I DNFed yet I am super proud of myself.

As soon as Colorado RBA John Lee Ellis opened up registration for the Colorado Fruita Loops 1200km Randonnée, I signed up. It's in May, early in the season, but I live in San Francisco and can ride year-round, so training should be manageable. It'll be at altitude, but I've summitted Kilimanjaro not so long ago, so the elevation should be manageable. There'll be a lot of climbing, but that's my forte, so the route should be manageable. It should all be so manageable.

A few days before the ride is set to start, we receive the update from the pre-ride : it was cold (and I mean they recorded 19°F), it was windy (and I mean they got strong headwinds), it was rainy (and I mean they got caught in a hailstorm).

Now those are factors I had not considered when I confidently signed up a few months ago. Text messages, phone calls, and impulsive Amazon purchases ensued, and I was finally ready and packed with: bar mitts, hand and body warmers, more merino wool layers than you could dream of, rain pants, and kitchen gloves. Spoiler: I overpacked.



Our ride, straight out of a movie.

Two days after embarking on the "coolest" and "hottest" road trip (how else would you qualify 3 cyclists driving a Westfalia van through the California, Nevada and Utah deserts

mid-May?!), Eric Larsen, Tak Noguchi, and I arrived in Fruita, right on time for the pre-ride BBQ: burgers, soda, hugs, excitement, and cake (pictured) to pump us up!



The cake

4am on Friday May 15: we are off and (unsurprisingly), I am overdressed. Rollies, the sun rises, red sandstone formations all around us, snowy mountaintops in the distance, long, well-paved roads, few cars, a long, delightfully gradual climb that takes us to 7000ft before dropping down into a heavily irrigated, lush valley. Pitstop at a general store in Naturita before we turn around. My cycling buddy Pascal Ledru is having a rough time keeping food down, so I shamelessly leave him with his RMCC buddies and make my way back to Fruita by 9ish, feeling strong and happy with the day's ride and looking forward to more hours of rest than I had anticipated.



Pascal somewhere in Western Colorado

Day 2. Slightly different story. Pascal is better, we meet up with the RMCC crew (Mike, Vernon and Paul) for a 5:30 am departure. Legs are heavy, we're on a low-trafficked freeway for 30miles and then a never-ending and windy faux flat. The landscape is eerie: the mountains on each side of the road feel so far away – wide open spaces that live up to my imagination of the American West. And here it is: the Colorado River meandering through the canyon. I feel energized by the scenery – though I think the very well-stocked aid station at Dewey Bridge and the tailwinds may have also had something to do with it! We've got some steep rollies, and I pass someone who decides to DNF. I continue on, rejoin my group, and together, we attack the climb of the day. 25 miles and 4,000ft of climbing and awesome tailwinds. And yet, it's a slog. My foot is hurting, my lips, nose, and lungs are dry, and I feel like I'm barely making progress. I drop back. The tailwinds become headwinds and I'm thinking "I am getting very close to the edge of this mountain, and there is no guardrail, I should get off my bike before I get blown off my bike". I take a break at the summit of La Sal for a quick snack and the breathtaking views – both because it's beautiful and because we're at 8,200ft above sea level. And I realize: my foot is *really* hurting. It's probably your saddle height, suggests Noah Swartz. I'll figure it out when I'm down the mountain, I shout as I begin my descent, going from chilly winds to furnace heat, in spite of very strong headwinds that force me to pedal downhill. Every pedal stroke is painful. I've got to figure out my saddle. I stop, and my belongings fly all over the place as I empty my gigantic saddlebag to locate the tools that I not-so-strategically placed under the rain pants, kitchen gloves, merino layers, and balaclava… As it turns out the seat post is already as low as it goes. Numb fingers and wind make reinstalling the bag a nightmare. I

feel sorry for myself, but the road ahead is still long, so I'd better keep moving. It's gorgeous. Keep pedaling, you'll catch up to someone. Or not. I ride back through the canyon, reminded of how majestic the West is and how dry: I am constantly thirsty and drinking water to stay hydrated.

At mile 150-something I'm back on the freeway, the sun is setting, my Achilles is killing me, and traffic has picked up, cars and trucks are zooming close past and shaking me in their wake. I'm starting to think that maybe I should tap out, yes, that is the responsible thing to do: cycling should not feel *this* painful. I spent time and money to do this thing, don't quit when things get hard. But this isn't *hard,* it's *painful.* And then, pulling me out of the heated debate going on in my head, in the distance, I see a red light. Or is it a reflector on the side of the road? I swear there's a white thing swaying above the red dot. Could it be another cyclist? No, they'd have come out of nowhere. The red dot gets closer. I must be hallucinating. No, I'm getting closer to it. A reflective vest is put on; it *was* a cyclist. Where did they come from? I catch up to the bike and see it's Iwan Barankay, whom I'd met the day before. He had exited the freeway to call an Uber – type 3 fun, he says – but to no avail. OK, I am not the only one having a rough time. We buddy up and ride the last 40 miles together which is a sketchy highway section in the dark. A teenager closing up a gas station in Loma reopens to let us fill our water bottles and use the bathroom. We nibble something, we're so close yet so far, with less than 10 miles to go Iwan motivates me and I motivate Iwan. And that's what randonneuring is all about: night riding with a new friend, chatting to stay awake, to keep pedaling, to come to terms with the fact that this is the end of the journey for us, this time.

The next day, Iwan and I made the most of our situation to get fancy coffee, have my saddle post trimmed, ride the Colorado National Monument (no regrets but I probably should not have done that as it further aggravated my sore Achilles), meet John Lee Ellis and his wife Pat (a charming birder and retired PA who validated my decision to DNF), enjoy a lazy lunch in Grand Junction and hitch a ride back to Fruita.


Victoria, John, and Iwan at the Colorado National Monument

This trip was not what I had planned. After all, in life, very few things go according to plan. In fact, those who finished the ride were rerouted twice on days 3 and 4 due to inclement weather. Congratulations to all of you on completing this hard Randonnée! And congratulations to me too, for listening to my body, DNFing when I did, avoiding a torn Achilles, and earning a couple of months off-bike to nurse my tendinitis.

As always, a huge thank you to the volunteers and organizers for the love and support and snacks before, during and after the event – none of this would be possible without you!