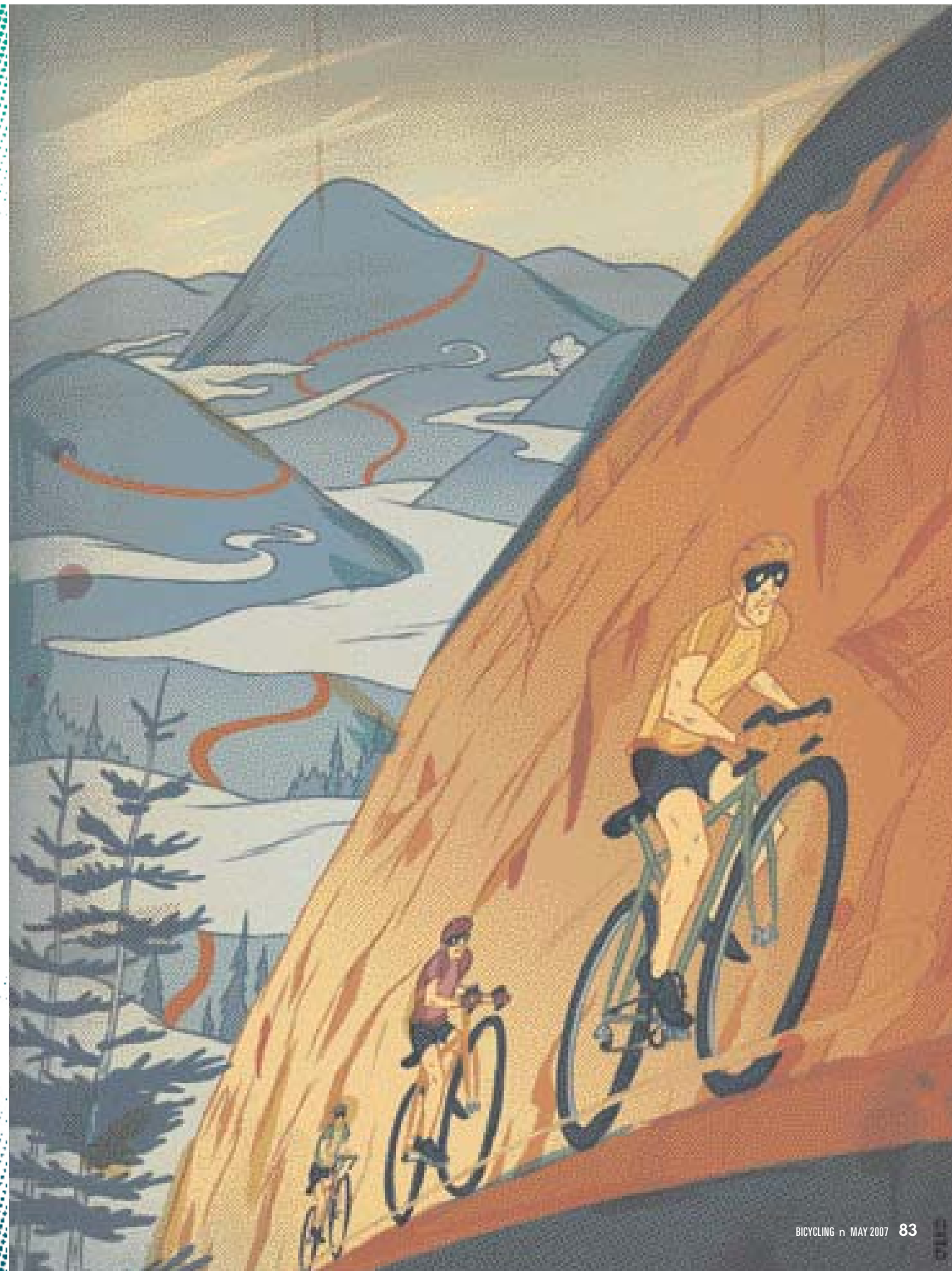


THE HEAVENLY BLUES

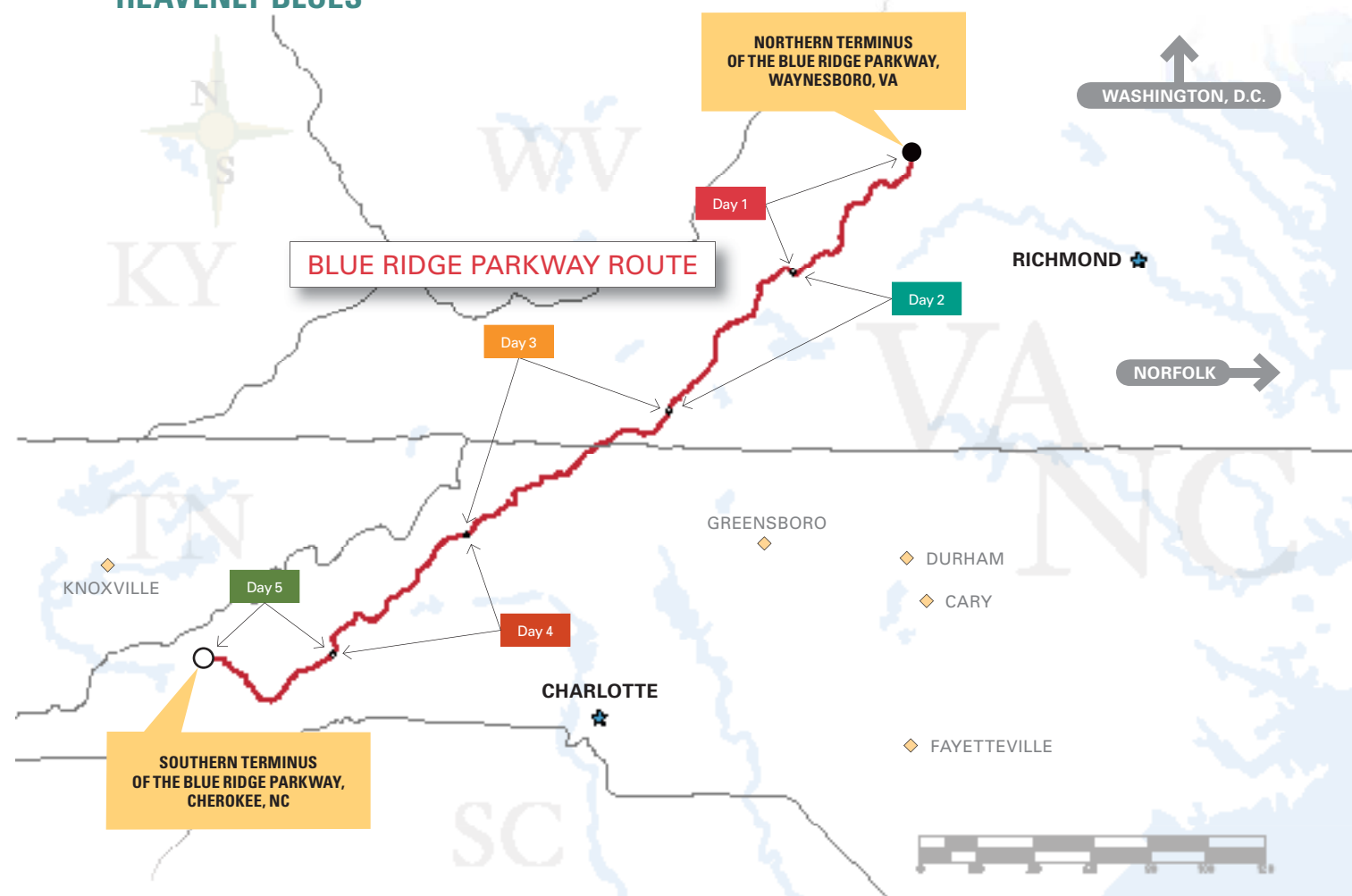
IN WHICH
FOR 5 AMAZING DAYS
THE LOSER DIES,
50,000 FEET ARE CLIMBED
IN 474 MILES,
AND THE JOYOUSLY SUFFERING
FAITHFUL ARE SET FREE TO
RIDE THEIR MACHINES
WITHOUT BEING HASSLED
BY THE MAN.

