

Tips for doing the Seattle to Portland (STP) in two days: What I learned in 2007

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Raymond Chen

Two weekends ago, I participated in the 28th annual [Seattle to Portland bicycle ride](#), wherein I joined up with 8999 of my closest friends for a friendly ride through western Washington and Oregon. Earlier this year [I provided tongue-in-cheek bad advice for preparing for STP](#). Today I restore the balance with proper advice. This was my first STP, and I was somewhat apprehensive over whether I was up to the task, since I had never ridden more than 60 miles in a day prior to this. Here are some notes I'm recording for the benefit of future generations, since I couldn't find much in the way of this type of advice on the Web. (Note: These remarks apply to two-day riders. I refer one-day riders to [Eric Gunnerson's STP 2006 blog](#). Obligatory disclaimers: Every person is different. These tips may not work for you. Consult your doctor before starting a major exercise program. Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.) **It's not as hard as you think.** Sure, it may be longer than you've ever ridden before, but if you're like me, your training rides were 50 to 60 miles without any significant break. In that sense, STP is easier than a training ride, since STP has a rest area every 15 miles or so. It's not really two 100-mile rides; it's more like a dozen short rides. **It's an endurance ride, not a race.** If you're like me, your usual bicycling is done at a decent clip, 16–18 mph on level ground. When I told one of my colleagues that I was wiped out from a 60-mile ride and he learned that I went 17–19 mph on the flats, he was horrified. *Riding fast is the wrong strategy for STP.* Keep it down to 13–14 mph. If you find yourself exerting, then you're going too fast, because you won't be able to keep it up the whole way. It turns out that if you're used to going 16–18 mph all the time, then going 14 mph takes almost no effort at all. You can do it all day without even breathing hard. And that's the idea. **Watch your pit time.** As with auto racing, the amount of time you spend in pit stops is important. Although our group managed an average speed of around 13.3 mph on the first day, we also hung around for over four hours at the various rest stops, stretching that first 125-mile leg into a grueling 13½-hour day. (That's right, we had more downtime than [this guy](#), and at the end of the day, he was in Portland!) Some of our extended stops were triggered by mechanical troubles, but others were just dawdling, or at least they felt like dawdling to me; perhaps the others in the group really needed the break time. If you've been moderating your pace per the previous tip, you might very well not be tired at all and need only stop for a bathroom break and a water refill. Besides, if you stop for too long, your muscles may start to stiffen. A lot of short breaks

is better than a small number of long ones. **You don't have to stop at every mini-stop.** Stop at the major stops, but if you feel fine when you reach a mini-stop and don't need a water refill, then just keep going. This is just a special case of the previous tip, where the pit time is zero. My colleague who had a suboptimal training regimen told me that he had to take frequent breaks, and when he got back on the road, he found himself passing the same person each time. (Said person was easy to recognize because he was riding a Razor Scooter. I experienced the same thing in reverse on this ride: I would recognize the same person passing me over and over.) It's the tortoise vs hare. If you go too fast, you'll need to take a long break to recover, and you end up going no faster overall than the person who goes slower but takes shorter breaks. **One slow leg isn't the end of the world.** Even if it looks like you got dropped by the rest of your group, it's not as bad as it looks. At one point, a subset of our group wanted to do a fast leg, and off they went. I stayed back with the rest of the group, but lost track of them in the crowd. I assumed the others were ahead of me, so I picked up the pace a bit and was able to sustain 17–18 mph without any real effort. (It's easy to go fast on Highway 507 between Spanaway and Roy.) Eventually, I caught up with the fast group and realized that I had left the main group behind. I pulled over and waited for the others to catch up. They did, six minutes later. This was over about two thirds of the leg, so the total difference between a fast pace and a relaxed pace on a single leg is just ten minutes. Being ten minutes late isn't the end of the world. **It's not your legs that will hurt.** Your legs will be fine, since you won't be pushing yourself much at all. What will hurt are your hands and butt. (And for me on the first day, my toes, since I didn't lace up well and my toes rubbed against the inside of my shoe.) Vary your hand and seat position to shift the weight to different parts of your body. At the start of the day, you applied butt cream, but since you don't know where it's going to hurt yet, you kind of covered everything and hoped for the best. Towards the end of the first day, you'll start to figure out where you *should've* applied it. Pull over and apply butt cream to the trouble spots. Yes, you may look like you're getting a bit too familiar with yourself standing by the side of the road with your hand in your pants, but everybody else going past you will say "ah, reapplying butt cream" and not "what a pervert", because by this point, they're probably thinking of doing the same thing. (Note: Attempt only along isolated country roads. In populated areas, seek a private place like a rest room.) **Get your bike ready early.** Don't think you can get your bike tuned up with only a month before STP; the local bike shops will be hammered with people who got the same brilliant idea. Also, don't make major changes to your set-up, like a new saddle, a new handlebar configuration, or (heaven forbid) a new bike! It takes a while to adapt to a new configuration, and you don't want to ride STP while you're still adjusting to the new saddle. Other quick tips:

- Bring your bicycle mirror. Saves you from having to turn your head to see what's behind you. Use it to make sure you're not pulling away from the rest of your group, to wait for a break in traffic so you can pass somebody, or to spot the car approaching from behind. If you turn your head, you stop riding straight, and you slow down. I broke my mirror at the start of Day Two, and life was significantly more difficult.

- Bring a bell. You can ding your bell to announce your presence instead of having to shout “On your left!” all the time. You can also ring your bell to celebrate crossing the finish line.
- Remove your bicycle computer when you finish so it doesn’t count your post-race puttering.
- If you are into performance statistics, you can bring a digital camera (or use the one built into your phone) and take a picture as you arrive at each stop, and again as you leave. The timestamp on the photo combined with the mileage on the route map will let you compute your average speed for each leg, as well as calculating how much time you spent resting. If you don’t trust the mileage on the route map, you can take a picture of your bike computer to record split statistics for posterity. If your phone doesn’t have a camera, you can leave yourself a voicemail message saying, for example, “Arrived at Seward Park, mileage 10.8.” The voicemail system will automatically timestamp the message.
- If you’re a guy and you just need to make a tinkle, then check out the line for the “men-only” portable toilets; it is often shorter.

You may not need (but since you can toss it in your luggage, it probably won’t hurt to bring anyway):

- Book, deck of cards, or other light entertainment. I brought a book and didn’t even crack it open, I was so tired. (On top of that, we overnighted in a high school, so there were plenty of books in the library to choose from.)
- Disposable fork, knife, spoon, cup. The people who serve you dinner will immediately notice when they run out of plates, but they are less likely to notice right away that they ran out of utensils and cups. If you bring your own, you won’t be stuck standing there for five minutes with a plate of food and no way to eat it.
- Pillowcase. Wadded-up clothes + pillowcase = pillow.
- Sleeping mask. You may want to go to sleep before Nature decides to turn off the lights.

Okay, those are the tips. Trip report begins next time.

Nitpicker’s corner: Numbers have been rounded for simplicity of presentation.

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