



Photos courtesy Paul Haddad

This local cyclist provides you with some Southern California training you need to cycle Hawaii

By Paul Haddad

A couple summers ago, my friend Tom Melgun and I boxed up our bicycles, flew off to Ireland and pedaled 350 miles to explore the Emerald Isle. Though it rained almost every day, it didn't dampen our appreciation of the scenery and the people, not to mention our sudden fondness for Murphy's Stout and bangers and mash. Ireland is marked by gently rolling hills, with few exceeding 2,000 feet. It's like a greener version of L.A.'s Santa Monica Mountains.

For our next touring ride, we wanted to take it to another level — we wanted to feel the burn in our thighs, the endorphin-fueled rushes of exhilaration, all in a setting that would inspire awe. It seemed like a tall order, but we found the answer in the Big Island of Hawaii. With spectacular scenery, volcanic terrain and mild temperatures year round, the Big Island offers excellent riding conditions for intermediate riders looking for that next challenge.

If you bike at least once a week, you're already halfway toward conquering the Big Island. All you need to do is incorporate a few more climbs into your rides. One of the advantages of living in Southern California is the number of hills we have to choose from. Both Los Angeles and Ventura counties offer a host of rides that replicate elevations on the Big Island, where it seems like you're always going up or down. The more you can simulate Hawaii's conditions here, the fewer surprises you'll have when you tackle its 240-mile loop.

First, you'll need to set aside 10 days (including travel) to complete the ride. You can actually circumnavigate the island in five or six days, but you'll want to give yourself extra time for side-trips and just chillin'. The good thing about Hawaii is that the temperature hardly varies more than five degrees year round. I went in December, and the mercury averaged about 72.

Once you settle on a date for the trip, you'll want to pick up a book for your training. "Touring the Los Angeles Area by Bicycle"



NEXT STEP: Paul Haddad, left, and his friend Tom Melgun, above, trained throughout the Los Angeles area preparing for eight days of impressive Hawaiian cycling and sights.

by Peter Powers is my bible for training rides in the L.A. area, and it's small enough to fit into the pouch under your seat.

All cyclists have a training regimen that works best for them, but I found it useful to break mine down into three stages — casual, intense and hardcore. Pretty scientific, huh?

I spent nearly six weeks in each stage, about four months before leaving for Hawaii. A typical ride in the casual stage involved a 35-mile or 40-mile ride with a 500-foot gain once a week. A particular favorite of mine was a ride in Westlake listed in Powers' book. It starts on Potrero Road, heads past Lake Sherwood and Westlake, then winds through Thousand Oaks before looping back.

To mix it up, other weeks I shortened my ride to 30 miles but increased my gains to 1,000 or 1,500 feet. There's a great ride in Malibu that starts on Pacific Coast Highway, winds up Topanga Canyon and Old Topanga, then returns to PCH via Las Virgenes Road. Not surprisingly, the more stimulating the environment, the more I pushed myself. If you can appreciate the oak-laden beauty of the Malibu hills with its horse ranches and ocean views, imagine how floored you'll be when cycling around a tropical paradise.

The Big Island has three different cycling trips with at least 2,000-foot gains, so you'll want to get a few of those under your belt. As such, my goal in my intense stage was to find 40-mile rides with 2,000-foot hills, mixed in with some 50-mile rides with 1,500-foot

hills. For the former, I found myself returning to the Malibu hills, starting at PCH for a ride along the crest of Mulholland Drive and Mulholland Highway. Another challenging but fun ride is to start in Ventura, pedal up the long incline to Ojai, then loop back to Ventura. In this stage, you'll want to start riding on back-to-back days whenever possible. Typically, I would hit the hills on Saturday, then opt for a less hilly but longer ride on Sunday.

With just six weeks left before the Big Island journey, I jumped into my hardcore stage, trying to get in two rides on the weekend and one during the week. It's a good idea to install your front and rear bike racks at this point and stuff your panniers (saddlebags)

Cycling in the rain can actually be an oddly liberating experience.

with clothes so you can get used to riding with the added weight. Be forewarned: one of your rides in Hawaii will include a mega-hill: 4,000 feet of continuous incline. Not to worry. By now you're ready to tackle the San Gabriel Mountains, which offer dozens of runs varying in elevation from 2,000 feet to 4,000 feet.

For me, the crown jewel of them all was a journey to Magic Mountain. Not Magic Mountain, the amusement park, but the real Magic Mountain. I stumbled upon this route flipping through county maps. The out-and-back ride begins at Sierra Highway and Placerita Canyon in Santa Clarita. Starting at an elevation of 1,200 feet, take Placerita Canyon east to Sand Canyon Road. Head south on Sand Canyon, then go left on Santa Clara Divide Road (route 3N17), which takes you to the 4,878-foot summit of Magic Mountain, a desolate place that feels like it's on top of the world with a 360-degree vista. Congratulations — you've just climbed 3,700 feet in 15.8 miles, and it didn't even cost you \$43 like the amusement park. Now you're ready to conquer the Big Island.