BY MIKE MAGNUSON

ILLUSTRATED BY JESSE LEFKOWITZ



HEAVENLY BLUES



One clear August Friday

afternoon along the Blue Ridge Parkway, a cyclist named Carl rolls into a parking lot and comes to a stop beside a curb. He does not know the name of the place he has rolled into.

Someone says to him, "Carl, we're in Crabtree Meadows."

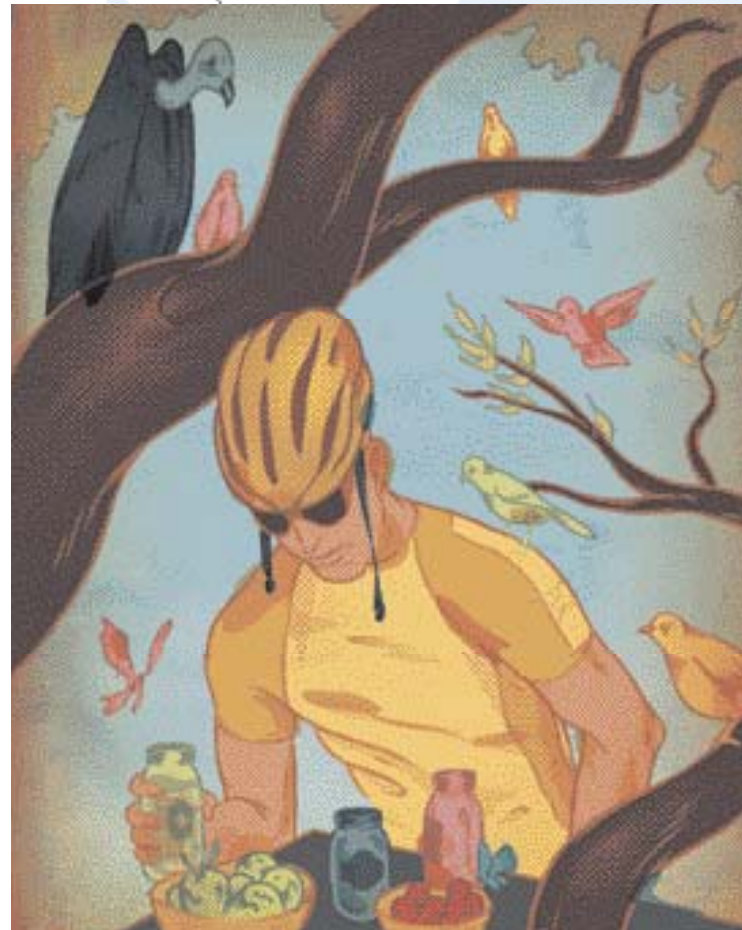
"Oh," he says.

"That's in North Carolina, Carl," someone else says, and chuckles, and some other people chuckle, too.

Carl regards these chucklers who have congregated in the grassy shade along the parking lot's edge, other cyclists, some sitting in portable picnic chairs eating sandwiches, some leaning over card tables laden with sandwich fixings, some searching for supplies inside a large, white van with bike racks on the top and the Black Bear Adventures logo on its sides. Carl tips his chin slowly downward, removes his helmet, looks into its soaked foam pads for a universal truth about cycling, and finds one. "I'm hungry," he says.

Beyond the parking lot, songbirds skitter from tree to tree, the perfect beauty-accentuating movement over a landscape of green fluttering leaves that extend everywhere along the mountain valleys and ridges occupying the vast horizon. Over the nearest valley, several vultures soar on the thermals and experience a joy no human being can ever know.

