

## INTRODUCTION

Cycling 4,700 miles across the USA, that's the easy part. So what's the hard part? How about doing it off the grid?

That means:

Traveling via my own human power, without the assistance of fossil fuels

Eating locally produced, organic and unpackaged foods, and forgoing long-distance-shipped, conventional, packaged food unless it is being wasted

Using water from natural sources and forgoing water from municipal systems unless it is being wasted

Using electricity generated by portable alternative-energy devices and forgoing electricity generated by fossil fuels

Creating near-zero trash or recycling and composting all of my food waste.

That is exactly what I'll be doing. The adventure is called "Off the Grid Across America," but it would better be called "Low-Impact Living Across America." Off the grid typically means not connected to public utilities such as electricity and water, but it is a very subjective term with different definitions depending on who you talk to. It almost always includes living in a self-sufficient manner.

In this adventure I'll mostly be off the grid, but more precisely I'll be living an extremely low-impact lifestyle and living in a manner that causes minimal harm to the planet and all the people, creatures and plants that call it home.

To live in this manner and stick to my guidelines I will:

- Use resources as they are naturally provided by the Earth
- Get these resources from the source, or as close to it as possible
- Use only as much of the resource as I absolutely need
- Be resourceful and find ways to meet my needs while causing no unnecessary harm.

This will mean giving up many of the convenient ways I am accustomed to using resources. Take water as an example. The

water we get when we turn on our faucets is of course from nature. However it has been treated with chemicals, electricity was used to extract it and deliver it to the faucet, and it may have traveled a long distance from the source. On the other hand water in a river or lake has not been treated with chemicals (at least not intentionally), uses the Earth's natural life cycles to move and is at the source. This water takes no human input or added resources and causes no harm in its creation or existence, whereas water from the tap often does. So on this adventure I will get my water from natural sources rather than taps.

Water is just one of the five key aspects of sustainability that I will be paying attention to. The others are transportation, food, energy and waste. I'll dive into those more in a minute but first, you're probably wondering, Why I am doing this. Why take on all of these strict rules and shoulder such a burden? I am doing this to inspire Americans to live more sustainably. I think the best way to effect positive change is to lead by example, so that is what I'll be doing. I've learned a lot about sustainability over the last few years but there is so much left to learn, and in turn to teach. What better way to do this than to thrust myself into an adventure that explores every nook and cranny of personal sustainability? What better way to inspire sustainability than to be extremely inspired about it myself? And of course it has to be enjoyable and entertaining, too or most people just won't be interested, hence the adventure being a little extreme. At times I will be doing things in an extreme way to draw attention to a core issue. Don't worry — there will always be simple, take-home lessons from the extreme actions, so you won't have to take on something so extreme. For example I'll be cycling across America, which you of course don't have to do — but you could cycle to work or school instead of drive.

I also have a strong desire to live a more Earth-friendly lifestyle, and this adventure is going to help me do just that. I want to live in a manner that is beneficial to the Earth, my community

and myself, and I don't want to cause harm anymore to anyone or anything. The problem is that we have lost touch with our resources. We have outsourced everything, and we don't realize how our actions affect the Earth and everything on it. Our simple daily actions revolving around food, water, energy, waste and transportation are causing all sorts of destruction to the planet and many of the people and creatures on it. We just aren't taught this at school or by the government, or (in most cases) by our parents.

I want to start with the basics and analyze all the details of how my simple daily actions affect my world, both near and far. By creating the guidelines for this adventure I will be forcing myself to pay attention to my surroundings, where the resources I use come from and how they get to me. At the same time I will learn more about how my actions affect the Earth, both negatively and positively. And that's what this book is here to share with you.

So here are all of the guidelines that I set for myself before departing on the adventure, in more detail.

## TRANSPORTATION

I commit to crossing the country on my bicycle using human power only, without the use of fossil fuels. I will not take a ride in a car for any reason, including a broken-down bike, unless my life is seriously threatened. I will not take public transportation and will not even get in an electric vehicle. On my off days I will still not use a vehicle to move my body, not even an escalator, elevator, or moving walkway. Simply put, no fossil fuels will be burned in my transportation.

