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# Georgia on their behinds

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By Michael A. Schwarz, USA TODAY

Participants pedal near Braselton, about two-thirds into the 406-mile route stretching from Dalton to Augusta. The ride ended June 17.

By Adell Crowe, USA TODAY

COMMERCE, Ga. — Day Six. It's 86 degrees and no shade on the road in mid-June. Charles Wright, 35, of Fort Worth, is in the lowest gear on his bicycle, slowly climbing another long hill outside town. His sons are on the bike, adding more weight than pedaling power. Five-year-old J.D is on the second seat of the tandem; Trey, 8, is on an attached two-wheel trail-a-bike.

Wright crests the top and announces, "Our specialty is downhill." The three assume a racer's crouch as they take off. "This is great," Wright says, clearly enjoying having his sons along. "I did this bike ride three years ago but got too lonely for my family. I decided not to do it again until they were big enough to come with me."

The Wrights are part of the annual Bike Ride Across Georgia (BRAG), the perfect family vacation, says ride director Jerry Colley, 62, of Atlanta. "If you can put up with a little discomfort."

After all, it's a well-organized week-long party on wheels with \$6 to \$10 all-you-can-eat meals, family-oriented movies nightly, and mile after mile of bucolic scenery that doesn't require a drop of gas to see.

But it's also a week of long lines for showers and porta-potties, sleeping on school gym floors or football fields alongside hundreds of snoring strangers, and pedaling up and down the hills of Georgia in 90-degree heat.

"You have to be able to roll with the flow," Colley says. "If you can, you aren't going to find a cheaper or more fun family vacation."

Of the 1,550 Lycra-clad cyclists — median age 42 — who roll (mostly uphill) with the flow, only around 30 can't take the miles or heat or hills. They are plucked from the road by BRAG support wagons. The others either make the full 406-mile

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Details: [cyclenorthcarolina.org](http://cyclenorthcarolina.org)

**Bicycle Ride Across Tennessee**

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**Dates:** Sept. 17-23 (with an option to make it 10 days).  
**Route:** 400 miles from Blanding to Cedar City.  
**Cost:** \$695  
**Details:** [lagbrau.com](http://lagbrau.com)

journey from Dalton in the Alps of North Georgia to Augusta in the rolling hills of the southeast part of the state (the route changes each year) or they jump in for a day or two along the way.

Now in its 27th year, BRAG, like GOBA (the Great Ohio Bicycle Adventure) and BRAN (Bicycle Ride Across Nebraska), is one of many offspring of the nation's oldest, biggest and longest daily state distance ride, RAGBRAI, *The Des Moines Register's* Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa. The Boston Marathon of biking events, it was started by a couple of reporters back in 1973 and has spawned dozens of similar rides around the country.

BRAG volunteers set the routes, paint arrows on pavement and post signs. Colley says each route is biked "at least 15 times" before the ride. Cyclists in Georgia pay a \$195 registration fee and receive a packet with careful descriptions for each route: "Begin 1.2 mile serious crime, I mean climb" or "nails seen recently." (And they are still there.)

The riders generally fall into three groups. A good percentage have Lance-like buns of steel and zip through the routes (this year, an average 61 miles a day) by noon. Their reward is to help unload the two trailer-trucks filled with luggage, then nap. For others, it's more leisurely.

"Hey, we're not the last ones in," says Cindy Durham, 48, of Deltona, Fla., who is doing her first BRAG with her sister Denise Neighbours, 42, of Lake Helen, Fla., and rolling in by mid-afternoon.

**Accommodations vary**

The early birds also tend to travel light. They don't bother with a tent, preferring just an air mattress or a sleeping bag and a square of an air-conditioned gym or hallway to put it on. In the

pecking order of comfort, they are the minimalists. Dana Jones, 50, of Decatur, Ga., is one. He is quite happily planted by the door and air conditioning vent in Commerce High School. "Way too hot outside," he says.

Next are those who bring their own tents and face a half-hour of pole planting right after the ride and camp breaking in the morning darkness.

Then there are the campers who pay retired St. Louis policeman Bubba Barron for his "Pampered Pedalers" service (slogan: "It's all good."). He provides tents with air mattresses, clean towels, soft drinks and a chair. "Everything I wanted when I was doing my cross-country ride," he explains.

A few riders are met at the stops with spouses in luxury motor homes. Another small group opts for hotels.

But the mattress, the route, even the ride is inconsequential for many.

