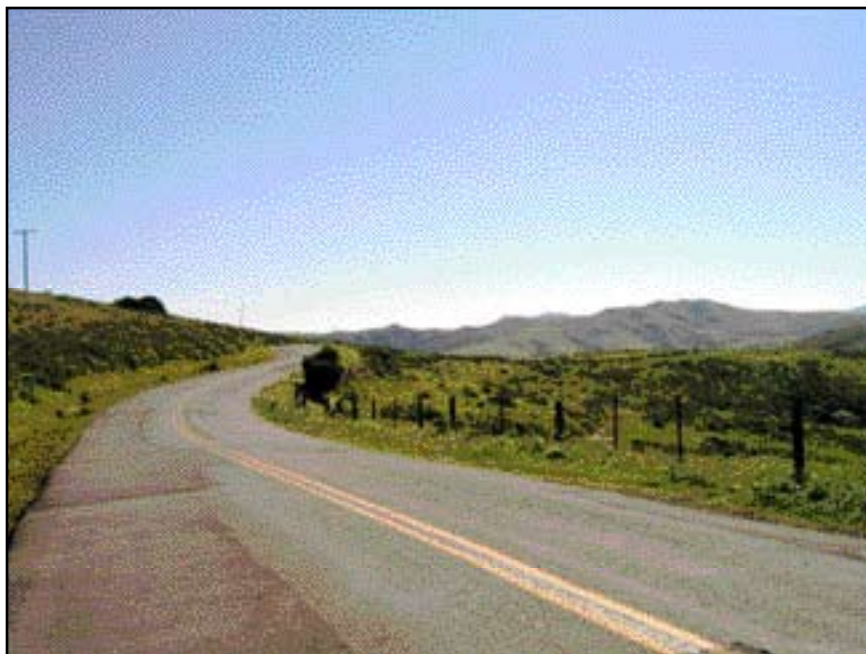
eno Valley Road. There's nothing wrong with this detour—the road is very nice—except that it adds six miles to the stage. Although this area is very thinly settled, there are many farm houses dotted along the roads, and most folks would be happy to let you fill a bottle from their garden faucet. Heck, I've even had people out here go in the house and bring me out a pitcher of ice water! It's also possible to beg a refill of water at Stormy's Tavern in Bloomfield, fairly late in the ride.

Just south of Tomales, the second short-cut turns left off Hwy 1 onto Tomales-Petaluma Road. More about this option at the conclusion of today's write-up.

Tomales is set back a few miles from the coast. When you leave town on Hwy 1, you drop into the little canyon of Walker Creek and follow its meandering course as it flows west toward Tomales Bay (both photos). This is one of the few remotely level stretches of road today, but once you reach the bay, the road begins bumping up and down, in and out of waterside coves and canyons. None of the elevation changes is very severe, but they keep coming, one after another, all the way down the bay-shore. Tomales Bay is another beautiful spot. If you've ever been to Scotland, the view down across the rolling meadows to the slate grey waters of the bay may call to mind Loch Lomond or Loch Ness. Perhaps that's why they named the town on the far shore of the bay Inverness.

The far shore: that's the Point Reyes National Sea-





on the way up where you can relax. You're climbing through open, empty, softly rounded hills, and the lack of trees or brush means an unobstructed panorama when you break out onto the hilltops. What a view! The grassy slopes tumble down to Tomales Bay, stretched out in a long silver sweep, far below, with the mountainous, forested bulk of the National Seashore looming in the distance. It is a non-negotiable, iron-clad requirement of this tour that you stop for at least a minute or two on this summit to take in the view.

After goggling at the scenery from the summit for awhile, it's time to get on the bike and get off the mountain, which you will do in short order on a fun descent of a couple of miles (below). When you level out at the bottom, you're in Verde Canyon, another

shore. Looking across the bay here means looking at a different slab of the earth's crust than the one you're standing on. Tomales Bay is the most visible evidence of the San Andreas Fault...the watery gap where the two tectonic plates meet. The Point Reyes land mass is actually a transient sled of rock that began life down around Mexico and has been slowly bumping and grinding its way north for millions of years, creeping up the coast an inch or two a year. In the great San Francisco quake of '06, the entire 30-mile long chunk of real estate leaped twenty feet north in a single bound.

You'll ride alongside this beautiful, unspoiled bay for most of six miles until a short descent plops you down on the north edge of the little fishing village of Marshall. You won't see much of the town though, unless you continue south (off-course) on Hwy 1. Not that there's that much to see of the town: some modest vacation homes, a few small boats anchored out, a piddly boatyard, and a seafood restaurant or two, all strung out in a thin line between the road and the shore of the bay. You're going to turn left—inland and uphill—just before the town. This is the Marshall-Petaluma Road, known in local cycling shorthand as the Marshall Wall (above).

When a road is called a "wall" by cyclists, it usually conjures up images of a really brutal ascent...a beast. In this case, I think the nickname is a bit of exaggeration...a cyclist's version of a fish story. You are in for a pretty good climb, but it only gains 700' in three miles, and there are two or three flat spots

wonderful region filled with a lot of nothing...nothing except meadows, boulders, and old trees crowding along the banks of a creek. There are a few farm houses out here, but there's a great deal of empty space between them. The road rolls along through the tranquil, deserted valley for about six miles, often nearly level, but from time to time rising or falling over moderate hummocks that may cause you to grab a gear or two.

Just before mile 36, you come to a junction with another road teeing in from the right. The only thing you absolutely have to know about this intersection is that you go straight. However, to forestall any potential confusion, I will burden you with a little more information. Most maps I've seen—including AAA and DeLorme—list this straight-ahead road as a continuation of Marshall-Petaluma Road, with the side road to the right named as Wilson Hill Road. However, that's not what the street signs at the junction say. They say the road ahead is Wilson Hill Road and the



road to the right is Hicks Valley Road. (More recent mapping software seems to agree with signs on the road.) I've made my map agree with the road signs, and I only mention this in case you've been cross-checking my map with other maps (which I always encourage you to do).

I think the road sign designations make the most sense: Hicks Valley Road runs down a valley, while Wilson Hill Road climbs over a hill...and that's what you're going to do now. It's a pretty good pitch too, almost on a par with its big brother, the Marshall Wall. It's a steady, medium-steep grade of a mile or two. The pitch eases off a bit at the last, and then, once you ride over the brow of the hill, there is another impressive vista, this time looking inland over still more rolling, grassy hills, now dotted with oaks, with the city of Petaluma off in the hazy distance. The descent from the summit is nice: steep enough to be as fast as you want it to be, but just bumpy enough to make you think twice about pulling out all the stops. One friend of mine crashed on this downhill and broke his pelvis. His cyclometer telltale indicated he was going 53-mph at the time...perhaps just bit quicker than the conditions would warrant.

After a brief roll-out at the bottom of the hill, you turn left on Chileno Valley Road (below). The one-room school house I mentioned earlier is just up the road after the turn. This ride passes at least five historic one or two-room schoolhouses, and I can think of another four or five that are just off the route by less than a mile. Some of those are still in use.

Chileno Valley is a very popular cycling road. If you're

doing this ride on a weekend, you might see a pace-line or two from a local club ride. You're also likely to see numerous Ducatis, Kawasakis, and BMWs screaming along at well over the posted speed, as it's a regular mecca for the moto crowd as well. This is especially true on Sundays, which is the traditional day for the motos to come out here and rip it up. (I can imagine that some bicyclists might be bothered by the howling, snarling racers, but I've always enjoyed sharing the road with our fellow two-wheelers.) Aside from the occasional gaggle of superbikes screaming by, there is almost no traffic at all on this lovely road.

Chileno bumps and boogies for almost ten miles through the now-familiar dairy country...undulating hills of grass, which fold the road up into an almost constant series of rollers, large and small. Most are less than 50' high, but one near the northern end of the road climbs gently for most of a mile, with a corresponding drop on the other side. At the bottom of that pleasant little descent, you turn left on Tomales-Petaluma Road, a straight, too-busy highway. A mile later, turn right onto Alexander. This is a much quieter byway, except for the rifle range midway along the road. Whenever I ride past this range and listen to the pop-pow-bang of the shooters, I wonder if they ever look over at us and think how much a passing paceline of cyclists looks like a row of little tin ducks in a shooting gallery..

Ever since descending from that last little summit on Chileno Valley, you've been crossing a wide, almost flat valley. At mile 50, you begin to climb—very gently—up the other side. This is Carmody Road, a long





easy roller thrown in to keep you honest. This leads you to the town of Bloomfield, home of Stormy's and not much else, except for several blocks of homes. (This is where the first shortcut rejoins.) Bloomfield marks the beginning of a long run of uphill, at first quite easy and even with a few flats thrown in. Two miles of mellow climbs on Bloomfield Road lead to a left on Burnside Road, and then the ascent gets a little more challenging. Burnside gains about 500' in two miles as it stairsteps up a ridge called English Hill (below).

Take a break at the summit to admire the view: off to the east you can see all of Santa Rosa and its suburbs spread out on the plain, with Mount

straight shot up the hillside. It starts out easy enough, rolling uphill amidst busy barnyards full of cows. (This is where you pass back into Sonoma County and it's also where the second shortcut rejoins.) In the last quarter mile, the road ramps up quite steeply, as it climbs into a pretty highland of sheep and grass and chunky rock outcroppings. And then you do another short-but-sweet downhill off the far side of the summit. That seems to be the name of the game today: aside from two or three fairly large climbs, the balance of the day is parceled out in a steady diet of dinky ups and downs.

Having said that, I will now steer you out onto one of the few flat sections on this ride...but it's only a little over a mile, and even this wannabe flat has one

Saint Helena and the Geysers looming in the distance. If you see some tall spires of cloud above the far mountains, they're probably coming from steaming fumaroles in the geothermal fields up around Geyser Peak. (The Eastern Loop goes almost all the way out there.) At an altitude of 900', this summit may be the high point of the day. Then again, the high point may be in a few miles, at the top of the final climb. They're both about the same elevation, but this one at least looks like a summit, with great vistas—and the other one doesn't—so I prefer to think of this one at the high point.