But Carl has no interest in the scenery or the birds. He has a bicycle problem to address. As a rule, he prefers not to lean his



CARL SIGHS, LOOKS UPWARD AT A BIRDLESS VOIDSPACE IN THE HEAVENS, AND SAYS, "I DON'T WANT TO CLIMB ONE MORE DAMN HILL...I'M SICK OF HILLS."

bike against a tree or lay it down on the soft grass when he is not riding it. Instead, Carl likes to lean his bike against the curb, using the wheels and their connection with it as a sort of precarious natural bike stand. He straightens the front wheel and eases the bike to the curb.

One of the cyclists watching, a 43-year-old English professor and wiseass, says, "That bike's gonna fall, Carl. Sure as shit."

Carl is 63 years old, as lean and weathered as a Carolina ham, hair buzzed to the skull in the fashion popular among male cyclists who ride their bikes too much, and his eyes are a washed-out, dangerous-looking blue. Carl levels these eyes at the English professor and says, "Bike won't fall."

The English professor says, "Bet you 10 bucks?"

Carl releases his bike, examines the wheels to assure himself that, in fact, the relationship between curb and bike is adequate and says, under his breath, "Arrgh."

Carl can train through anything without a complaint: thunderstorms, hurricanes, plagues of locusts, nuclear attacks. A typical light training ride in his hometown of Charleston, Carolina, involves something like four hours at 95 percent of his maximum heart rate. And he's conquered the Assault Mitchell and the Bridge to Bridge and various other mountain races more times than these events have been held. This while racing masters-level crits in the Charleston area—you know how tough he is—he has crashed 10 times and has, each time, brushed off the hurt as a bear would a mosquito bite. He drinks alcohol or cusses or eats cheese or, as far as anyone can tell, his mind strays from focused, disciplined endeavors. It is when he wakes in the morning, that he whacks himself in the head with a hammer a few times, just to get the blood moving.

Presently, he leans over a picnic table and his eyes scan the luncheon possibilities: several loaves of bread, plastic containers filled with organic peanut butter and almond butter, large jars of jam and pickles, packages of deli ham, bags of potato chips, bowls of grapes, and so forth. His brow furrows, and he rubs his chin disconsolately, emits a grunt, and removes two large slices of sourdough bread from their plastic sleeve. He smears each slice with a half-inch coating of almond butter, over which he empties easily half a jar of raspberry preserves. He somehow carries these open-face sandwiches from the card table to a chair without one drop of preserves spilling over the sides, then he sits, still without spilling, and consumes the first of the sandwiches with such speed it startles everyone watching him. He sighs then, looks upward at a birdless voidspace in the heavens, and says, "I don't want to climb one more damn hill."

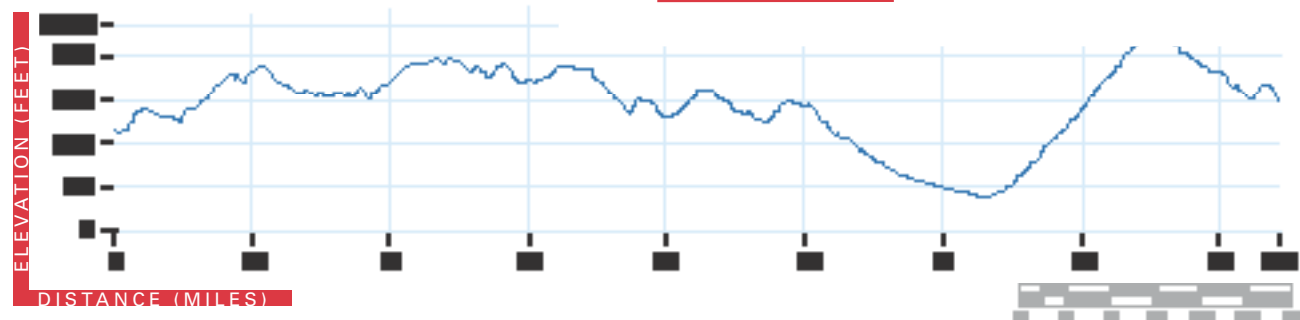
The English professor bursts out laughing and says, "Good luck with that, buddy. We're on the Blue Ridge Parkway."

"I don't care," Carl says. "I'm still sick of these hills."

