

How to Organize a Ride (“A Tour is Born”)

By Graham Fleming

PART 1: PLANNING THE TOUR

On several occasions BAC members have mentioned that they might be, or are interested in leading a tour but they are not sure how to get started and what to do. So I want to share a few notes on how Lois and I put tours together. BAC has leaders who are much more experienced than Lois and I are and there are probably many ways of handling tours so the following describes just one way, a way that seems to work for us. The reason we lead tours? We find leading one is a lot of fun, almost as much fun (even more fun) than the planning process.

1. The first step is to do a little self-analysis. What kind of tour do you enjoy to ride? And, more importantly, what kind of tour would you enjoy to put together and to lead? For example, would you like to do a tour in the mountains with the emphasis on serious cycling or would you enjoy an easier tour with the emphasis on the social activities, or perhaps you would prefer something else. Would you want your participants to stay at four star hotels or would you be happier proposing a moderately priced tour? All of these considerations are important not only from the point of view of your comfort level but also from the type of participants that the tour will likely attract.

2. The second step is to decide on the locale for the tour. To me the locale usually appears out of the blue, i.e. all of a sudden a notion appears in my mind that such and such a place would be a wonderful spot for a tour. Many people choose to do tours in their own areas of the country. They are familiar with the chosen area and its possibilities. Some people may think of places they visited at some point in their lives, remembering the fun they experienced, the sights, etc. On the other hand, if there is some part of the country or the world that you would really like to get to know, there is no better way than working on a tour in that area. Once you have decided on an area, don't immediately rush into doing anything; instead let the ideas roll around in your mind. Decide whether the area would best be suited to traveling to a new hotel each day, to a fixed base-approach, or maybe to a multi-fixed base approach. (2 or 3 nights at each location.)

3. The third step might be to read the ***Ride Directors Guidelines*** (on the **MORE...** Page of the BAC Website) and, optionally, to contact a BAC Tours Coordinator and ask for the name of an experienced leader who might be willing to help in whatever way you think might be useful to you. Or you could ask whether a past tour in that area might be in the club archives. You could also ask whether anyone else plans to do a tour in the same area and in the same time frame that appeals to you.

4. The fourth step is to get some maps. For the U.S., I like the DeLorme state maps as they provide great detail. As a matter of fact, what I really use is TopoUSA, the software version of these maps which makes routing much easier - almost a snap. With TopoUSA it is easy to get distances and elevation profiles. I highly recommend it. For European map suggestions, see the following document that is available on the BAC website. “Tips on Directing BAC Rides in Europe”

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5. The fifth step is to use the appropriate maps and also to check accommodations. Actually what I do is to do all of the preliminary routing using TopoUSA combined with checking possible accommodations via the internet. At this point it is usually worthwhile to also do a Google check of local bike clubs and bike shops. Both of these often have local cycling maps showing bike paths, roads to avoid, etc. Whatever time you spend on this step is time well spent because the better the job here, the less time the actual scouting will take. It is at this stage that you need to match daily distances with available accommodations. As an example, if one day is 20 miles and the next day is 80 miles you will need to change the routing, maybe completely, in order to even the miles. You may have to go an entirely different route in order to find the accommodations at the mileages you want.

6. The sixth step is to do the physical scouting. It is quickest to do this by car. Of course, if significant parts of the route are on bike paths you will have to check these by bicycle. It is at this stage that I usually talk to the various hotels; in fact I try to stay at the proposed hotels on the scouting trip. Please be aware that at this stage you may have to change the proposed routing considerably; the hotels may be unsuitable, the roads may be unsafe, a part of the route may be boring, etc., etc. Often, the rerouting involves just two or three days. By the time you are done with the scouting you should have the physical aspects of your tour pretty well fixed.

7. The seventh step is to figure out how much money you need to collect from each of the participants. Several items need to be taken into account.

- You will need to collect the BAC fee of \$50 per rider.
- You need to figure the cost of the van. This should include the rental cost WITH FULL INSURANCE, plus the cost of gas. **DO NOT PLAN TO USE YOUR OWN VEHICLE.**
- The cost of “included hotels” plus any hotel deposits that may be required.
- The cost of any “included meals”, e.g. the opening and closing dinners.
- The cost of refreshments for the evening social hour; be sure to include the cost of soft drinks, wine, beer, snacks and supplies like paper plates, napkins, etc.
- Include a contingency for unforeseen expenses, perhaps \$1,000 or \$2,000 or even more, depending on the proposed tour.