Nestled just below you in the near hills is Sebastopol (my hometown). You won't visit the town itself, but the apple orchards and rural ranchettes you'll be





riding past for the next few miles are all part of its sphere. The surrounding orchards are mostly Gravenstein apple trees, by the way...the area is famous for them. If the fog has burned off, you may be able to catch one last glimpse of far-off ocean, away to the northwest.

A fast descent of a little over a mile delivers you to a left onto Barnett Valley Road. Two miles on Barnett, two miles on Jonive Road, and two miles on Occidental Road are all that remain. All three of these are fine roads. Barnett bumps up and down along a ridgeline, either out on the ridge amid open meadows—with great views—or working through apple orchards or Christmas tree farms. There is also a denser concentration of homes than you’ve seen all day. This is the “Hobbitville” region I mentioned in the intro...lots of five and ten-acre properties, with a house or two per parcel, and often some small, specialty agricultural endeavor underway: llamas or game birds; cutting flowers for the florist trade or unique vegetables for the gourmet market.

Cross Bodega Hwy to Jonive. This pretty road climbs quite steeply at first, and after a brief run across the open ridgeline, snuggles into thick fir forest, with a few orchards thrown in. It’s pretty much the same on Occidental Road, except that this arterial is likely to have a heavier load of traffic. Occidental climbs gently for about a mile to the final summit, and then it’s one last, fast, silky smooth, mile-long descent into Occidental. Time to relax!

But wait: I still have to briefly examine the two official shortcuts. The first one, just south of Valley Ford, is very simple: stay on Hwy 1 when the basic route turns right on Middle Road. After about a mile, Hwy 1 turns south, but the shortcut continues straight again. Now the road is called Petaluma-Valley Ford Road. Take this to Bloomfield Road, turn left and pick up the basic route as it passes through the little town of Bloomfield. This will yield a loop of just 21 miles. It’s all downhill or level from the start to Bloomfield, but then you have quite a bit of climbing to do...check out the final 12 miles of the elevation profile.

The second shortcut is as simple as the first. Turn left on Tomales-Petaluma Road (left) just south of Tomales, winding through open, rolling dairy pastures for about four miles, including two moderate hills (less than 100’ each). When you get to Alexander Road, turn left and pick up the basic route. Taking this pleasant road will shorten the stage to about 33 miles.

The Eastern Loop 76 miles, 2000’

Ask people (from somewhere else) what they think of when they think of Sonoma County, and in most cases, the answer will be wine or vineyards. And yet, we’ve done two out of our three tour stages without seeing so much as a grape. (Actually, there were a few, small, isolated vineyards on those first two stages, but not many and not very noticeable.) Finally, you’re going to get your full ration of wine country atmo-





you're a comfortable descender, you probably won't touch your brakes all the way down the hill. At the bottom, it almost levels out, but not quite: you can put all that momentum to work on a long, slightly downhill roll-out. Finally, after almost four miles of high-speed hi-jinx, you have to get back to work on a small climb of around 100'. Coast down the other side into the village of Graton.

A very few years ago, Graton was one of the seediest, most run-down towns in the region, with two boarded up storefronts for every surviving business, and an astonishing crime rate for such a tiny place. Now, thanks to the vision and efforts of a handful of

sphere, as this route heads inland, out of the coastal hills and into the valleys behind the hills, where the grapes are grown.

So far, both stages have begun with great downhills and ended with great downhills. Neat trick, huh? I almost make it three-for-three today, but not quite. You begin by heading north on Bohemian Hwy, but only to the edge of town. There, you turn right on Graton Road and tackle a gradual climb. If you're doing this in the spring, you may be able to enjoy a pretty waterfall near the headwaters of Dutch Bill Creek, off to the right, half way up this little climb. (Waterfalls are rare in this area. With no snowmelt and little rainfall to replenish the streams, most of them are reduced to a trickle by midsummer.)

The total climb is exactly one mile long (and very easy), and now you get your great, almost-first-thing-in-the-morning downhill (above). This is a delight at any time of the day...a two-mile, silky ribbon of fun. Not too technical and not too steep, but fast enough to wake you up quicker than a double espresso. If

locals, the town has been reborn and rebuilt in a way that is almost miraculous. So far has it come, that it's now almost the hippest, trendiest address in the county, and the short main street is lined with cute shops and interesting places to eat, from offbeat cafes to gourmet restaurants to wine tasting rooms. It's a pity it comes so early in the ride, because it would make a great place for a rest stop.

Just past the center of town, turn left, uphill on Mueller Road, which shortly butts into Hwy 116. Cross this busy highway and continue on Vine Hill Road (below). Local color through this section consists of equal parts apple orchard and vineyard, with a steady diet of rural residential ranchettes and horse spreads thrown in. Very nice horses too: Vine Hill Ranch—at the top of a long, lazy climb on Vine Hill Road—was the home of Cavonnier, who finished second in the 1996 Kentucky Derby by less than a nose. I believe this gelding is the most successful equine to come out of Northern California since Seabiscuit took the world by storm half a century ago.





basic route turns right from Trenton-Healdsburg Road onto Mark West Station Road, I offer the first of today's shortcuts. Instead of turning right, go straight, then turn left on Eastside Road. Follow it downhill for a little over a mile and then rejoin the basic route with a left onto Wohler Road. This will give you a ride of about 28 miles. However, just as was the case on the shortcut of the Southern Loop, the biggest climbs of the day are right near the end, so even on this otherwise very easy loop, you should be prepared for a couple of steep pitches on the way back to Occidental. When we get to that part of the course description, I will suggest a way to avoid these big climbs.

After that Vine Hill climb, you wiggle downhill into a region that it would probably be safe to call the Russian River Valley. You won't actually see the river until mile 38, but all of the low hills and little valleys around you now merge fairly seamlessly into the main drainage of the river. From the bottom of the descent on Vine Hill, there will be eight road changes in less than ten miles. The route slip and map do a good job of showing you where to go, and none of the turns is confusing. I don't think any good purpose can be served by my rehashing every one of those turns. Your eyes will just glaze over.

Back to the main route... At the end of Shiloh—mile 18—turn left on Faught Road (above) and return to the country. Faught rolls along the edge of the valley for a mile, with vineyards on the left and wooded hills on the right. Turn right on Chalk Hill Road (below) and really head out into the country. This is one of the most popular cycling roads in the area...as popular with Santa Rosa riders as Chileno Valley is with the Petaluma crowd. Chalk Hill climbs very gently—with numerous flat spots along the way—to a little summit, gaining about 400' in three miles. Chalk Hill is one of the county's many officially recognized wine appellations, and the pretty hills are now often cloaked in corduroy rows of vines. Not every acre is given over to grapes though. The road often winds through the dappled shade of oak, sycamore, laurel, and other broadleaf trees, and there are many horse ranches here as well.

In summary: the terrain is flat or rolling, with a few mild ups and a few mild downs. Scenery is a mix of orchards, vineyards, and leafy woods, with a large dairy tossed in for variety. This section also passes the outskirts of Santa Rosa's little airport, then a golf course, and finally a Walmart, a Home Depot and a small rash of suburban sprawl (along Shiloh Road, where it crosses over Hwy 101). Whenever you head inland from the western hills, ultimately you have to deal with the series of small cities spread out along the freeway in the central Santa Rosa plain. Shiloh Road does a fairly decent job of slipping you through this sprawl without inflicting too many of the dubious benefits of civilization on you. The really trashy suburban stuff lasts for less than a mile, and even that bit isn't too bad. There are public restrooms at Esposti Park, where Shiloh crosses Old Redwood Highway.

Only one other comment about this section: at mile 11.5, when the





with benches in front for basking in the sun, and a water spigot for filling bottles up the alley at the side. Inside is an intriguing store, combining antiques, goofy gag gifts, and real general store merchandise under one handsomely restored roof. Best of all, there is an excellent deli-style lunch counter with a changing menu of delicious cuisine. If you don't want to go off-course to Jimtown, water is available at Alexander Valley School at mile 30 and again at Geyserville School at mile 39.

The Pine Flat junction marks the departure point for the second official shortcut. Turn left and head west and south, past Jimtown and onto Alexander Valley Road. The simplest thing to do is to stay on slightly uphill Alexander Valley Road to Healdsburg Avenue, turn left and ride straight through the city of Healdsburg, picking up Westside Road at the center of town and heading back to the route that way. However,

that involves a few miles of busy, commercial streets getting into town, so instead, I'll lead you on a slightly more complicated, but more enjoyable detour.