## FOOD

I will eat locally produced, organic and unpackaged foods and forgo food that has been shipped long distances, was conventionally grown, or is packaged. The food must be local AND organic AND unpackaged, not just one or the other.

## **MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

**DUDE**

**LOCAL** For the purpose of this adventure, locally produced means that the food was grown in the state I am in or within 250 miles of where I purchase it. I will be getting local food directly from farms, gardens, farmers' markets and environmentally conscious grocery stores such as co-ops, and to a lesser extent through hunting, fishing and foraging. (Foraging may sound like a fancy word but if you've ever eaten a wild berry off a bush, you've foraged.) If I buy a food item with multiple ingredients, all of the ingredients have to be local, even the salt.

**ORGANIC** This means that the food was grown naturally without using any chemicals on the plant or in the soil. I do not care about certifications and will simply be taking the word of the grower.

**UNPACKAGED** This means there is no packaging on the food, even if it is recyclable: no paper, no plastic, no cardboard, no tinfoil. I will even avoid fruit stickers. The purpose of this guideline is to not create waste. I can, however, buy food in a reusable package, such as milk in a returnable bottle or eggs in a carton from a farmer. I will also make an exception for some jarred items when I can give the jar to someone who will get good use out of it or give it back to the distributor to be reused.

**WASTED FOOD** The exception to all of these guidelines is food that is going to waste, which I can eat. This primarily means eating food that I find in grocery store dumpsters or trash cans. Other sources of wasted food include table diving (food left on people's plates at restaurants) or food going bad in my host's fridge. I will be very strict in only eating food that was already thrown away or most definitely will be thrown away; if I have any inkling that the food is not in fact going to waste, then I will not eat it. In this way no "helpful" friend can pretend to be not finishing his sandwich and trick me into eating it.



## WATER

I will use water from natural sources and forgo water from municipal systems unless it was being wasted.

Natural sources of water include rivers, lakes, rain, and groundwater. Means of accessing groundwater include wind-powered pumps and artesian wells. When needed I will purify the water I harvest using a Katadyn Pocket filter. I will not use water that has been transported from the source with the use of any resources, such as electricity. This means I will not turn on a faucet, use a shower, use a flush toilet, or wash clothes in a washing machine. Despite these challenges I intend to remain clean, presentable and pleasant-smelling.

Again, the exception to these guidelines is water that is going to waste, which I can use. This waste could come from leaky faucets, water bottles found on the roadside, or broken sprinklers. I will also be bathing and washing my clothes using natural sources of water. For the purpose of keeping track of statistics I will only include water that I actually consume or take away. So for example if I swim in a lake I won't count that as water used.

## ENERGY

I will use electricity generated by portable alternative energy devices and forgo electricity generated by fossil fuels or that has been put into the grid.

I am equipped with Goal Zero solar panels and a PowerPot to generate electricity to charge my laptop, cell phone, bike lights and headlamp. I will not turn on a light switch, plug into an outlet, turn on anything in a house, take a hot shower, use a stove, eat at a restaurant that uses electricity, or use any electronic device powered by electricity, unless it was powered by my alternative energy.

Electricity is so engrained in my daily life that I will really only understand the challenges of this part of the requirement once I have begun the journey. I will likely use some electricity indirectly by walking through automatic doors, accidentally

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triggering automatic lights, buying food with cash registers or getting money at the bank, but I will avoid all these actions wherever possible. I will make an exception with wireless Internet, so that I can connect to social media, contact the media, communicate, etc.; but again, my laptop will be solar-powered.

I will only cook using fires made with wood that I harvest myself.

## **WASTE**

My aim is to create near-zero waste on this adventure. I will do this by following the 3 Rs — reduce, reuse and recycle — in that order. First I will reduce my consumption and needs, then I will reuse what I can, and only after failing to reduce or reuse will I then recycle. What can't be recycled will be considered trash, but both recyclables and trash will be considered waste.