"Heck, I can ride my bike at home," says Wayne Nelms, 59, of Warne, N.C.

It's the scenery, the towns, the food and entertainment, and, most of all, the people that bring the same cyclists back year after year.

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This year the ride begins in Dalton ("Carpet Center of the World"), with stops in Cartersville and Jasper ("Marble Capital of the World"); two nights and a rest day in Gainesville ("Poultry Capital of the World"); Commerce; Washington (home of *American Idol*'s Carrie Underwood); and ends in Augusta.

To beat the heat, most riders start out at first light. The sounds of tent zippers and yawns easily penetrate gel ear plugs, so no alarms are needed. "Used to be people started around 8 a.m.," says BRAG veteran Winston Greene, 59, of Jonesboro, Ga., who would have preferred to sleep in. "Now it's earlier and earlier, with folks out by 5:30 a.m."

### Excitement rolls into town

North Georgia is picturesque country, especially when the morning mist hovers over the hayfields and the road shoulders of red clay. Ten Commandment yard signs, garden statuary, old appliances, pines, sweet gums and tulip poplars dot the landscape, and the honeysuckle is heavy.



But a quick change in wind direction makes a big difference. Dairy farms smell, but chicken farms stink, especially in the mid-afternoon heat. And for some reason, snakes, squirrels and raccoons seem to meet their fates toward the tops of hills, where the pedaling is slower and the stench lingers.

This year, the smaller the town, the bigger the fuss they make over the riders. In tiny Jasper, with a population of 2,167 ("We don't even have a Wal-Mart," says Chamber of Commerce volunteer Paula Rummell), the town closes Main Street and throws a party for the riders with cloggers,

a country band and gospel singers. Dan Huth (who was game warden Ed Dennis on the '60's show *Flipper*) acts as master of ceremonies.

One business right on the route benefits from the heat. Mayfield Dairy offers generous-sized \$1 ice cream cones at its Brazelton plant and makes a cool \$1,500 in one day when the riders sweep through. Favorite flavors: Blueberry Cream Pie and Extreme Moose Tracks.

Food on BRAG is cheap and plentiful. The Special Olympics of Georgia, which is a sponsor of the ride, provides fruit, peanut butter and Powerade at stops averaging 10 miles apart. Mama Raphael's, a mom-and-pop food service run by Raphael and Tuan Gugliotta, dishes up breakfast burritos, grits and oatmeal each morning for \$6.25.

"I designed this burrito to be the perfect breakfast for cyclists," Raphael says. "Simple sugars, fats and carbohydrates, and the mushrooms provide trace minerals."

At night, school booster clubs usually serve up \$8 to \$10 buffets. In Jasper the riders eat 200 pounds of pork barbecue and 200 pieces of chicken the school brings in from BubBaQ's. Riders also can take community-provided shuttle buses to restaurants in the towns.

And more than 200 riders pay \$25 for all the Café Campesino fair-trade coffee they can drink.

"The last thing you want to do is go out for a ride without a good cup of coffee," says Campesino's Geoffrey Hennies of the Americus, Ga.-based company.

As a group, BRAG participants are a happy, helpful crowd. If someone stops for a swig from the water bottle or to check the route map, every single passing rider will ask if help is needed. It's offered freely along with advice on the type of tools one should carry and the bike one should ride. (Don't bring a heavy, fat-tired mountain bike for a road tour.)

"Bicyclists are quiet people, individualists not into team sports," says David Stromberg, 64, of Marietta, Ga., on his fifth BRAG.

Not all are quiet. Dale Louque of Gramercy, La., lets out a bellowing Tarzan yell whenever he leaves camp or a rest stop, "just to let my friends know I'm leaving." And not all like to be alone. Joe Ninky, 37, of Sebastian, Fla., can't bear to leave Luckie, his 4½-year-old, 77-pound Labrador at home, so she rides in a sidecar the whole trip.

And then there are the guys from Team Occisus Via. That's "almost Latin for road kill," says Bennie Watson, 50, of Milledgeville, Ga., on his 14th BRAG. Team members drape road kill with a strand or two of Mardi Gras beads.

"It was a big year for skunks," Watson says. "We usually don't see any, and this year we saw three."

The group also decorates its campsite with Christmas lights and, in Commerce, decorates a hillside with a cluster of plastic pink flamingos on their sides below a sign warning, "Caution: Bird Flu."

"It's a great way to meet people," Watson says.

Just like BRAG itself.

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