A puff of wind crosses the parking lot and tips over Carl's bike, ejecting a white bottle from its cage. The bottle's cap pops open, and green, energy-packed sludge spreads over the asphalt in a



DAY 1



MAPS AND CHARTS BY ASHLEY FREEBY

HEAVENLY BLUES

sickening, slow motion.

Carl pays no attention to this and inhales his second sandwich.

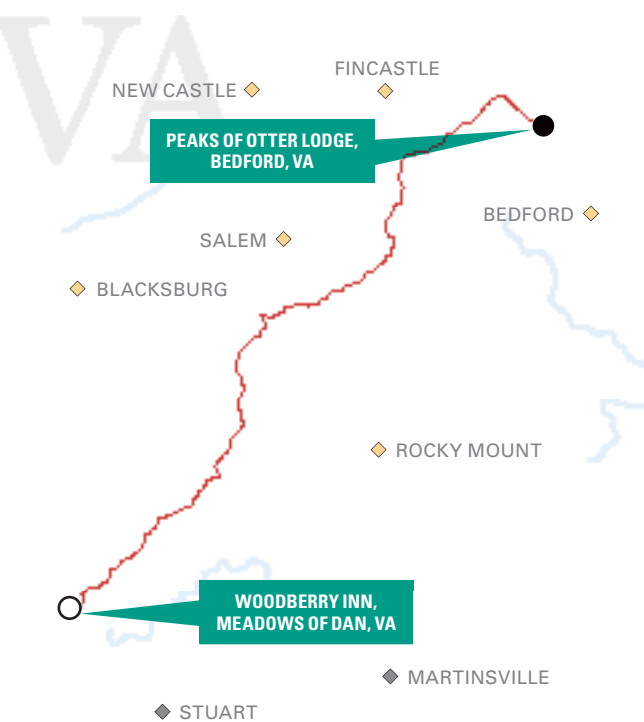
The professor says, "How was your sandwich, Carl?"

"Fantastic," Carl says. He smiles then at the professor.

There is no furrow in Carl's brow. There is, maybe, a little twinkle in his eyes. Hell, Carl is nothing but a 63-year-old guy in terrific physical shape, out having the time of his life. Even he realizes this, now, about himself. He says, "What a great morning on the bike!"

These 13 cyclists here are on a Black Bear Adventures tour that takes five days to ride the entire Blue Ridge Parkway, from its northern terminus at Rockfish Gap near Waynesboro, Virginia, to its southern terminus in Cherokee, North Carolina. This is, needless to say, a not-small physical challenge: 474 miles, 26 tunnels, 50,000 feet of climbing (and 50,000 feet of descending), and almost zero feet of flat road. Essentially, plenty of hurt to go around. In the last three and a half days, the cyclists have ridden exactly 340.5 miles of Blue Ridge Parkway

DAY 2



and climbed 33,000 feet and bombed 33,000 feet and been rained on and sunned on and stayed in the saddle from dawn to nearly dusk. And in the next day and a half, they have—what?—17,000 feet to go?

Today's ride, it turns out, is what Paul Wood, owner of Black Bear Adventures, has deemed the Queen Stage of the tour: 106 miles and 12,500 feet of climbing. A respectable day in the saddle, he's been saying, especially considering that the previous day the group covered 120 miles and climbed 11,000 feet. He knows what he's talking about, absolutely, because he's not just the owner, as they say; he's a client. He's ridden the whole route with the group so far, and he's tired but, like everybody in the group, he seems happy. He's eating a sandwich and munching on some chips and laughing about this or that. He's in his 40s, has all his hair, not a touch of it gray, and he's lean and fit and, like everybody on this ride, quite used to spending huge chunks of time on a bike.