Many of these terms are subjective so I'd like to define them for this adventure.

Waste is both trash and recycling. Any item that needs to be sent to the landfill or a recycling facility is waste. Trash is any item that needs to be sent to the landfill, or ends up becoming litter. Recycling is any item that needs to be sent to a recycling facility (and is actually accepted there; otherwise it's just trash).

You may be surprised that I am including recycling as waste because you've likely been taught that recycling is the green thing to do. But recycling is actually a highly energy- and resource-intensive process, and though it is far superior to sending waste to the landfill, it still has a far greater impact on the environment than not having that item to recycle in the first place. I will be weighing and logging both forms of waste. I will not be throwing away any of the trash I create this summer, but will carry it all the way across the country. So if I purchase something wrapped in non-recyclable plastic, it will be traveling all the way to Vermont with me. In this manner I'll deal with my own burden, which should keep me from creating much trash. I will put recyclable materials into a recycling bin after I've logged their weight.

I am not including food scraps in my waste. I will either bury these in the dirt, throw them under a plant, or put them in a compost pile. In this way the nutrients will be recycled into the earth without using any added resources or energy. I will also be using bokashi to help break down food scraps so they can be absorbed into the earth. Of course I will make sure I don't throw any food scraps in places where the Earth can't put them to good use, such as sidewalks, because that would be littering.

What about human waste — you know, poop and pee? I will not waste it, as it is a valuable resource for the natural world. I will not be using a toilet so you may be dying to ask, “Where will this guy be pooping and peeing?” When I am cycling through nature, which will be often, I will go in the woods or the desert so that the nutrients can be recycled naturally back into the earth. While in cities I will have to be a little more creative; I will be carrying a small portable toilet. I'll use this when needed and bury the waste when I get back into nature.

I would recommend trying nearly everything else discussed in this introduction EXCEPT THIS, unless you have a very sanitary and responsible way of dealing with your waste. At home you can easily set up a composting toilet, but as a traveler this is going to be the most burdensome aspect of creating zero waste.

## CONSUMPTION

I spent many hours preparing for this trip, making sure I will have everything I need for the next three and a half months. So I should not need to buy much besides food. More importantly, though, I intend to reduce my needs greatly to reduce my consumption. When I do need to make purchases I will follow these guidelines to reduce their impact:

- Rather than purchase something I will try to go without it or find a way to repurpose other items, such as finding things in the trash.
- I will purchase used products over new products when possible.

- I will purchase sustainably made products.
- I will buy locally made products from small businesses.
- I will support businesses that are putting serious effort into minimizing their negative impact on the Earth, like those that practice corporate social responsibility and the triple bottom line. These businesses are not operating solely for profit but are also trying to minimize their negative impact on people and the planet in their business operations.
- I will support businesses that are doing their part to make the Earth a better place. Many of the businesses I support will be members of One Percent for the Planet, a growing global movement of over 1,000 companies that donate one percent of their sales to environmental organizations worldwide.
- I will keep the money in the hands of the small businesses by paying with cash. I will not be carrying a credit or debit card so that the bank doesn't get a cut of the transaction. Plus not having a card will reduce my consumption by limiting the funds available to me and keeping the transactions more noticeable, as it's all too easy to swipe a card without visually seeing the money leave my hands.

The previous guidelines were all designed to decrease my negative impact on the Earth and to lead by example in living a more Earth-friendly lifestyle. But I realize one of the best ways to have a happy, healthy Earth is to have a happy, healthy me. So I've also created some guidelines to make myself a better person and lead by example in that area, too. Many of these also decrease my environmental impact, as everything on this Earth is connected whether we realize it or not. And I do not want to focus solely on reducing my impact but also want to increase my positive impact.