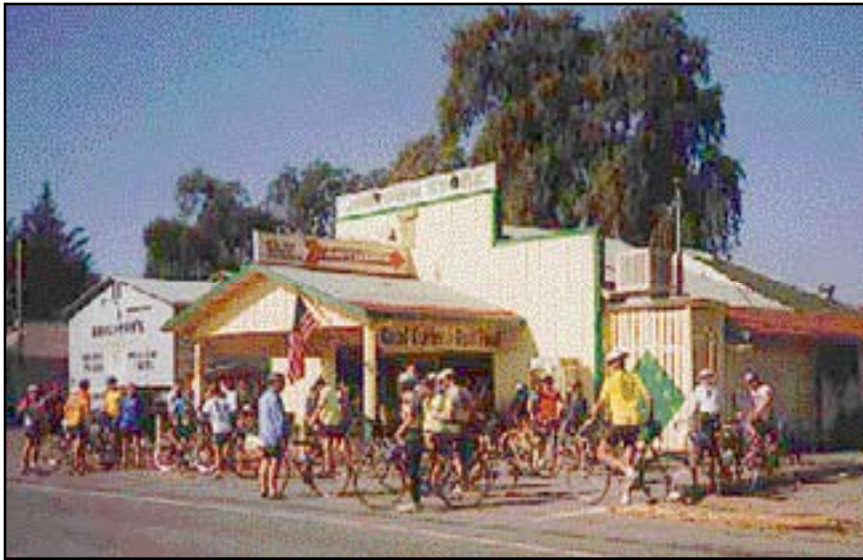
From Alexander Valley Road, turn right onto Lytton Station Road, then right again on Lytton Springs Road, under Hwy 101 and up a little hill. At the top of the hill, turn left on Chiquita Road, which swoops up and down over a couple of small hills on the way to the outskirts of Healdsburg. Just before butting into the main road (Healdsburg Avenue), turn right on Grove Street. This quiet, half-residential/half-commercial road bypasses the busier main drag and shoots you right through town to Mill Street, where you turn right. Mill becomes Westside Road as it leaves town, and within less than a mile, you're back on

After the long, almost insignificant grade up to that little summit on Chalk Hill, you're rewarded with a more exciting descent than you have any right to expect...one of those rare cases where the downhill payback seems much greater than the uphill investment. It's short but fun, as you toss away those 400' of gain in less than a mile. (This hill comes at about mile 95 on our local club's annual Wine Country Century. In that event though, the riders are going the other way, and over the years, this short, steep climb has been the occasion for many little meltdowns for the weary cyclists.) After the descent, Chalk Hill meanders along, mile after mile, through some of the most pleasant country you could ever want. The elevation profile will tell you what all these miles hold in store: nothing much in the way of big climbs or wild descents, but also almost nothing that is remotely flat...modest, lumpy rollers, again and again.

At mile 27 and change, Chalk Hill tees into Hwy 128 (above). You go left (north) on this smooth, rolling, lightly travelled highway and descend into Alexander Valley (right), one of the most prestigious wine regions in America. You'll be riding north through this beautiful valley for the next 13 miles on a succession of roads. All these miles are as easy as any cycling miles can be: flat or gently rolling. Sometimes you cruise down the middle of the nearly flat valley, with vines on either side of the road, and sometimes the road rubs along the east side of the valley, with vines sprawling away on the left and oak-studded hills rising up steeply on the right.

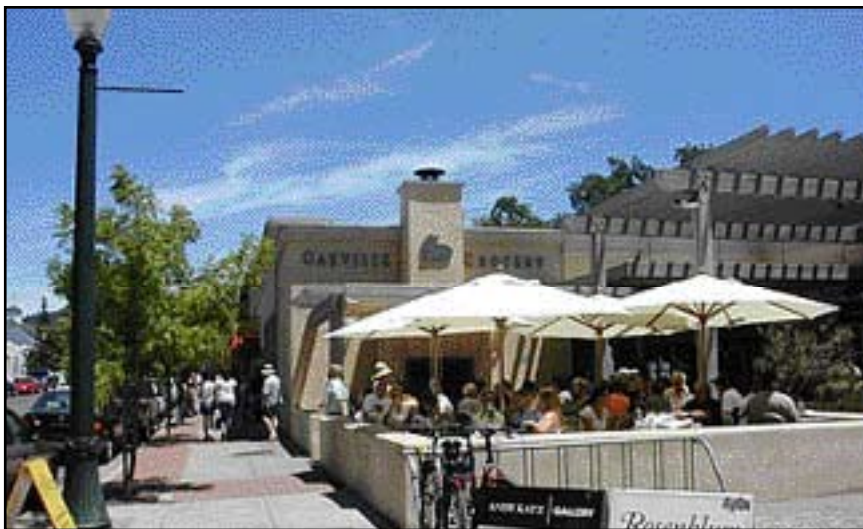
At mile 30.6, the route turns right on Pine Flat Road. If you need a rest stop or water, you might consider going left a fraction of a mile to the Jimtown Store (photo next page). This is a regular stopping place for cyclists in the wine country,





Our club's favorite spot for a carbo fix is El Sombrero Taqueria, just off the plaza on Center Street. If you want something a little lighter or more nouvelle cuisine than a carnitas burrito, the Oakville Grocery is right across the street (right), where you can sample all sorts of trendy new foods on their spacious streetside patio.

A trivial aside about Healdsburg: before premium vineyards covered the land, this area was a great producer of prunes, and Healdsburg, after much deliberation, decided its official nickname would be "The Buckle of the Prune Belt." Somehow, I don't think that's a tag with which the town wants to identify itself anymore.



Back to the main route on Pine Flat... You're only on Pine Flat for a few tenths before turning left on Red Winery Road (below). I think this stage is long enough that it doesn't need any add-ons, but for the ultra-hammers in the crowd, I will offer one here: Pine Flat is an out-&-back that is popular with local riders. It's a very quiet road winding up into the mountains. It climbs 2000' in 7.5 miles, then levels out for a few miles and finally climbs another 1000' in a little over a mile, for a total of 12 miles. The lower climbs are quite mellow, but the last pitch is brutal, and is generally agreed to be the steepest climb in the county...over 20% in places. Usually, when cyclists do this road,

they stop at the 7.5-mile level, where there is a superb view over the valley. And of course, the best part of all is the return trip: one of the most exhilarating,

the basic route at the junction with West Dry Creek Road. This easy shortcut will yield a total ride of about 55 miles.

It also gives you the opportunity to explore Healdsburg's charming downtown. From Grove, turn left on either North Street or Matheson Street and ride one block east to the plaza, a beautiful, old-fashioned town square surrounded by interesting shops and cafes. Healdsburg is considered the heart of Sonoma County's wine culture, and in addition to that distinction, it's just a very nice, attractive town, for residents and visitors alike. It has all the things tourists look for in a destination, but hasn't quite become an overly exploited, tacky tourist trap...yet.

You'd hit the town at something like 35 miles on a 55-mile day, so it would make an ideal spot for a leisurely lunch break on the plaza.





and farm implements stores in town, and dry goods stores with the windows full of farmer's straw hats, but there are also hip health spas and new restaurants and B-&-Bs, and even a surprising number of little tract neighborhoods. So far though, it still looks for the most part like the sleepy little wayside it has been for all of this century. This will be your last chance at store-bought munchies for the duration of the ride (unless you go off-course). You'll cruise through town for less than a mile, and then you turn left on Canyon Road, cross under Hwy 101, and work your way up an easy, gradual climb.

The small range of hills you're crossing separates Alexander Valley from its equally prestigious wine-growing neighbor to the west: Dry Creek Valley. The climb on

constantly entertaining descents on this or any other tour. Adding in the whole road—all the way to the top—would turn this stage into a very challenging century.

Red Winery hugs the eastern edge of Alexander Valley, rolling along just at the base of the grassy hills. At around mile 33, the route turns left on Geysers Road. Were you to turn right and follow Geysers Road the other way, into the hills, you would be in for a major expedition. This is wonderful backroad, but tacking it onto this stage is too much, even for those who might want a challenging ride. It would add about 40 miles to the 76-mile day, and a lot of them would be very hilly. We do offer this road as an optional long route on one of the stages of our Wine Country Tour, but in that case, it only bulks the day out to 60 miles, not 116.

So go left on Geysers and then right on Hwy 128 (above). While we were larking about on Red Winery, 128 was taking another, slightly less interesting route up the valley, and now we return to it. Everything continues in much the same vein the rest of the way up the valley: low hills and long, almost flat runs through the vineyards, all the while passing one winery after another. Finally, the road takes a hard left and crosses the Russian River, just before the town of Geyserville.

Ride north up the main street of Geyserville (Hwy 128). This little town stands with one foot in the past and one foot stepping off into an uncertain future. There are still tractor

Canyon gains only 150' in 6/10ths of a mile, and then you cruise downhill on a smooth, gradual run of 1.7 miles to Dry Creek Road. Jog north just a few hundred yards on Dry Creek and turn left on Yoakim Bridge Road. This short connector crosses the creek, which, in all the years I've been riding around here, has never been remotely dry, regardless of what the name implies. In fact, it's a fairly substantial stream. At the other end of Yoakim Bridge, turn left (south) on West Dry Creek Road (below and next page, top). Both Dry Creek Road and West Dry Creek run north and south, one on each side of the valley. Dry Creek is smoother, wider, and busier. It carries all the traffic to and from Lake Sonoma, a large recreational destination up at the end of the valley. West Dry Creek is the preferred cycling road. It





West Dry Creek tumbles along its up-and-down course for nine miles down the narrow valley. For the most part, the valley floor to the left is all vineyards, while on the right, the steep hills are covered in dense fir and oak forest. At mile 51, this delightful road tees into Westside Road...the point at which the 55-mile shortcut rejoins from Healdsburg. Westside is almost as nice as West Dry Creek. The scenery is every bit as good and the road is perfect for cycling—more pleasantly diverting little ups and downs through the trees and vines—and the only mark against it is a slight increase in traffic. You'll be on Westside for another nine miles.

Midway along the road, you pass through the Sweetwater Springs Historic District, a wide spot in the road highlighted by the grand old hop kiln barn at Hop Kiln Winery (below).

Hearty, dark hops used to be a major crop in Sonoma County before Prohibition and big, bland, brand-name beers wiped out the little brewers. There are numerous old hop-drying barns in the area, and this stately stone structure is one of the finest examples. (Now, with the resurgence of the micro-breweries, some local farmers are planting hops again. However, this mini-industry in hops is not going to put a dent in the spread of vineyards, which, like creeping kudzu vines, are overwhelming every other form of agriculture in the county, from hops and prunes in Healdsburg to apples in Sebastopol to dairy farms in Petaluma.)

is narrow and windy, has slightly lumpy pavement, is forever dancing up and down over an endless series of little hills, and carries almost no traffic.

