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Abbotsford News

Time to stop and smell the blackberries



The third and final installment in our series about Abbotsford commuters.

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On sunny days, commuting on a bicycle is simply a joy.

And after 24 years of two-wheeled travels, Harv Bergen has experienced plenty of those. When the summer sun is shining and the wind is blowing just right, he can smell ripe blackberries and wild roses blooming in the ditches.

On one particularly perfect day, Bergen was so overwhelmed by the aroma that he pulled over to the side of the road, poured out the contents of his water bottle and refilled it with blackberries. Then he pedaled home and baked himself a pie.

But then there are those classic Lower Mainland mornings when Bergen takes a look out the front window and it's splattering with a vengeance.

Ever the optimist, he'll strap on his rain gear –

water-repellent windbreaker and pants, neoprene gloves, waterproof shoes and a helmet – for the 13 km ride to work. Maybe the wind will be at his back. Maybe it's not as bad as it looks.

More often than not, it's exactly as bad as it looks, if not worse.

Some days, the rain seems to be coming sideways. As Bergen pedals out of his driveway and leans into the wind blasting across Sumas Prairie, a sympathetic neighbour might pull up next to him and offer him a lift. He always declines. He could have chosen to hop in his own car, but where's the challenge in that?

By the time Bergen swings his bike westward onto Vye Road, the rain is already breaching his clothing – beading on his pants and running into his shoes. On an intellectual level, it doesn't bother him much. If his gear were much more waterproof, he'd sacrifice breathability and be heavily sweating underneath. Either way, he's getting wet.

By the time Bergen pedals into the parking lot at Life Cycles Bike Shop, the Salton Road business that he owns, any dampness is an afterthought. After 45 minutes on the road, he's feeling an adrenaline buzz that comes with overcoming the elements.

"I'm a victor, brother," the energetic 47-year-old says. "If we don't take on the great challenges, we deny ourselves the opportunity to taste sweet victory."

That's not to say that bicycle commuting is without its challenges. A number of years ago, Bergen was riding home from work at night when a car came cruising around a curve in the road and made an erratic swerve in his direction. He hit his hand brakes with such force that he went flying over the handlebars and landed on the hood of the car. He broke his jaw, and after surgery, it was wired shut for six weeks.

But Bergen wasn't about to let the accident change his routine. He was back on the bike even while his jaw was still wired shut, furiously

sucking wind through his teeth as he pedaled.

For the most part, Bergen said that motorists are becoming more tolerant of two-wheelers on the road. Twenty years ago, it wasn't uncommon for a driver to pull up beside him and yell something real creative like, "Get on the sidewalk!" But that happens less now.

"It is what it is – you're going to have some rednecks," he says. "I think they get frustrated when they're stuck in traffic, and you're rolling past them.

"But for the amount of cycling I've done, I don't think I would have had any more close calls than if I'd been driving a car."

Even before he bought the bike shop, Bergen has been pedaling to work. At first, it was a matter of finances. He received a car insurance bill in the mail one day, and reasoned that if someone were willing to pay him almost \$500 to ride his bike to work for a year, he'd do it in a second. So he got rid of the car.

Bergen's got enough commuting stories for days. Like the time he spotted his neighbour, a police officer, manning a radar trap in a school zone. Bergen stood up on his pedals and churned his legs as fast as he could, and the officer later told him that he could have ticketed him for speeding. He was going 38 km/h in a 30 zone. Sweet.

"When you're riding your bike, you're more aware of your environment," Bergen says. "When those blackberries are ripe, you've got this great aroma."

Bergen pauses to take a sip of coffee.

"Of course, when the farmers are spreading manure, you've got that too."

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