I intend to leave each place a little better than I found it and to have a positive impact on the Earth. I will do this by:

- Inspiring and teaching people how to live in harmony

with the Earth, their communities, and themselves. This will be done simply by leading by example.

- Planting seed bombs full of native wildflowers all along my path. These flowers will help the endangered bee populations and beautify the Earth. A seed bomb is a little ball of clay, soil and seeds that you can toss anywhere you want. The seeds are protected within the clay while they wait patiently for the rain (or a sprinkler) to soak them so they can grow into food or flowers.
- Having a positive mindset. Although my actions will speak much louder than my words I strongly believe that my thoughts and my words shape my actions. Because of this I aim to think and speak positively in order to act positively. One way that I will control and monitor my mindset is by giving up swearing and keeping track of how many times I break this rule. Every time I swear I will do ten push-ups and donate \$10 to Below the Surface, a nonprofit that protects America's water supply.
- Living 100-percent alcohol-and drug-free for the entire summer. Although I typically enjoy beer or wine in moderation and occasionally smoke marijuana, I realize that my mind and body perform on a higher level when I am alcohol-and drug-free, so I will not drink or smoke for the entire summer.
- Raising money for One Percent for the Planet nonprofits. I've set a goal of raising \$10,000 for Guitars in the Classroom, Below the Surface, Worldbike, Ioby, Surfrider Foundation San Diego Chapter, Reuse Alliance, Growing Power, Solar Sister, and Community Cycles, so they can carry out their missions of creating a more sustainable planet.
- Practicing natural personal hygiene. You've heard the saying "one Earth" and it's true — this is the only one we've got. Well, what we do to our bodies we are doing to the Earth. To treat my body (and the Earth) with respect I

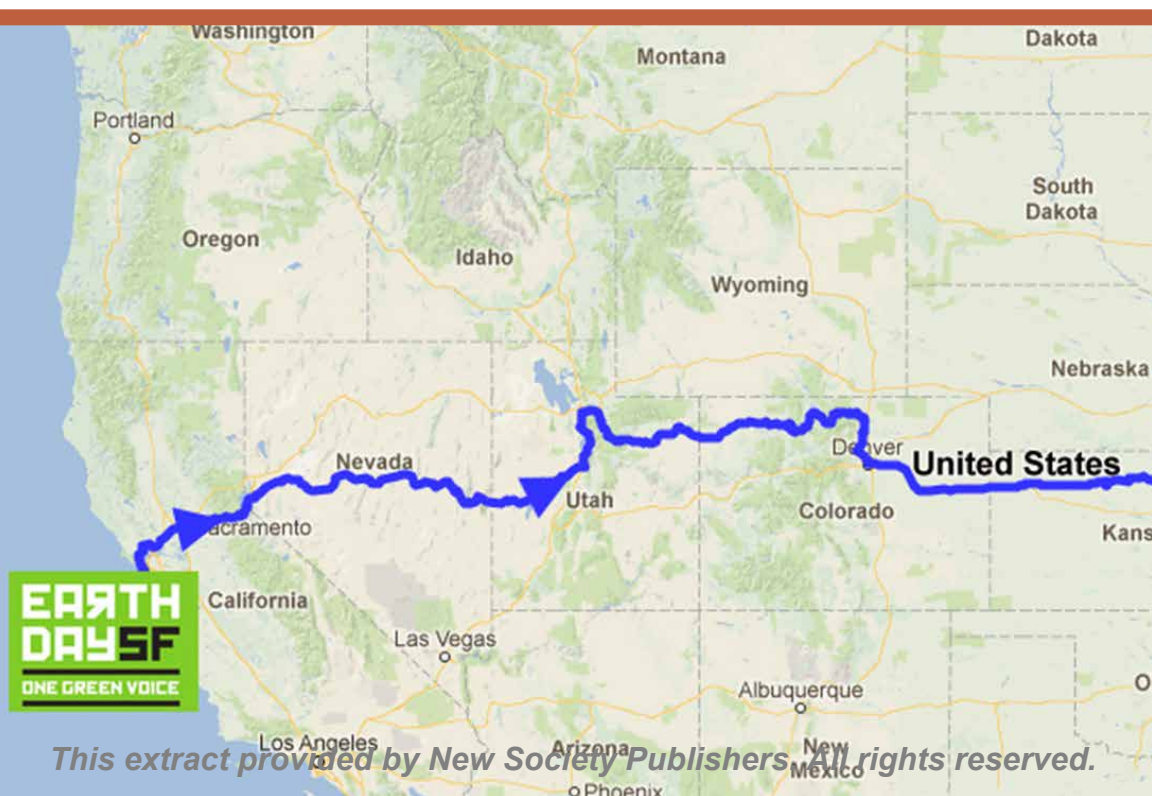
## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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will only put natural things on it and will forgo all chemically derived products. I will only use Dr. Bronner's organic biodegradable soap to wash my body and hands; organic coconut oil to moisturize; and natural toothpaste and essential oils for cleaning as well as scent. I will not use any body-care products that contain synthetic chemicals or petroleum-based ingredients.