What it does carry are legions of cyclists. More than Chileno Valley; more than Chalk Hill; this is the most popular cycling road in the area...perhaps in the state. It's the sort of road that you would create, were you to sit down and try to design the perfect back road cycling experience. As a consequence, it is featured in the catalogs of every company that runs catered cycling vacations. It is used for at least two centuries (including our club's Wine Country Century), for triathlons, for road races, and for several other mass rides. Plus of course, it plays host to an endless succession of weekend club rides and visits from individuals out for a spin among the vines.

The only problem with all this cycling perfection is that the constant glut of riders—often dawdling along two or three abreast—has caused some of the local residents to become a bit fed up with all the riders cluttering up their road. Our club has been working hard in recent years to find some rapport with the folks along this road, and the results have been gratifying. We are figuring out how to share the road. While we vigorously defend our right to ride on any public road—especially one so ideal for cycling—we are sympathetic to the complaints of the residents and motorists, and we try hard to educate riders to be sensitive to the world around them: to ride single-file, or, if they must ride double, to stay alert for overtaking vehicles—including faster bikes—and to single up promptly as needed.





onto pretty little Martinelli Road (below). This excellent cycling road winds through leafy woods for three miles. Halfway along the road is a clearing planted with vineyards...one of the last large tracts of vines you'll see on this journey. These are some of the oldest vines in the county, maybe the first plantings, or at any rate the oldest ones still in existence. I have heard it said that the hilly planting on the right side of the road is known as Jackass Hill because you'd have to be as dumb as a jackass to try and till a field on a hillside that steep. There is one small climb on the far side of the vineyard clearing—back in the woods again—and then a short, easy descent to a junction with Hwy 116.

There is one fairly ambitious climb toward the end of Westside: about 100' in half a mile through a shady wood. The pretty little valley that wanders off to the west halfway up the hill used to belong to actor Fred MacMurray, who kept a prize herd of Angus beef here. After his death, the property was acquired by the omniverous Gallo family, who have turned it into yet another vineyard. Once on the downhill side of the ridge, be alert for a left turn onto Wohler Road. Wohler crosses the Russian River on a rusty old truss bridge (above) and then descends to more grape plantings down on the flat valley floor...flat enough and low enough to be flooded whenever the river gets the least bit uppity. Eastside road tees into Wohler just where Wohler drops to the valley floor. This is the point where the first and shortest of the shortcuts rejoins.

Turn right when Wohler ends at River Road. River is a busy road which we have to use to get to the next nice backroad. Fortunately, it has smooth, wide shoulders to give you a little cushion from the passing parade. It's dead flat and is quite pretty: almost all of it bordered by redwood forest or broadleaf trees. There is a county park at Steelhead Beach at about mile 63. This is a good spot for restrooms, water, or a rest stop. If you find yourself bonking and in desperate need of a food infusion, you can go off-course on Mirabel Road—almost across from Steelhead Beach—and in couple of blocks you'll find a good market.

You're on River for less than two miles, and then bail out with a left

Earlier, I promised to show you a way to avoid the two steep climbs that are lying in wait for you just ahead. I don't think much of this solution, but it works...sort of. Instead of turning right on 116, turn left. You'll climb a small hill and drop into the town of Forestville (where there are stores and cafes and even quasi-fast food). Turn right on 1st Street and then right into a gravel parking lot. Cross the lot looking for the head of a bike path—The West County Regional Trail—which will take you to Green Valley Road. Turn right on Green Valley, then left on Sullivan, and finally right on Graton Road and retrace the first miles of today's ride back to Occidental. That does mean you have to climb the long hill that was this morning's great, two-mile downhill. Is this an improvement over the climbs on the main route? Yes, because it's a more gradual climb. But you'll still be doing a lot of uphill plugging. Mileage is about the same, either way.

Back to the basic route... Turn right on 116 and toil along for 1.3 miles on a mild uphill through the trees. Hwy





116 is another busy road. It's not as busy as River, but it makes up for it by having no shoulders. I don't consider it especially dangerous or even really unpleasant, but I'm still happy to get it over with, and my guess is you will be too.

From the summit of that small climb, you descend very gently for a mile and a half to a left on Green Valley Road. Now you're back on one of the area's better back roads. It's also the gateway to those two big climbs that mark the end of today's stage. Things start out easy enough, but soon begin ramping up in a series of little bumps. At around mile 70, the climbing gets serious: a nasty little wall that gains over 300' in about half a mile. This climb always seems to look worse than it really is. As you're climbing, it looks as if this wicked pitch will continue for miles, but it doesn't. Almost before you've had a chance to go anaerobic, it abruptly flattens out and just as suddenly plunges down the other side of the hill in a steep chute through the forest...a snappy descent that drops you into the road's namesake valley, where the trees give way to pinot noir vineyards and pasturage for cows and horses (above).

Our run on Green Valley ends with a short but sweet downhill swagger through the trees and meadows to a junction with Harrison Grade. Turn right onto this pretty road and get ready for the last big climb of the day. You'll gain around 500' in a little over a mile, stitching a series of hairpin switchbacks onto the mountain (right), all the



while riding through forest of redwood, bay laurel, madrone, and manzanita. The grade varies between quite steep and mild, with even one downhill snippet tossed in. The last little bit may be the steepest, but then you get a half mile that's almost flat for catching your breath before one final, easy climb to the high point on the day (all of 825' above sea level!).

From here on, it's all downhill: a little descent on Harrison Grade and then the retracing of that easy climb at the start on Graton Road...now a smooth, slinky slide back to Occidental.

I like the descent on Graton, even if it does ruin our record of no backtracking for the entire, three-day package. However, just for the heck of it, and just because I can't leave well enough alone, I'll offer you one last option...one that will circumvent the backtracking and give you instead a very nice, very remote little road to explore. On that flat stretch of Harrison Grade, just after the steep climb, there is a right turn onto Morelli Road. This pretty little lane climbs over an open hilltop—crowned with the handsome old Morelli farmhouse—and then descends very steeply into a little hollow with a pretty farm at the bottom. I love this spot. To me, the little farm and its tiny, tidy pond are like an exquisite jewel in an elegantly crafted setting. Unfortunately, you may not even notice this view as you negotiate the downhill because the pavement is so atrocious as to be virtually nonexistent. It is a paved road, but in some places, it calls for a liberal, charitable interpretation of the word "paved" to see it that way.

There are two wickedly steep descents: one to the cute little farm and another to the village of Camp Meeker. The second one is at least well paved, but is so narrow and so steep that you'll be riding your brakes all



the way down...no chance to play on this puppy! At the bottom, in Camp Meeker, you turn left and head upstream alongside Dutch Bill Creek, on Occidental-Camp Meeker Road (aka Old Bohemian), on the opposite bank from Bohemian Hwy. (I suggested this as an alternate route for retracing the Boho section for the shortcuts on the Northern Loop, remember?) It's a nice, virtually deserted, slightly uphill road with mostly good pavement that ends up almost at the same spot as Graton Road on the edge of Occidental.

If you choose this obscure, alternate route, you'll see wonderful sights; you'll have the crap beat out of you and your bike on the lousy pavement; and you'll wear out a set of brake pads on the vertical descents. You'll miss that last, fast descent on Graton (the backtrack). And you'll add a bit to your total miles. If all that sounds appealing, go for it!

And that, my friends, is that. Three days of nearly perfect riding. Long, hard, hilly days, perhaps, but if you have the fitness

Harrison Grade

and frame of mind to tackle them, you will be paid back in full for all the effort you expend.

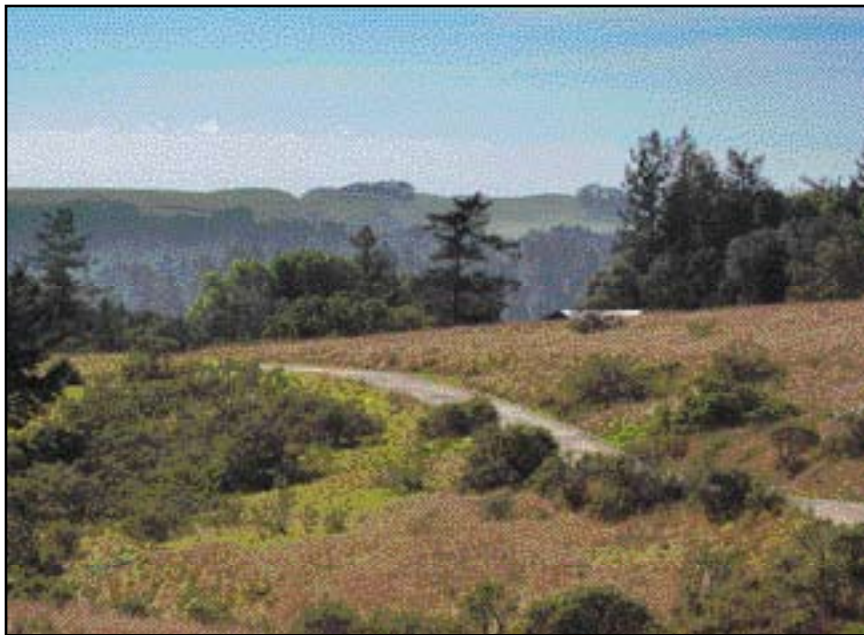
But wait: there's more! In the same, can't-leave-well-enough-alone spirit that brought you that shattered pavement on Morelli, I'm offering this additional ride at absolutely no extra cost, except perhaps to your aching quads...

The Leftover Loop **24 miles, 2600'**

Everyone knows what leftovers are, right? The turkey sandwiches the day after Thanksgiving. The extra pasta reheated with a few eggs and herbs folded in. Leftovers are those tasty morsels that didn't get consumed at the main feast, but are just too good to throw away, especially if you're still hungry for more of the same delicious fare.