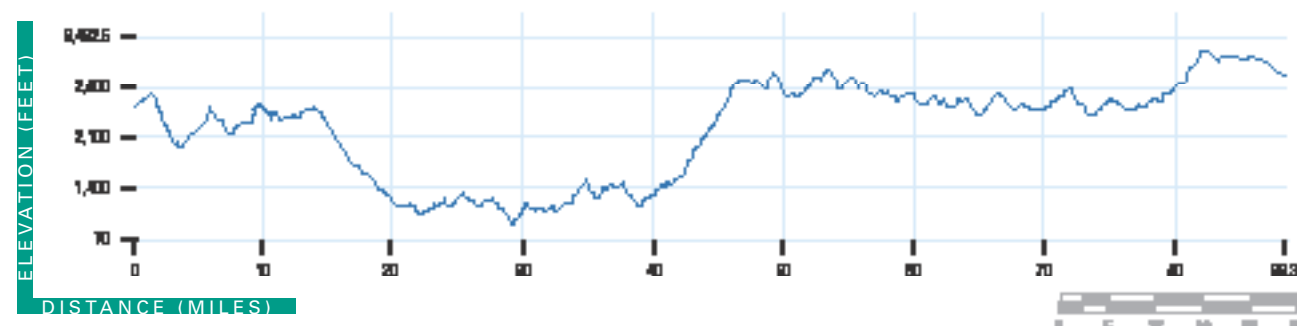
Funny thing about cyclists like these: If you look at this group now—fit, happy-looking people, laughing and eating whatever they can get their hands on—you'd swear you were looking at a group of graduate students in their 20s on a bicycle tour, but in fact, the youngest person on this ride, an affable crit racer from

TODAY'S RIDE HAS BEEN DEEMED THE QUEEN STAGE: 106 MILES AND 12,500 FEET OF CLIMBING—A RESPECTABLE DAY IN THE SADDLE.

St. Louis named Greg, is in his 30s, and basically everybody else is, at minimum, in their 40s. A woman named Elizabeth, 55 years old, is doing this tour on a recumbent, and the only complaint she has yet to offer is that she doesn't have enough free space on her digital camera to capture all the magnificent views.

Besides, why would anyone on this kind of ride look old or unhappy? For one thing, these folks are not riding the Parkway with loaded touring bikes and sleeping on the ground at night and eating dehydrated, campstove-cooked crap for supper. Black Bear Adventures has eliminated that certain misery from the itinerary.

The riders are staying in nice hotels every night—the quite rustic Peaks of Otter Lodge on the first night in Virginia; an excellent hippie place called the Woodberry Inn right next to



GET OFF YOUR BIKE

There is more to the Parkway than sweat, asphalt and amazing views. Take a break from your two-wheeled tour, and make these pit stops for culture, food and fun.

VIRGINIA'S EXPLORE PARK Living exhibits and a full-scale village straight out of the 17th century bring American history to life in a way textbooks never could. Grab a boxed lunch from Brugh Tavern and picnic on the bank of the Roanoke River. Milepost 115 on the BRP; Roanoke, VA; explorepark.org

SMITH MOUNTAIN LAKE Slip your feet out of your cycling shoes and put them on the sand, in the water, on a wakeboard or in a boat. If you're up for it, you can also test the putting greens or hiking trails. East of BRP off State Route 43 at Peaks of Otter Lodge to Bedford and SR-122 south; visitsmithmountainlake.com

CRABTREE FALLS Gaze at the highest vertical-drop waterfall east of the Mississippi and you can't help but feel recharged. Miles of hiking trails snake around the valley, revealing scenic overlooks, and authentic log cabins are available for a good night's rest. Six miles east of SR-56 and BRP intersection. crabtreefalls.com

BLUE RIDGE MUSIC CENTER Catch a few plucked tunes with a fiddle or banjo concert celebrating American roots music at this outdoor amphitheater. Summer concerts start in June on Saturday afternoons and evenings. Milepost 213; Galax, VA; blueridgemusiccenter.org

GRANDFATHER MOUNTAIN Get up close and personal with black bears, cougars and bald eagles at the world's only privately owned biosphere. Don't worry, the habitats are in large enclosures so you can view the animals in their natural setting as you hike around 12 miles of trails in North Carolina backcountry. Trek across the Mile High Swinging Bridge to the best 360-degree views. One mile south of Milepost 305. Linville, NC; grandfather.com