All of these guidelines are self-created and self-imposed: I conjured them up, and only I can hold myself to them. You will see that I really took on some extreme challenges. You may also see that at times I overlooked certain aspects of the guidelines and did not always succeed in following them. I was, however, transparent with my successes and failures throughout the journey. I recorded every instance when I broke or bent one of the guidelines and kept statistics wherever they could be kept.

The journey was set to start in San Francisco, California on April 20, 2013 and end at the One Percent for the Planet headquarters in Waitsfield, Vermont on August 1, 2013, after 104 days of riding. So that I could plan events and media, I had a pretty

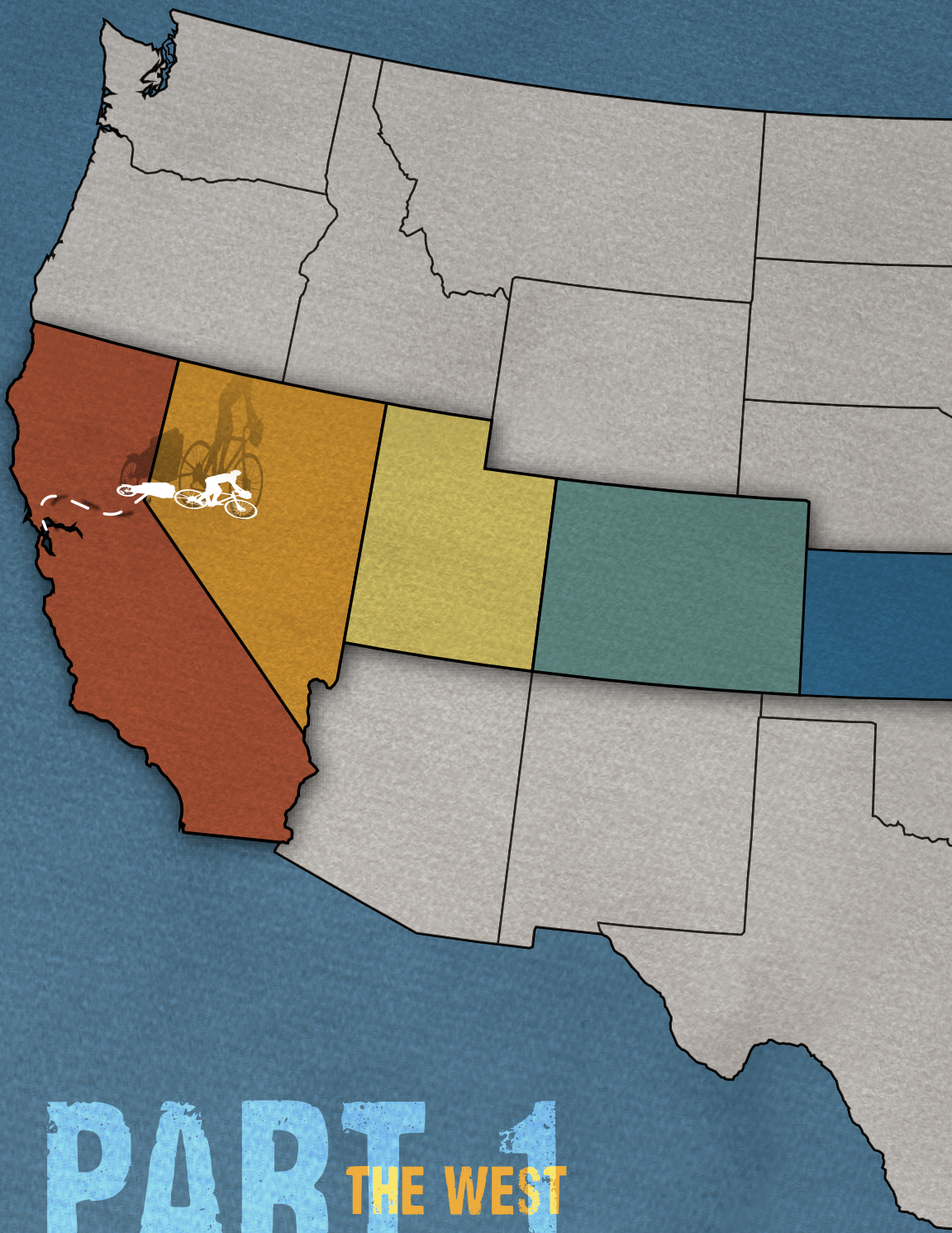




solid route and schedule, but had left some flexibility across the great expanses of land. I planned to travel mostly via local highways and roads, avoiding the interstates whenever possible. I wasn't alone — my friend Brent, whose two favorite things in life are cycling and photography, was tagging along, videoing the whole adventure. We were planning to create a documentary out of the journey.

This book is a journal of my adventure. I wrote about my experiences most nights — in my tent, on a picnic table, or from the couch or bed I was sleeping in — and posted each day's story straight onto my blog and Facebook page. What follows is an edited version of that blog. By "edited," I mean that I have had a chance to correct my grammar, cut repetition and add factual information. But for the most part I have not altered the feelings I expressed on my journey or changed my thoughts to reflect new perspectives I may have developed in the two years since. This is the 104-day journey as I experienced it: the highs and lows, the successes and failures and, always, the truth.