I'm a serious back roads junkie. I hate to leave any good roads unriden. And so all the time I've been laying out this little tour and writing it up, I've been fussing and stewing about a handful of excellent roads that are right in Occidental's backyard, but that I couldn't figure out how to cobble together into another full stage. I finally decided to stop trying to make a main course out of these ingredients and just settle for a small snack of a ride. It's a little morsel you might do on one of your travel days. My choice—if I were driving in from somewhere not too far away—would be to do this ride as a sort of prologue on my arrival day, before checking in at my lodgings. That way, I'd get four days of riding for the cost of three days' accommodations.





You can think of this ride as entirely optional or as the perfect complement to the Big Three...the main rides. There is only one circumstance which would turn this into an essential ride: if—on the Northern Loop—you elected to skip the Hwy 1-Coleman Valley section at the end of the day. In that case, you *have* to do this ride, because you simply cannot leave Occidental without doing Coleman Valley Road—both photos this page and bottom of previous page—and this little loop gives you another shot at it, going in the opposite direction. After King Ridge, Coleman Valley is probably the most classic, cream-of-the-crop road in western Sonoma County. One way or another, you must do it.

All of this presupposes that you like hills. In spite of offering assorted shortcuts on this tour, the basic theme for the whole weekend has been climbing and descending, and this little ride is packed with killer climbs and white-knuckle descents, and this time, there are no flatter, easier shortcuts.

As usual, you begin at the center of town. Today you go west on Coleman Valley...a stout climb to begin the day of about 400' in a little over a mile. Then you get to rest and enjoy the view on a more-or-less level run across a wide, sweeping meadow, with a splendid vista of Mount Saint Helena and the other peaks of the Mayacamas Mountains on the far, eastern horizon.

There is one more little bump of an uphill to the first big summit. The first summit comes at a junction with Wil-

low Creek Road. You may have noticed Willow Creek on the Northern Loop map, marked as “unpaved.” That’s only partially true, because it’s only partially unpaved. It has a few miles of rather patchy pavement at the bottom—coming inland from the Russian River—then three or four miles of dirt/gravel on the big climb in the middle, and finally a few miles of rather decently paved downhill to this junction with Coleman Valley. I have ridden it many times on a road bike and it’s very manageable. In the drier seasons, the dirt becomes quite packed and hard and almost rides like a paved road, at least at the speeds one does on a climb. Most of the climb is very gradual, especially compared to climbing Coleman Valley from the coast. There is

however one short, steep pitch which is a great test of your bike skills: you’ll want to stand because it’s so steep, but you can’t or you’ll lose traction on the scruffy surface.

Although I don’t include it as an official route, I think it’s reasonable to suggest that if you’re comfortable taking your bike on dirt, you might want to do Willow Creek instead of Coleman Valley at the end of the Northern Loop, especially if you’re planning to do Coleman Valley on the Leftover Loop. Were it not for the dismal road surface, it would be a must on any tour of this area. The scenery is a pleasant combination of thick forest and hillside meadows, and the road is gated and closed to cars over much of its length.





with a very hairy downhill. Stop for a minute to admire the sweeping panorama along the seashore (middle photo). Take in the sights now, because you won't have any attention to spare for the scenery once you launch off into this 1.5-mile, 800' amusement park ride. It's steep; it's twisty; it's bumpy. There are cattle guards to hop and potholes to dodge. There are many spots where the cliff just spills away suddenly from the edge of the narrow road. Like a large, writhing snake, this tangled descent can be a handful. But if you like technical, tricky downhills, you'll have a ball on this one.

The bottom of the descent means Hwy 1. Turn left and roll down the coast, with the surf crashing just at the base of the cliff next to the road (below). In some cases the almost sheer cliff is so near the road that going off onto the shoulder here would mean dropping 50' to the

Once over the top at Willow Creek, Coleman Valley Road plunges down into its namesake valley on a slithery run through the woods. Pass the one-room school house and the pretty farm next door and cruise down the length of the valley. Very abruptly, the road rounds a right-hand bend and tilts up onto the hillside, beginning



beach. The highway glides downhill right to sea level at the mouth of Salmon Creek. There is a small cluster of beach houses here—doing a passable imitation of a Maine seacoast village—but no public services. Climb gently up the other side of the creek's little valley, and soon you'll be at the left turn onto Bay Hill Road.

If it has "Hill" in the name, you can be fairly certain it's going to have

a succession of short, steep pitches that will eventually winch you up to panoramic views over the Pacific and miles and miles of empty hills (above). Once up on the 1100' summit, this spectacular backroad bends to the south and waltzes down the ridgeline in a rollicking series of small ups and downs. Coleman Valley Road winds through thick forest for most of its first half, but when you break out onto the ridge above the ocean, the trees fall away, and the hills are mantled in only green, wind-blown grasses. Hence, the wide-open, uninterrupted views.

Finally, at around 8.5 miles, you crest the last of the little uphill rollers and are confronted





a climb in it somewhere, and in this case, the climb begins immediately and continues—with a few flat spots mixed in—for a mile and a half, to a 750' summit. It's a stiff climb, but not absolutely brutal. On the way up, you can enjoy the view back out to sea, beyond Bodega Harbor and Bodega Head. By taking Bay Hill Road, the route bypasses the fishing village of Bodega Bay. If you want to avoid the climb on Bay Hill, you can stay on Hwy 1 right through the town. There is a good deal more traffic in and around the resort, which is one of the reasons we're detouring around the town on Bay Hill. The landscape on the top of Bay Hill (above) is much as it is on the ridge on Coleman Valley Road: empty, grass-covered hills, rolling down the mountainside until they crinkle up into deep, creek-cut canyons.

The descent off the backside of Bay Hill consists of several moderately steep pitches strung together with almost level bits. The last and fastest section whistles downhill through the dappled shade of a dense eucalyptus wood (below), and then you roll out at the bottom to another run along Hwy 1. This time you're only on the main highway for a little less than a mile, and most of that is done at top speed on a long, smooth, straight descent to the junction with Bodega Hwy.

I'm going to offer two suggestions for bulking up the miles on this pocket-sized ride. The first is an out-&-back off this section of Hwy 1. When you turn south from Bay Hill onto the highway, you climb briefly before the fast descent. Just at the top of the hill, Estero Lane takes off to the right. It climbs at first, then dips and climbs a few more times over the course of its two miles. This is not an absolutely wonderful road, primarily because the pavement is patchy and potholed, but I like to ride out to the last bluff before the

road peters out and soak up the view. This is the only spot where you can look down into the valley of the Estero Americano. We pass this tidal stream on the Southern Loop, where it's just a lazy little thing wandering through a meadow. Here though, a little closer to the ocean, it makes an impressive showing, curling through the low hills in broad, muscular arcs.

Back to the route... Shortly after turning left onto Bodega Hwy, you drop into the tiny hamlet of Bodega (often confused with the larger seaside town of Bodega Bay). A few things to note about this village: if you're here in the spring, you may be treated to an eye-popping display of scotch broom blossoms. The hills on either side of

the road are densely packed with the plants, and when they're flowering, it feels as if you're riding through banks of butter-colored clouds. Next thing of note about Bodega: there are several handsome Victorian structures in town, and one of them was prominently featured in Alfred Hitchcock's classic thriller *The Birds*. Hitchcock shot the movie here and in Bodega Bay, and in a bit of cinematic license, he blended the two villages into one town. All of the waterfront scenes were shot in Bodega Bay, but my favorite scene from the film—the schoolhouse scene, where the crows congregate on the jungle gym—was done in Bodega. Can you find the old schoolhouse? It's next to the church (both photos, next page).

Final Bodega note: this is where the second mileage-padding option takes off. Salmon Creek Road veers off to the left in the middle of town. This is a very nice cycling road, with pavement that varies from quite good to mediocre-but-tolerable. There are numerous





middle reach by Salmon Creek Road, and now at the point of its birth.

A little bit of easy uphill at the end of Bittner ushers you right into the center of Occidental. I like the name Leftover Loop for this ride, because it really describes how these roads came to be included in the tour. But if you do this ride on your arrival day as I suggest, it might be more accurately described as the Hors d'oeuvres Loop. If that is, in fact, where you place the ride in your weekend schedule, then I envy you: you have three more days ahead of the best backroad cycling in the world.

Please let us know how your tour went. We appreciate all comments and suggestions.

short, very easy rollers along the road, but no significant climbs or descents. As is the case with most dead-ends, there is no traffic. For almost its entire 4-mile length, it parallels Salmon Creek, and the road is shaded by pretty glades of laurel and willow. The road becomes a private, dirt drive at a little bridge over a creek, and I find it a tranquil spot to stop for a snack.

After leaving Bodega, you head east on the highway—a busy highway, but with big shoulders on this section—for a fraction of a mile and then turn left onto Joy Road. You had a couple of steep climbs on Coleman Valley. You had a good pull up to the top of Bay Hill. Now you get Joy Road. After a brief level prelude, this tiny lane tilts up on end in the first of two, brutal, back-to-back walls. Neither is very long, but they are steep: 350' in half a mile for the first one. Then you drop into a saddle in the trees before hitting the second climb: 400' in .7 of a mile. That's not the end of the climbing, but the wicked grade eases off to the point where you can sit down and take a few normal breaths. Easy climbing—mixed with little rollers—continues for another mile to a summit at 1000'. After that, your dance card is filled with downhills almost to the end of the ride.

You snake down off the ridge on Joy in a twist through the trees and then, after a swift, sweeping right onto Bittner Road, you funnel into deep forest on a steep, fast plunge of about a mile. As you drop into the canyon, you'll pick up a little stream by the side of the road. Those are the headwaters of Salmon Creek, and this is the third time you've encountered it on this ride: first as it emptied into the ocean at the village of Salmon Creek, then along its

Details

Traveling to Occidental:

From the south: Hwy 101 north from San Francisco; west on Hwy 116 to Sebastopol; from the center of Sebastopol, turn west (left) on Bodega Hwy; turn north (right) on Bohemian Hwy at Freestone and proceed to Occidental. Allow approximately an hour and a half for the drive from San Francisco.