TUPELO HONEY CAFÉ Roll into Asheville any time of day for a bellyful of sweet-potato pancakes or fried green tomatoes over goat-cheese grits. Keep one eye on your bike from the bistro tables outside, and the other on plates of Southern food with modern twists (candied-ginger corn bread, anyone?). Asheville, NC; tupelohoneycafe.com

BILTMORE HOUSE This colossus of a Vanderbilt mansion opened its doors to the public in 1930, allowing visitors to indulge in fine dining, accommodations and a playground estate that would make Richie Rich envious. Sample wine at the estate winery, smell the 2,300 roses in the gardens and explore 8,000 acres by bike, horseback, boat, or with the help of a Land Rover on an off-road driving course. It's 19th-century luxe living at its best. Asheville, NC; biltmore.com

THE GREY EAGLE You've found the nightlife. Flood your ears with live blues and jazz as you go on a culinary adventure of Southern Louisiana cooking. All ages welcome. Asheville, NC; thegreyeagle.com

—Alison Granell



The road to the summit of Mt. Mitchell, elevation 6,684 feet

PHOTOGRAPH BY YVONNE BOYD

HEAVENLY BLUES

THE IDEA IS THAT DAYS SHOULD BE TOUGH BUT NIGHTS EASY— ALL RIDERS HAVE TO DO IS WHAT THEY ENJOY BEST: RIDE, AND LAUGH WHEN THEY'RE NOT.

the Parkway in none other than Floyd, Virginia, where every rider on the tour agreed they ate the finest alfresco pasta supper of their entire lives; then, after a 120-mile ride, a night in the fanciest resort in the already fancy town of Blowing Rock, North Carolina; then the final two days in the Haywood Park Hotel in downtown Asheville. Paul Wood's idea for the tour is that days should be tough but nights easy. All the riders have to do is what they enjoy best: ride.

And hang around and laugh when they're not riding.

Just now, the professor is discussing with the group the heavy doping program he's on: 12 ibuprofen a day, six Extra-Strength Tylenols, four Alka-Seltzers. Plus, nightly, several glasses of red wine, which help with the artistic requirements of the ride, which involves the professor and his buddies busting out the guitars and the bongos after supper and jamming in the sort of embarrassingly bad middle-aged way that middle-aged guys with guitars and bongos will, but hey, Black Bear Adventures has agreed to lug the guitars and bongos from hotel to hotel, so why not?

After jamming, every night, the professor and his buddies have stayed up late, watching bad movies on TV. The highlight of the Parkway Film Series has been Roger Corman's 1966 classic biker film *The Wild Angels*, which is an artsy, shaved-and-bathed portrayal of the Hell's Angels, starring Peter Fonda as Heavenly