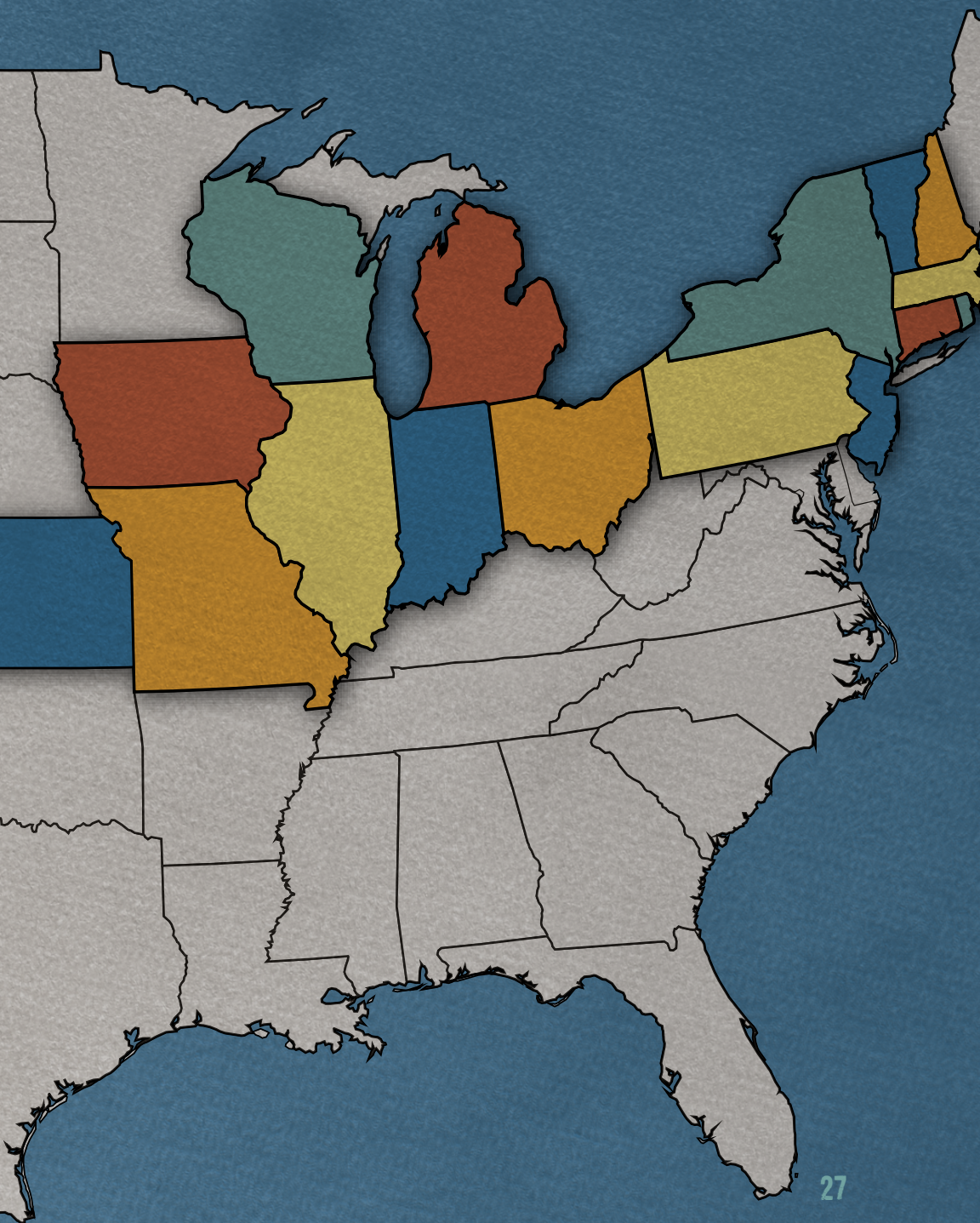


# PART 1

## THE WEST

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## **DAY 1: TRAPPED IN SAN FRANCISCO**

Today was the day. The months of brainstorming and countless hours of planning were at an end, and it was time to finally put it all into action.

Upon awakening I took a shower, the last I'd be taking until I reached Vermont in 104 days. Then I made plans to stock up on food and water. My host, Meghan Lipsett, was a huge help here. She directed me to a nearby farmers' market that is well known for its bounty of local, organic food as well as Lake Temescal, a small lake 2.5 miles east in Oakland. This would also provide me an opportunity to test out the trailer on the bike.

So Brent and I headed to the lake with high hopes. But just a mile from the house the trailer started rubbing really hard on the frame. I adjusted the set-up and was able to make it to the lake and fill up my three-gallon jug with water, but the little five-mile roundtrip adventure took two and a half hours.

Back at the house I knew I had to drop some weight to make this manageable so I spent a good amount of time going through my gear getting rid of things I did not need. I took out about ten pounds of gear including the blender and fishing pole. Meghan kindly stocked me up with locally produced olive oil, honey, rice, beans and produce from the Berkeley market.

By 4 p.m., way behind schedule, I finally headed into San Francisco to the official launch point, the Earth Day festival in Civic Center Park. I got onto the BART knowing this would be the last time I stepped foot in a fossil fuel-powered vehicle for 4,700 miles. At the festival I was invited onto the stage to speak for a minute. I spent the next few hours talking to many of the good people out celebrating Earth Day and was now even further behind schedule.