Here's the tricky part: How much to pack? My rule of thumb is to pack for half the number of days you'll be gone. If it's eight days, pack for four. You can wash your clothes at the halfway point. Don't forget to throw in some sturdy hiking shoes and swimwear. After all, you're in Hawaii — if you don't work in some hiking and snorkeling, it'd be like visiting Paris and not seeing the Eiffel Tower.

Also, be prepared to get wet, especially on the eastern end of the island. Hilo is one of the rainiest cities in the United States at 140 inches a year. I found it useful to line my panniers with plastic bags since rain tends to soak through the canvas. In addition, I stored all valuables in waterproof pouches and put nutrition bars and snacks in a latched metal container. Other essentials include a raincoat, long cycling pants and shoe protectors, which slide over your shoes to keep your feet dry.

We usually don't worry about rain in Southern California, but believe it or not cycling in the rain can actually be an oddly liberating experience. You can blaze through a downpour knowing you'll have dry clothes to put on and a dry book to read at the end of the day.

After dismantling your pedals, racks and handlebars, you'll want to find a sturdy box in which to ship your bicycle from the mainland. I have a permanent bike box that I purchased from Crate Works (crateworks.com) a few years ago that has held up great.

After switching planes in Honolulu, Tom and I flew into Hilo and got ready for our first day. The hotel we stayed at, Uncle Billy's,

PARADISE: On the first day of the trip, Melgun rides through the majestic Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden.

agreed to store our bike boxes and suitcases for no charge while we circled the island. There's another hotel in Hilo, Arnott's, that caters specifically to bikers and hikers and offers a variety of outdoor packages for the budget-minded. There are also companies that offer cycle-tour groups, though I always find the self-reliant approach more appealing — you can travel at your own pace, find your own way around and fix your own flats. For navigational purposes, you should be fine with good maps and a book called "Cycling Hawaii" by Jeff Baldwin.

You have the choice of traveling clockwise or counterclockwise on your trip, but some folks prefer clockwise because they feel you get more favorable winds, which can get pretty intense. We chose counterclockwise mainly because we wanted the ocean to our right, and

because we didn't feel like climbing 4,000 feet on our first day, which is what we would have encountered riding south out of Hilo.

Our first leg of the trip was from Hilo to Honoka'a, a 51-mile trek up Highway 19 that included side trips to breathtaking Akaka Falls as well as Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden, a wonderland of giant ferns and streams that felt right out of Land of the Lost. After a \$35 stay at a hotel in Honoka'a, we set out for Waimea, home to the largest privately owned ranch in the country.

We decided to get off the main highway and take a back road called Mamalahoa. A sign warned "road closed ahead" due to a washed-out bridge, but a local assured us that it was repaired enough to walk a bike across. This reminded us that it's always a good idea to talk to residents about conditions of alternate routes.

As we passed over the damaged bridge we entered a different Hawaii. Lush rainforest gave way to rolling green hills and lots of cattle, and the air felt warmer.

In Waimea, we were told to expect gusty conditions and a narrow shoulder for our ride to Kona. The first 25 miles were downhill. To our right was the blue Pacific, to our left was snowcapped Mauna Kea. (At 13,796 feet, we chose not to make it part of our trip.) The final 25 miles were mostly flat along the coast, but we ran into an excruciating 20-mph headwind. What a relief to roll into Kona that afternoon.

Known for its diving, we spent the next day in Kona and headed to Kahalulu Bay. The snorkeling was excellent, as I mingled with



needlefish, unicornfish and half a dozen giant green sea turtles.

The next day we wanted to get an early start, knowing we had about 3,000 feet of ascents and 56 miles before our next stop. There are no bike shops between Kona and the return to Hilo, so we made sure our bikes were in good shape for the rest of the ride. Much of the road on the west side of the island goes through old lava flows, basically rivers of hardened, black magma. Road signs indicate the year of each flow. We crashed that night in the township of Na'alehu, which declares itself the southernmost city in the U.S.

Our fifth day of riding was the one that I warned you about — from sea level to 4,024 feet. The ride is essentially a 35-mile grade up the slope of a volcano. But hey, if you've already conquered the more rigorous Magic Mountain back home, this is cake.

After a day at the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, we finished up with an easy 26-mile glide back to Hilo, completing our journey in eight days (including days off in Kona and at the volcano park). With our side trips, we had pedaled 284 miles.

It was nice to be able to cycle in a casual island atmosphere with an efficient American infrastructure. The two main highways — 11 and 19 — that make up the loop are in excellent shape, comparable to two-lane mountain roads here like Mulholland Drive. Drivers are courteous and the locals are friendly, eager to offer advice and places to see. If we had listened to them, we would've been there at least another week. And because the island is so big, most of your ride is spent with nature, not tourists. <<

— Paul Haddad enjoys cycling when he's not writing and producing television. For his next trip, he is thinking of tackling New Zealand.