From the north: in the center of Santa Rosa, exit Hwy 101 and head west to Sebastopol on Hwy 12, which becomes Bodega Hwy as it passes through Sebastopol; follow the “from the south” directions from here.

From the west: if you're heading north on Hwy 1, turn east (right) on Bodega Hwy and then north (left) on Bohemian Hwy in Freestone. If you're heading south on Hwy 1, turn east (left) on River Road, right



on Moscow Road in Duncans Mills, and right on Bohemian Hwy in Monte Rio.

As far as I know, there is no airport shuttle service to Occidental. Sonoma County Transit buses do run to Occidental on schedule, and with a little planning and a lot of perseverance, you could make the connections that would allow you to arrive in Occidental car-free.

Ask the Santa Rosa Airporter driver to drop you at the stop nearest the Sonoma County Transit Mall, and get directions for which SCT bus to take to the mall. At the mall, get on the Occidental-Guerneville bus.

Airport shuttle policy is that bikes should be boxed, but if the bus isn't full, that rule may be waived. SCT buses have bike racks on the front.

Santa Rosa Airporter 707-545-8015
Sonoma County Transit 707-576-7433

Accommodations in Occidental:

Negri's Occidental Lodge Hotel

PO Box 84
Occidental, CA 95465
707-874-3623

www.occidentalthotel.com

The Inn at Occidental

3657 Church Street
PO Box 857
Occidental, CA 95465
707-874-1047 or 874-9191
800-522-6324

Owner: Jack Bullard

www.innatoccidental.com

innkeeper@innatoccidental.com

Union Hotel

PO Box 76
Occidental, CA 95465
707-874-3635

www.unionhotel.com

Nearest campground:

Casini Ranch Campground
22855 Moscow Road
PO Box 22
Duncans Mills, CA 95430
800-451-8400

www.casiniranch.com

Camp facilities: showers, laundry, playground, recreation hall, canoe rentals, store.

Nearest bike shops:

West County Revolution

6731 Sebastopol Avenue, Suite 130
Sebastopol, CA 95472

707-829-2192

info@westcountyrevolution.com

www.westcountyrevolution.com

NorCal Bike Sport

425 College Avenue
Santa Rosa, CA 95401

707-523-0112

norcalcycling.com

Healdsburg Cyclery (Spoke Folk)

(on the Eastern Loop)
201 Center Street
Healdsburg, CA 95448

707-433-7171

www.spokefolk.com

Wine Country Bikes (bike rentals)

61 Front Street
Healdsburg, CA 95448

707-473-0610

866-922-4537 *Toll Free in the US*

winecountrybikes.com

For additional information:

Sonoma County Convention and Visitors Bureau
707-524-7589

sonomacounty.com

Adventure Velo

707-823-9807

srcride@sonic.net

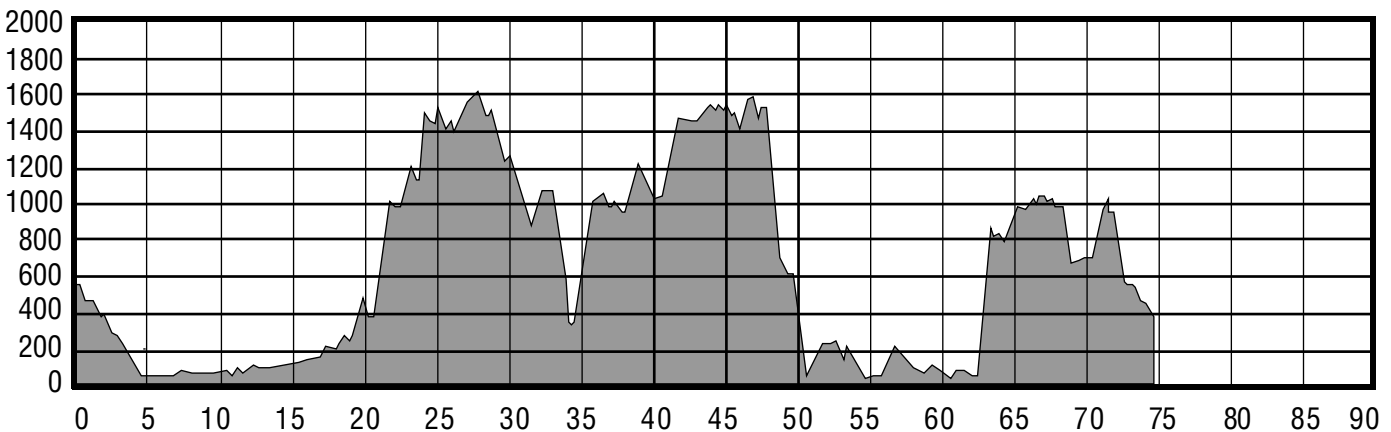
backroad@sonic.net

The Sonoma County Tour

Northern Loop

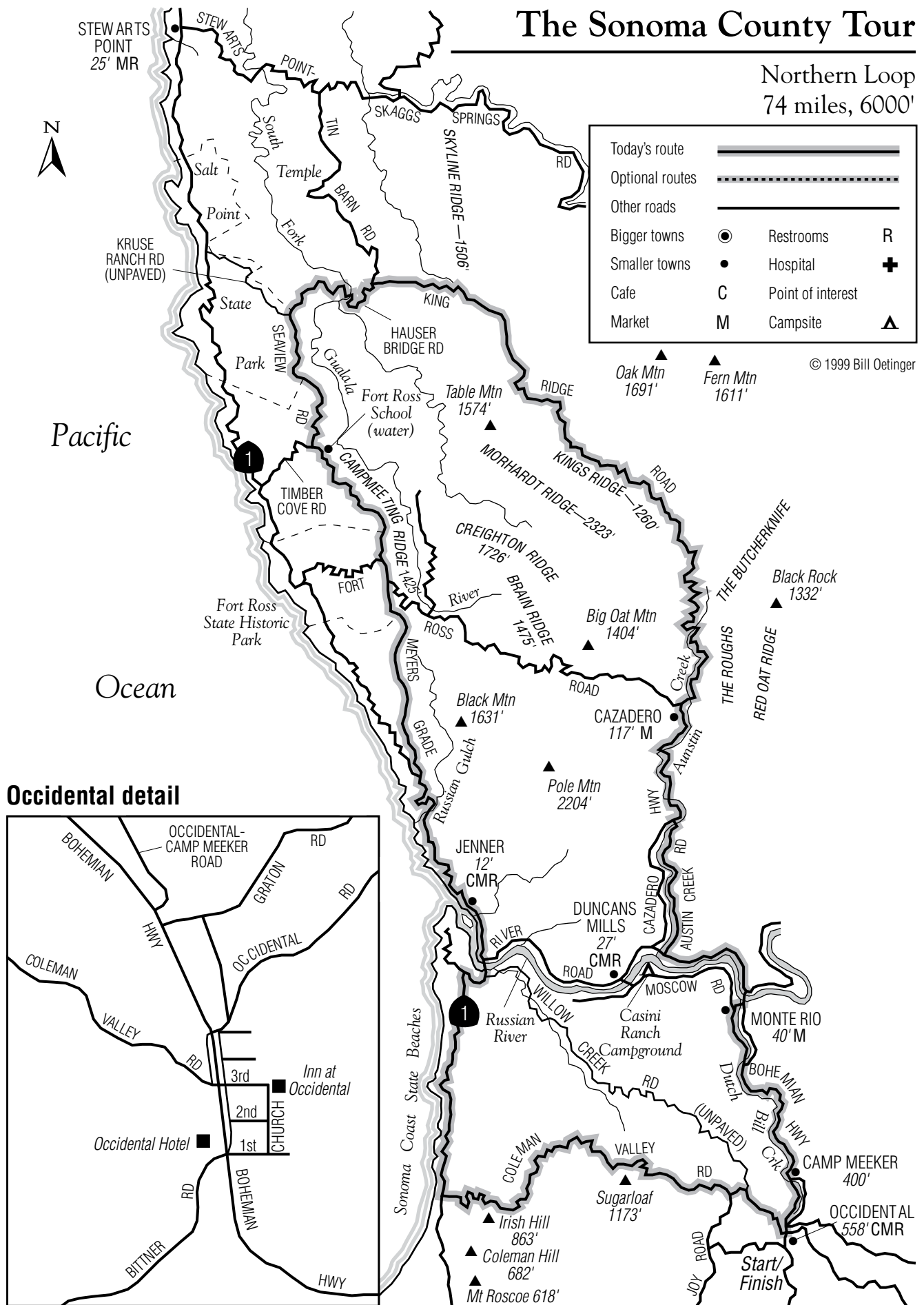
74 miles, 6000'

MILE	DIR	ROAD	COMMENTS
0.0	North	Bohemian Hwy	Great downhill to start the day!
6.7	L		Cross bridge over Russian River.
6.9	L	River Road (Hwy 116)	Almost level, fairly busy.
9.6	R	Austin Creek Road	Quiet, bumpy.
13.1	R	Cazadero Hwy	Flatland shortcut turns left.
15.5	S		Town of Cazadero (117').
16.1	S	King Ridge Road	Great cycling ahead! Many major ups and downs.
32.9	L	Hauser Bridge Road	Fort Ross Road shortcut to the left. Extremely steep descent to Gualala River, followed by long, sometimes steep climb.
36.4	S	Seaview Road	Road name changes at Kruse Ranch Rd junction.
40.0	★	Only source for water (until Jenner) at Fort Ross School, approximately 40 miles.	
43.9	S	Fort Ross Road/Meyers Grade Road	Name changes to Fort Ross for 1/2 mile.
44.4	S	Meyers Grade	Panoramic views. Wild downhill.
49.3	L	Hwy 1	More great downhill. Busier.
54.8	S		Town of Jenner (12').
55.8	S		Bear right on Hwy 1 at River Road junction. Shortcut through Duncans Mills turns left on
River.			
62.4	L	Coleman Valley Road	Steep climbs ahead. Then some great descents.
74.4		Bohemian Hwy junction	Finish in Occidental.