Now decide on a deposit amount required from each participant at sign-up time. If the total amount you require is less than \$400, you might want to ask for the total amount as the deposit. If the total is considerably more, you may wish to ask for a deposit and then one or two additional payments.

8. The eighth step is to write a proposal (the Ride Description). **It is vital to give a complete and completely honest description of the tour.** Let me give a couple of examples to illustrate this point. If on one of the nights the accommodations are below the usual standards, **say so**. If one day is 120 miles including a 5,000-foot climb, **say so**. People need to be quite clear what they are signing up for. Then if they don’t like it, at least they knew what to expect. If you are not sure how to enter the proposal on the BAC

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website, call Nancy who is always willing to extend a helping hand. You will also need a cancellation policy. You will find examples of cancellation policies in the Ride Directors Guidelines, Enclosure #9.

REFERENCES: See the following documents on the BAC Website **MORE... Page**

- ***Ride Approval Process***
- ***How to Manage Your Ride on the BAC Web Site***

What happens after the ride is approved? Read on... But I'll give you this glimpse into the future: proper preparation is the whole secret to really enjoy participating in the tour you're leading.

PART 2: BECOMING A TOUR LEADER

The most important part of “leading” a tour needs to happen before the tour ever starts -- that part is preparation. Below are some suggestions.

1. Communication with the participants before the start of the tour

- Before submitting your ride proposal, decide whether you will accept BAC riders who do not have email. In making this decision, you may want to bear in mind that communicating with participants who do not have email may create more work than the email-equipped participants.

2. System for keeping track of tour-related funds.

- Set the system up to show two things: funds received from participants and funds expended on tour expenses. (Some people use Quicken for this; others prefer a spreadsheet.)
- Do not intermingle BAC tour funds with personal funds. Open a separate account for the BAC tour.
- Whenever funds are received, make an entry in your system AND also enter the source and amount of the funds in your checkbook. Record the check number.
- Send an acknowledgement to the participants as you receive funds from them.
- Design your accounting system so you will be able to dispense funds in two ways -- from the tour checkbook AND ALSO via your personal credit card.

3. Hotel reservations.

- Contact the group sales representatives at the hotels/motels you plan to use and make the appropriate reservations/arrangements.
- After you have made the appropriate arrangements, make sure you get a written contract for each hotel. (Ask for a contract if one is not offered by the hotel representative.)

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- Decide whether you are going to reserve the rooms and pay the bill for the group, or whether you arrange for the required number of rooms to be held and participants call in to make their own reservations and pay their own bills.
- Find out the hotel’s cancellation policy. Better yet, get it in writing.

4. Communicating with the participants soon after the ride is published.

- Include information regarding payments: when future payments are due, and the amount of the payments.
- Unless you are making all of the hotel reservations yourself, give the participants the phone numbers and contact information to make their own reservations at each of the hotels where you have reserved a block of rooms.
- Mention special cautions, e.g. “we will cycle to high altitudes”; “we will experience extreme heat”; “some of the places where we will be staying are very basic”, etc. “If any of these are a problem, please don’t sign up”. Participants need to be advised of special conditions.
- Point out any special requirements, e.g. “we will do considerable cycling on unpaved road, please do not use narrow tires”, etc., etc.

5. Reminders for deposits.

- Notify each participant three to four weeks before the due dates of all additional deposits. You may want to send an additional reminder a week ahead of each due date.

6. Notification of changes.

- Advise participants if there are any changes in the tour from the original write-up. One example of this would be the situation where you are unable to get the reservations described in the original write-up and you need to make alternative arrangements. In such a case, be sure to indicate whether this will result in poorer accommodations, greater tour expenses, a longer daily distance, etc.

7. Room reservations.

- Get written confirmation of any and all bookings you make yourself. Take these with you on the tour.
- Find out, as you talk with the hotels, about suitable areas for overnight storage of bikes and for the evening Social Hour. Will these be in the riders’ rooms, or do they wish to make other arrangements for the tour.

8. The Van

- Make rental arrangements for a van of suitable size. Do NOT use your own vehicle.
- Get complete and comprehensive insurance coverage.

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- Advise the participants in your first communication if they are expected to share in the driving. If so, have each participant send you a copy of his/her driver's license.

PART 3: THE RUBBER HITS THE ROAD

Finally the tour starts. Usually the kick-off is a Social Hour. Most of your communication with participants occurs during the social hours.