At 6 p.m. I began the journey. But as I pedaled up the ridiculously steep hills of San Francisco it fully sank in that this trailer would not do the job; it was way too heavy and was throwing the tire off kilter, making it rub on the frame. We spent about two hours biking up and down the steep hills of San Francisco



and only made it about four miles. Much of the two hours was spent pushing the bike up hills too steep to ride and trying to put the rear wheel back on after it had been pulled off by the weight of the trailer.



Pushing the bicycle up the steep hills of San Francisco.  
Notice the rear wheel is not even touching the ground.

It was obvious we weren't making it out of the city that night so Brent got ahold of a buddy from a past bike ride, and we crashed at his house. I had my solar light set up as I lay in bed charging my laptop with energy stored from the day's sun, so I was successful at remaining off the grid. A few hours earlier, around 9 p.m., I had a huge pit in my stomach and was questioning how I was going to make this happen. We came up with some solutions, and it looks like we will spend tomorrow in the city setting up a new rig.

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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It's not a question of if I will make this work, only a matter of how. I've had some moments of doubt and some moments of worry but right now I feel joyful and confident.

### DAY 2: A NEW TRAILER

Upon awaking I got online and found a better bike trailer on Craigslist for \$160 just three miles away. This was exactly what I needed, for the right price, just down the street! I called the number from the ad and he got back to me right away saying the trailer is still available. Score!

So I rode over there and picked up the trailer. It fit on my bike perfectly, and I was on my way home trailing it behind me in no time. I had a lot of work to do though so we decided to not rush things too much and leave tomorrow morning after a full day of reconfiguring everything. I had to figure out how to mount the solar panel, which I accomplished fairly easily. The harder part was dropping more weight, and a serious amount of it, if I wanted to bike out of San Francisco, let alone over the mountains, which were just a few days ahead.

I laid out everything on our host's garage floor and chose what I didn't need. The biggest thing I ditched was the 28-pound battery. I'll have to get a smaller battery to charge my laptop, but for now I'll still have the small kit to charge my cell phone. I also ditched my three-gallon jug, deciding to carry no more than one and a half gallons at a time. Those two changes alone add up to 40 pounds.

Sorting through my gear in search of stuff to send home to lose weight in the trailer.



I remembered two things today that let a load of stress off my back. First, I am allowed to eat from the garbage, so if I can't find local organic unpackaged foods I have that to fall back on. Second, I can find water bottles in garbage cans, in the gutter, etc. and purify it. So if there isn't a natural body of water nearby I can scour for water in that way.

I'm definitely behind schedule, but with this lighter load we will jam over to Tahoe.

### DAY 3: THE ADVENTURE BEGINS (AGAIN)

We took off from San Francisco around 9 a.m. and headed north to the Golden Gate Bridge. The new trailer pulled along nicely, and I could tell this new setup would be manageable.

North of the bridge navigation was pretty tough and we spent a good portion of the afternoon making wrong turns. Food consisted of drinking honey straight from the jar and fruits and veggies I still had left from the Berkeley farmers' market.

After a couple of hours we started to make good time. When we hit Highway 37 we had a fun half hour dodging thousands of honeybees in wine country. Towards evening I saw a sign for fresh eggs and stopped in at a farm. Fresh eggs indeed. I cracked them right open into my mouth for some good protein.

Now for those of you who just cringed at the idea of eating raw eggs, let me explain. The odds of being exposed to salmonella from raw eggs are extremely low. How low? About one in 20,000. So if I ate a raw egg every single day of my life it would take 20,000 days — nearly 55 years — for me to begin defying the odds. Then you have to take into account that I've got a healthy immune system and salmonella doesn't fare too well in healthy individuals, so even if I do ingest the bacterium, the odds are I'll fight it off. Here's where it gets even better though. The one-in-20,000 statistic is for eggs produced by the industrial farming system, which come from hens that live their entire lives in tiny cages. These are the eggs you'll find on your average grocery store shelf. Studies have shown that *all* of the egg recalls for