The Sonoma County Tour

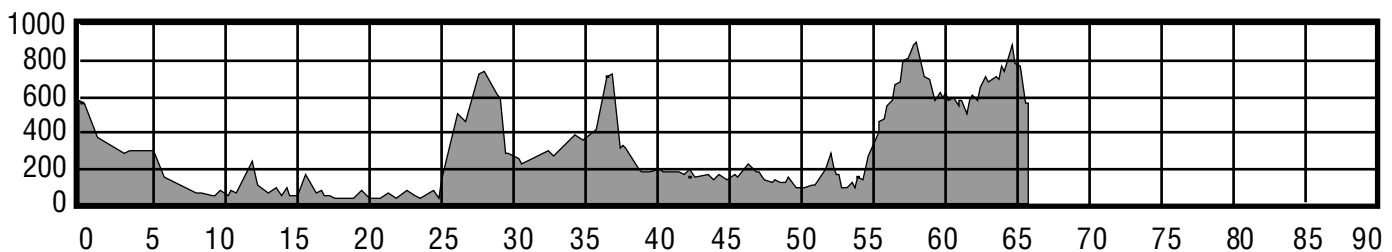
Northern Loop
74 miles, 6000'



The Sonoma County Tour

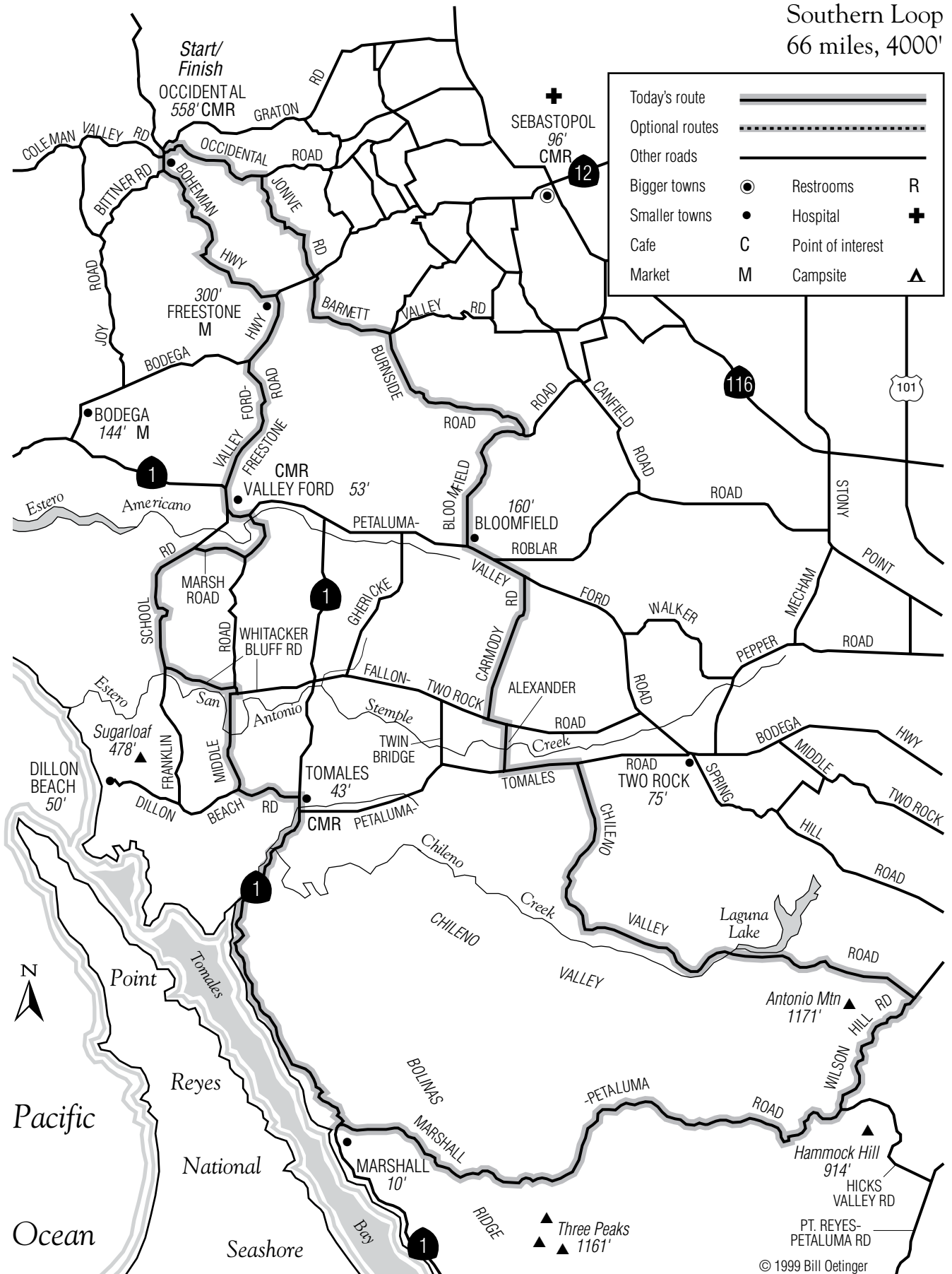
Southern Loop
66 miles, 4000'

MILE	DIR	ROAD	COMMENTS
0.0	South	Bohemian Hwy	Great downhill to start the day!
3.5	S		Town of Freestone (300'). Historic district.
3.9	R	Bodega Hwy	Busier highway.
5.2	L	Valley Ford-Freestone Road	Quiet backroad again.
7.8	L	Hwy 1	
8.4	S		Town of Valley Ford (53').
8.6	R	Middle Road	Quiet roads to nowhere.
9.4	R	Marsh Road	
10.3	L	Franklin School Road	Moderately challenging climbs ahead.
12.8	L	Whitaker Bluff Road	Nice view out over the Estero San Antonio.
14.3	R	Middle Road	Moderate climb ahead.
16.1	L	Dillon Beach Road	Fast descent.
17.2	R	Hwy 1	Town of Tomales (43'). Food and water.
24.8	L	Marshall-Petaluma Road	Big climbs ahead. Town of Marshall (10').
27.8	S		Summit (720'). Great view over Tomales Bay.
35.7	L	Wilson Hill Road	Big climb. See text about confusing intersection...
38.2	L	Chileno Valley Road	Pleasant, rolling meadows.
47.7	L	Tomales-Petaluma Road	Busier.
48.9	R	Alexander Road	
49.7	L	Fallon-Two Rock Road	
50.1	R	Carmody Road	Moderate climb and fast descent.
52.7	L	Petaluma-Valley Ford Road	Busy highway, but big shoulders.
53.9	R	Bloomfield Road	Begin small climbs. Town of Bloomfield (160').
55.7	L	Burnside Road	More climbs.
57.8	S		Summit (900').
59.1	L	Barnett Valley Road	
61.3	S	Jonive Road	Cross Bodega Hwy to new road. Short, steep climb.
63.5	L	Occidental Road	Moderate climbs and one last, fast descent.
65.5	L	Bohemian Hwy	Town of Occidental.
65.6		Coleman Valley Road junction	Finish.



The Sonoma County Tour

Southern Loop
66 miles, 4000'

