



Clients ride at their own pace and can stop to sample wine.

Gear Up for Wine Country

Backroads takes clients sipping and cycling through Sonoma and Napa Valley

by VALERIE CHEN

I THINK I CAN, I THINK I CAN,” I CHANTED in my head, wiping off the sweat from my brow with one hand and switching gears with the other.

I was on a California Wine Country cycling trip through Napa Valley and Sonoma with Backroads, and I had just clocked in mile No. 16 of the day’s ride. My legs felt jelly-like, and the thought of idly imbibing a crisp chardonnay or an oaky merlot felt far more seductive than the monstrous hill looming before me.

Temptation overcame me when a sign announced that Twomey Cellars, a Calistoga winery, was around the corner. With a new friend made on the trip, I turned off the road into the winery’s parking lot, locked up my bike and strolled right in, helmet and all. Then, sidling up

to the bar, I ordered a set of tastings — proper hydration can come in many forms — and several clinks later, we hit the road to ride out the day’s remaining 15 miles.

An array of mileage options is always available on the trip’s itinerary; for example, one day might include up to five courses, starting at the Robert Young Winery route of 27 miles, with a 1,500-foot elevation gain, all the way up to the Wine Country Century route, which includes 100 miles and up to 4,700 feet in elevation.

Despite 21 cyclists of varying skill and experience levels comprising our ragtag group, not once did I feel rushed or crowded. We would holler words of encouragement as we took turns whizzing past each other, and meals were enjoyed in

each other’s company. We also gathered at select wineries, such as Napa’s hilltop Artesa Winery, to sample varietals and admire the rolling views.

But, most of the time, it was just me and the glorious open road.

KC Hoppe, marketing partnerships manager for Backroads, stresses the need for travel agents to explain this aspect to clients.

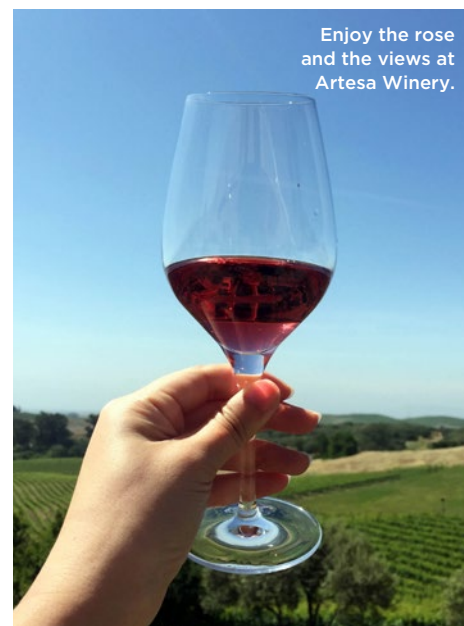
“The biggest misconception is that it’s a group ride, and you’re following a leader,” Hoppe said. “Guests have their own set of maps and directions, and they can go at their own pace — it’s not a packed ride or a race.”

That independence is delivered with a cushy side of high-end service. Each trip has at least two leaders playing multiple roles: good-natured

BIKE TOURS



Guests spend a night at Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa.



Enjoy the rose and the views at Artesa Winery.



Many renowned wineries line each day's cycling routes.

host, talented chef, bike mechanic, educated guide, fellow cyclist and morale-booster, among others. A third Backroads employee drives a second van, which serves as a shuttle for those who could use a break, as well as a transport van for luggage and any heavy wine purchases. (Backroads has also recently updated its policy to add a fourth leader on trips that have reached the maximum number of guests.)

In addition to a titanium bike, a helmet, water bottles, a rear rack, a trunk bag (that can hold up to three bottles of wine), daily snacks for the road and other essentials, guests receive a daily paper map to supplement a Garmin Edge Explore 1000, a GPS system that rolled out for Backroads trips earlier this year. The GPS clips onto each bike and offers guided instructions and the ability to track trip mileage. Also this year, Backroads is offering

the complimentary choice of an electric-assist bike instead of a manual bike (only available for North America, Europe and Hawaii tours). Other upgrades, such as a lightweight wheelset or use of a tandem bicycle, cost extra.

The active tour operator, based in nearby Berkeley, has even more in its wheelhouse. Set against a backdrop of grapevines, Redwoods or the Pacific coast, clients on the California Wine Country trip are rewarded with gourmet picnic spreads at lunchtime. Ravenous from each morning's ride, I would polish off plates heaping with ingredients the leaders had purchased in town: appetizers of local cheeses, nuts and jams; a watermelon, mint and feta salad; mini egg frittatas; and other delicious, healthy dishes.

At night, guests hang up their helmets at

some of the Napa Valley and Sonoma regions' finest properties. A dip in the 24-hour heated pool at Villaggio Inn & Spa — our charming Tuscany-inspired hotel in Yountville — hit the spot, as did the New American fare at Hurley's Restaurant & Bar (order the braised wild boar with polenta). A highlight at my favorite hotel on the itinerary, Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa, was its 40,000-square-foot indoor/outdoor Willow Stream Spa. Here, I spent a good part of the afternoon rotating through the bathing ritual circuit, which consists of an exfoliating shower, two mineral water soaking pools, a eucalyptus steam room, a dry sauna and multiple cool-down showers.

According to Hoppe, once agents sell the trip for the first time, they quickly realize how easy it is to sell again.

"You might have clients who are a little hesitant about a cycling trip, but once they get out there and they enjoy it, it's fun to see the sense of accomplishment," Hoppe said. "That happens every day on Backroads trips — people do more than they had anticipated."

As for little old me who nearly collapses after one SoulCycle class? About 80 miles later, it's safe to say I had the time of my life. **X**

THE DETAILS:
Backroads
www.backroads.com