1. Social hours.

- Buy the snacks, drinks, paper plates, glasses and knives and forks, regardless whether you or one of the riders hosts the social hour.
- Decide how extensive or simple you want to make the social hours on the ride. Some leaders have rather extensive snacks and drinks; others prefer to keep it simple.
- Provide snacks which can range from peanuts, chips and dip to local treats or smoked fish, fancy cheeses, etc.
- Beverages should include non-alcoholic drinks as well as beer and wine.
- Supply plastic knives, forks, spoons and napkins.

2. Social Hour discussion points.

- Hand out the name tags and welcome all the participants.
- Have the participants introduce themselves.
- Distribute the tour packets – unless you sent these out before.
- Talk about several things at either the social hour or the opening dinner: remind them that all came to have a good time. Then immediately after that talk about safety. You could link these two items by saying, “we are all here to have a good time; unfortunately nothing spoils a good time quicker than an accident.” Follow this up by reminding the participants of basic safety rules, e.g. stop at STOP signs, stay to the right, in single file on narrower roads, etc., etc. Let all of this sink in before you continue your talk.
- Tell participants about van arrangements – how to identify the van, what time does the luggage have to be in the van, what is your policy about picking up participants (are you willing to pick up participants if they get tired? Or do you use the van strictly for transporting luggage?) Tell the participants what time the social hour will be each day. (If possible, have it the same time each day as this avoids a lot of confusion.)
- Talk about the first day of riding. Point out just a few salient facts, e.g. there is neither food nor water for the first 50 miles, so be prepared; the right turn at mile 26.2 is easy to miss, look for...; there is an incredible view just ¼ mile off the route.
- As you prepare your talk remember that people have a very short attention span; therefore stick to the essentials.

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3. Problems

- Very occasionally on a tour, you may encounter a problem, e.g. someone is not riding safely, or a conflict arises between two of the participants. If a problem arises, speak to the affected participant(s) immediately and get it taken care of. If you wait, the problem will not cure itself it will just get worse.

4. Accidents

- In the rare event of an accident, fill out the BAC Incident Report form. You need to take a copy of this form with you on the tour. Send, FAX, or email the completed form to the BAC Office. If at all possible, also telephone the BAC office and advise them of what happened. Also you should take a copy of the emergency contacts with you. Please note that these are available to you via the BAC web site.

Finally and so importantly, have a good time. You are the leader and your mood will be reflected in the mood of the participants. If you don't have a good time the others won't either!

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Tour Leader Checklist

- _____ 1. Read through the Ride Directors Guidelines on BAC web site.
- _____ 2. Notify a Tours Coordinator.
- _____ 3. Get maps of the tour area.
- _____ 4. Develop tentative routes.
- _____ 5. Check out accommodation possibilities and nearby restaurants.
- _____ 6. Scout the routes and make adjustments as needed:
 - _____ Daily mileages _____ Hotel possibilities
 - _____ Possible restaurants, cafes _____ Van rental possibilities
- _____ 7. Decide maximum number of participants you would accept.
- _____ 8. Decide on type of social hours. (Beverages, snacks, paper products, etc.)
- _____ 9. Figure an approximate per person cost, including hotels, meals, social hours, van expenses including full insurance, opening/closing dinners, \$50 BAC fee and no less than \$50 per person contingency.
- _____ 10. Submit ride proposal. Include:
 - _____ Ride description _____ Cancellation policy
 - _____ Approx cost per person _____ Need for email
- _____ 11. Set up accounting system to accommodate:
 - _____ Receiving funds
 - _____ Expending funds
 - _____ Expending funds via check and personal credit card
- _____ 12. Open a separate bank account.
- _____ 13. Send acknowledgements to riders as funds are received.
- _____ 14. Make hotel arrangements.
 - _____ Reserve rooms _____ Get contracts
- _____ 15. Arrange for opening and closing dinners.
- _____ 16. Reserve van. Decide who driver(s) will be.
- _____ 17. Notify riders of:
 - _____ Payments due and when,
 - _____ Hotel arrangements.
 - _____ Special cautions and/or requirements.
 - _____ Any changes since original write-up.
- _____ 18. Rent van. Get comprehensive insurance.
- _____ 19. Get copies of drivers licenses if appropriate.
- _____ 20. Buy snacks, beverages, sundries for social hours.
- _____ 21. Welcome riders and hand out name tags and tour packets.
- _____ 22. In opening talk, include:
 - _____ Safety _____ Van arrangements _____ Next day's route
- _____ 23. Take emergency contact info and BAC Incident Report Form with you. Also office phone number.
- _____ 24. Enjoy the tour