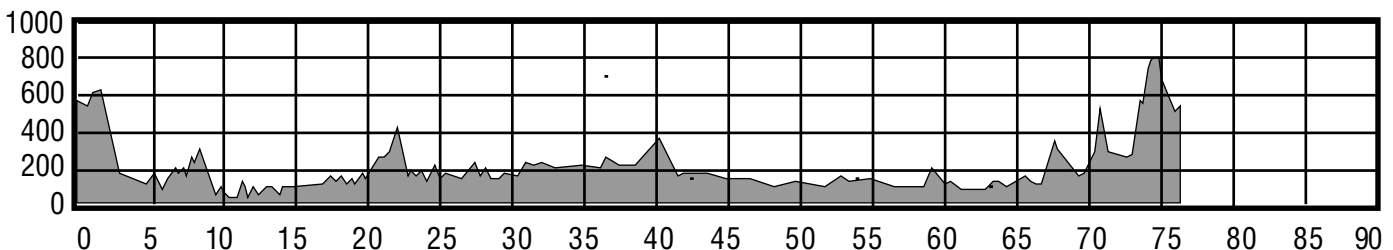


The Sonoma County Tour

Eastern Loop

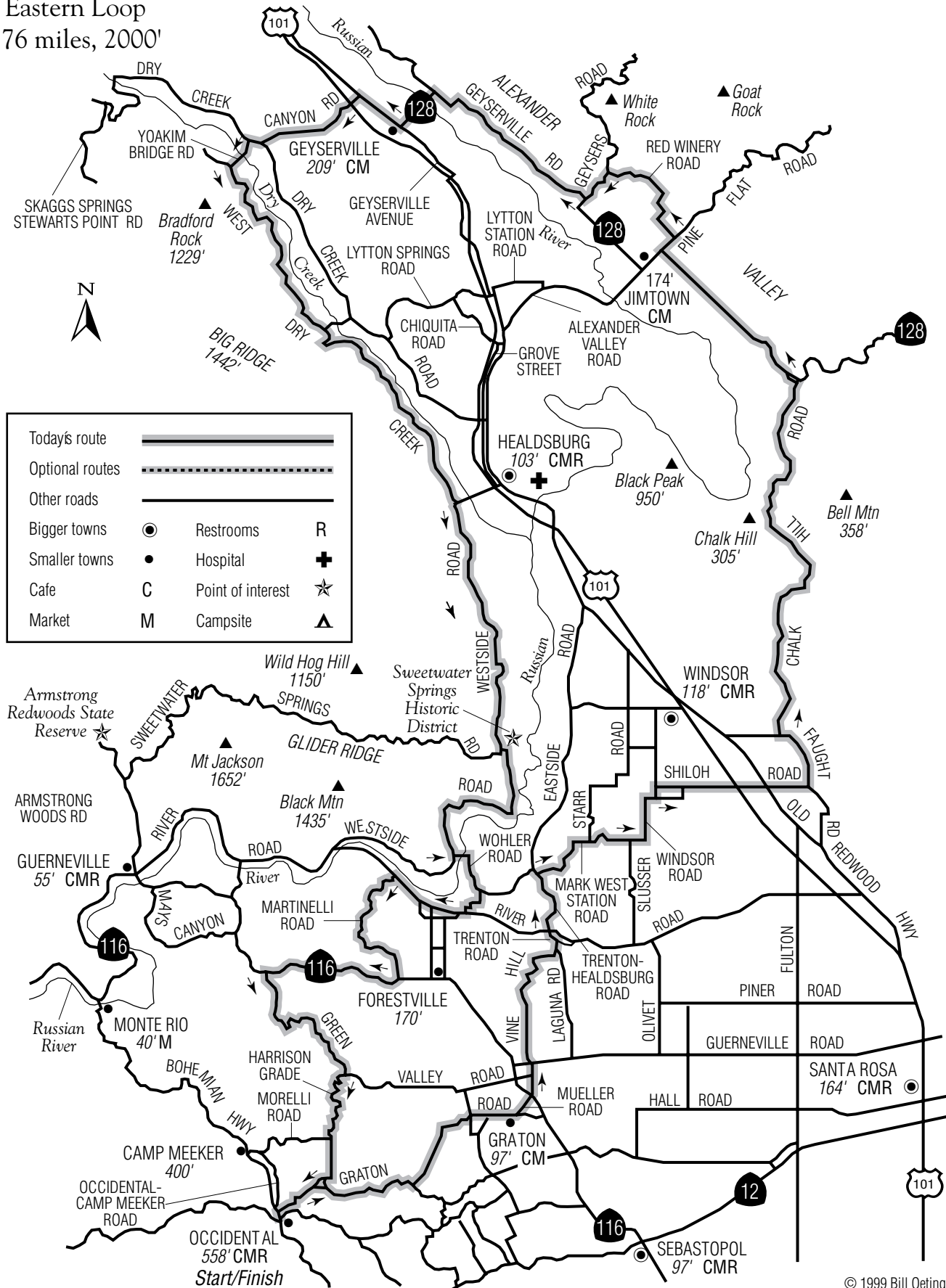
76 miles, 2000'

MILE	DIR	ROAD	COMMENTS
0.0	North	Bohemian Hwy	Leave Occidental.
0.3	R	Graton Road	Moderate climb and then fast, smooth descent.
5.7	S		Town of Graton (97').
6.0	L	Mueller Road	Uphill out of Graton.
6.4	S	Vine Hill Road	Cross Hwy 116 to new road. Small climbs ahead.
9.7	L	Laguna Road	
10.0	L	Trenton Road	
10.3	S	Trenton-Healdsburg Road	Cross River Road to new road.
11.5	R	Mark West Station Road	Dairy country.
13.9	S	Windsor Road	Go straight at junction with Slusser Road.
15.1	R	Shiloh Road	Into and through suburbs.
18.0	L	Faught Road	Back to country...vineyards.
19.3	R	Chalk Hill Road	Nice country road. Moderate climbs and descents.
27.6	L	Hwy 128	Descend into Alexander Valley.
30.6	R	Pine Flat Road	Off-course to left: Jimtown (174'). Food, water.
31.0	L	Red Winery Road	
33.3	L	Geysers Road	
33.9	R	Hwy 128	
38.4	R	Hwy 128/Geyserville Road	Town of Geyserville (209'). Water at school.
39.4	L	Canyon Road	Moderate climb and descent into Dry Creek Valley.
41.6	R	Dry Creek Road	
41.9	L	Yoakim Bridge Road	
42.5	L	West Dry Creek Road	Quiet backroad. Rollers through the vines.
51.2	R	Westside Road	Slightly busier, but still nice.
60.0	L	Wohler Road	Cross Russian River.
61.8	R	River Road	Busy, but wide shoulder.
63.6	L	Martinelli Road	Quiet, through the woods.
66.4	R	Pocket Canyon (Hwy 116)	Busier.
69.2	L	Green Valley Road	Steep climb and descent ahead.
72.4	R	Harrison Grade	Steep climb.
75.2	R	Graton Road	Nice little downhill.
76.0	L	Bohemian Hwy	Into Occidental.
76.2		Coleman Valley Road junction	Finish.



The Sonoma County Tour

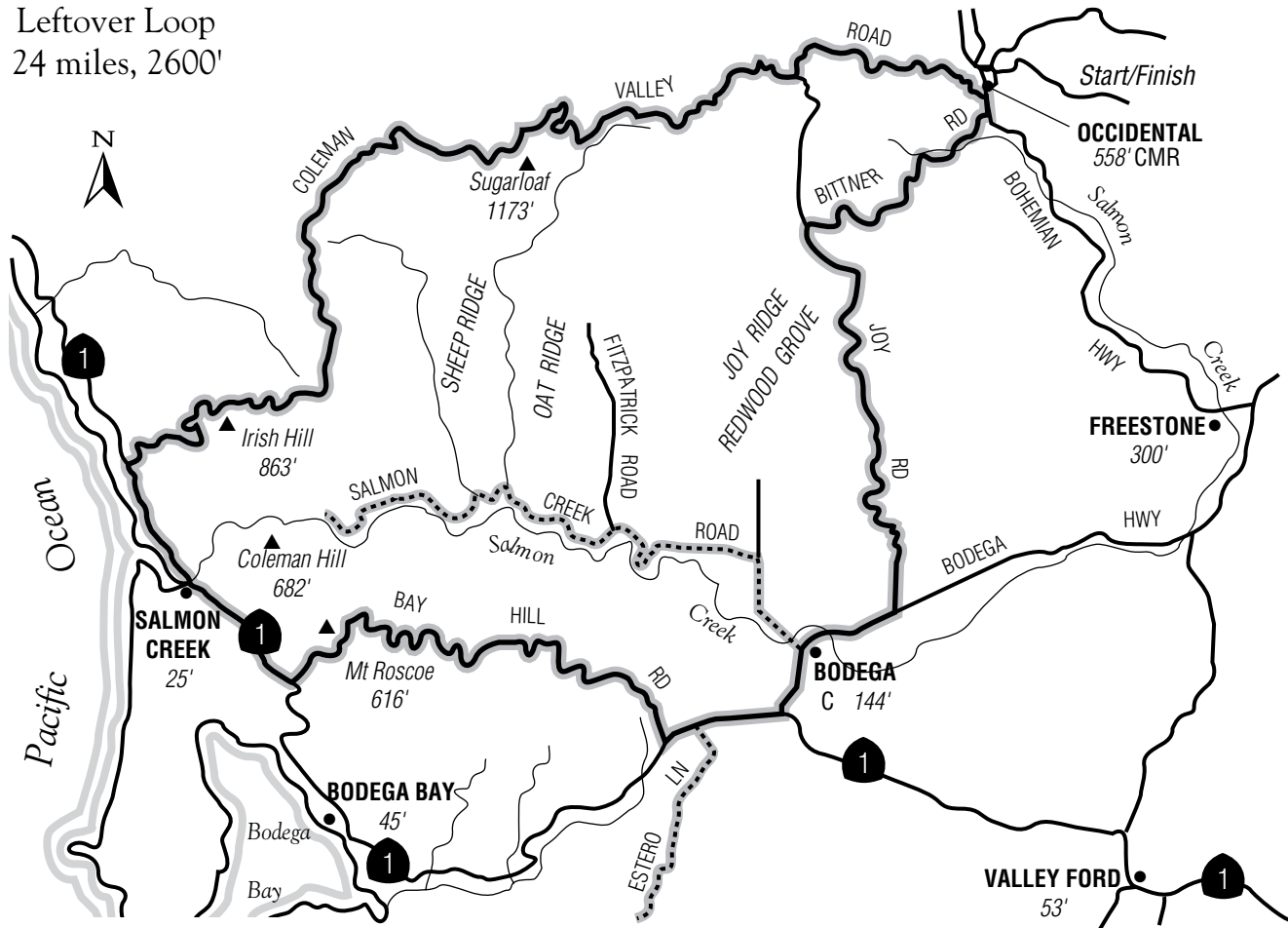
Eastern Loop
76 miles, 2000'



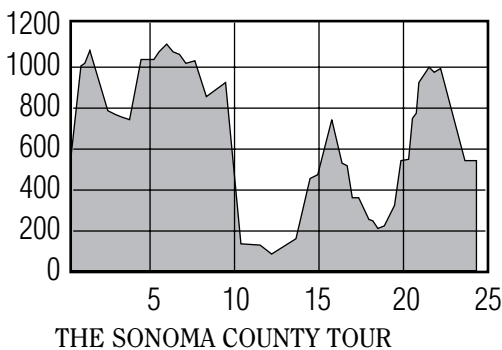
© 1999 Bill Oettinger

The Sonoma County Tour

Leftover Loop
24 miles, 2600'



MILE	DIR	ROAD	COMMENTS
0.0	West	Coleman Valley Road	Leave Occidental. Stiff climb!
10.2	L	Hwy 1	
12.4	L	Bay Hill Road	
14.0	S		Summit (750')
16.3	L	Hwy 1	
17.2	L	Bodega Hwy	
17.8	S		Town of Bodega (144')
18.6	L	Joy Road	Step climbs ahead.
22.1	R	Bittner Road	
24.1	L	Bohemian Hwy	Into Occidental.



© 1999 Bill Oetinger

Today's route	—————	
Optional routes	- - - - -	
Other roads	—————	
Bigger towns	●	Restrooms R
Smaller towns	•	Hospital +
Cafe	C	Point of interest ☆
Market	M	Campsite ▲