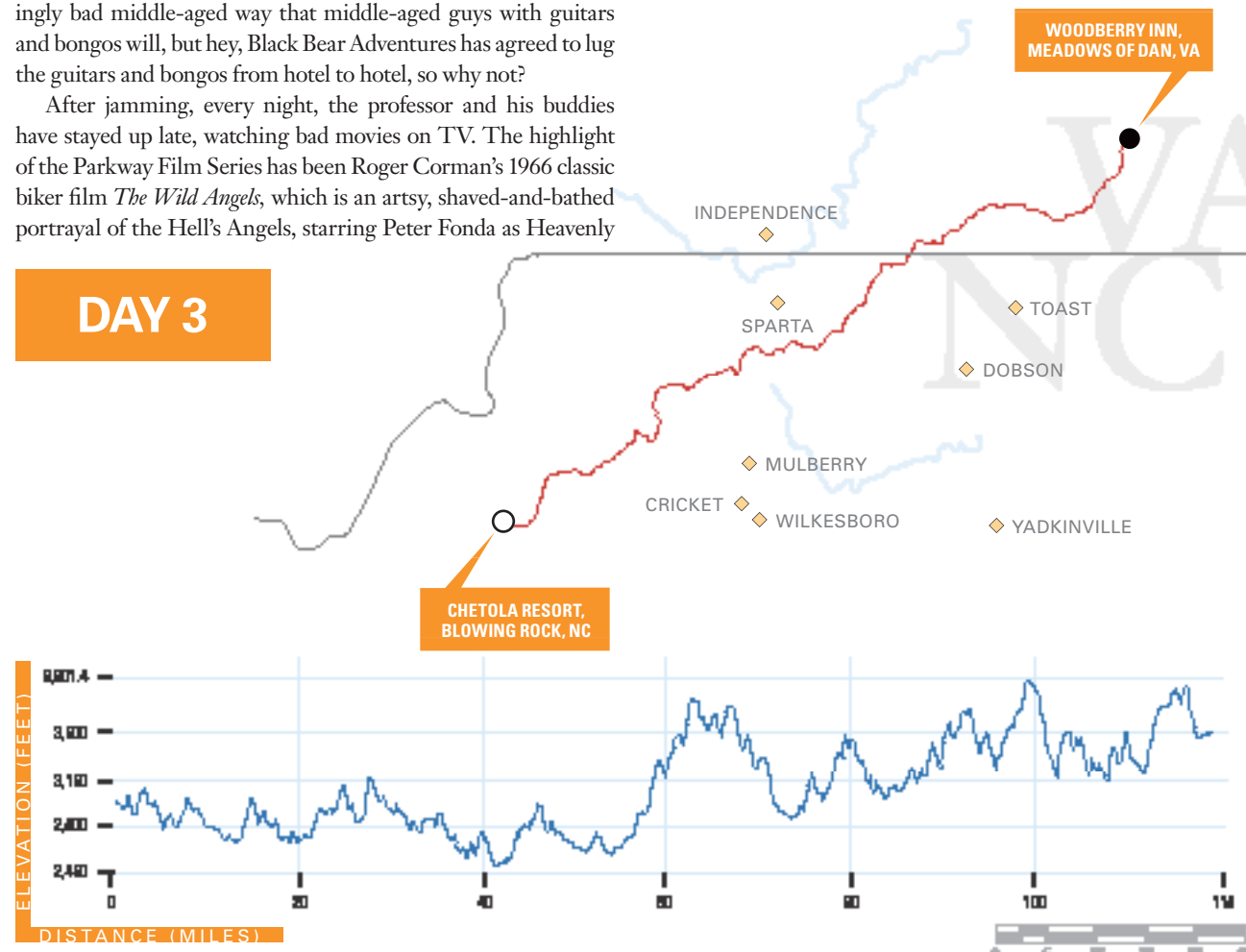
Blues, leader of the Hell's Angels. Late in the film, after much carousing and engine-revving, Heavenly Blues's best friend, a guy named Loser, played by Bruce Dern, gets shot and dies. At Loser's funeral, Heavenly Blues offers this brief, inspired eulogy: "We wanna be free! We wanna be free to do what we wanna do. We wanna be free to ride. We wanna be free to ride our machines without being hassled by The Man! And we wanna get loaded. And we wanna have a good time. And that's what we are gonna do. We are gonna have a good time. We are gonna have a party."

The professor and his buddies, needless to say, have adopted this elegy as their lifestyle credo for their ride on the Blue Ridge.

This type of nighttime, reveling behavior in the face of daylong athletic endeavor, and this kind of admiration for classic biker films, has greatly disturbed Carl, but on the other hand, why do people ride bikes, anyway? To hurt themselves? To tear their bodies and lives into shreds? Imagine a life where every night you stay up late jamming on guitars and laughing and watching movies with your buddies, and every morning, at the butt-crack of dawn, you rise and ride your bicycle upwards of 120 miles with an average elevation gain of 10,000 feet. Then you arrive at a nice hotel and clean up and eat at a nice restaurant and keep on doing this over and over again.

We wanna be free to ride our machines. We are gonna party!

DAY 3



HEAVENLY BLUES

And this is the kind of party it is.

After lunch, everybody saddles up and follows a masters bike racer named Jane downhill. She keeps a tight tuck and sweeps through each corner at 35 miles per hour, at 40, and on straight-aways she may reach 45, and the group lines up behind her.

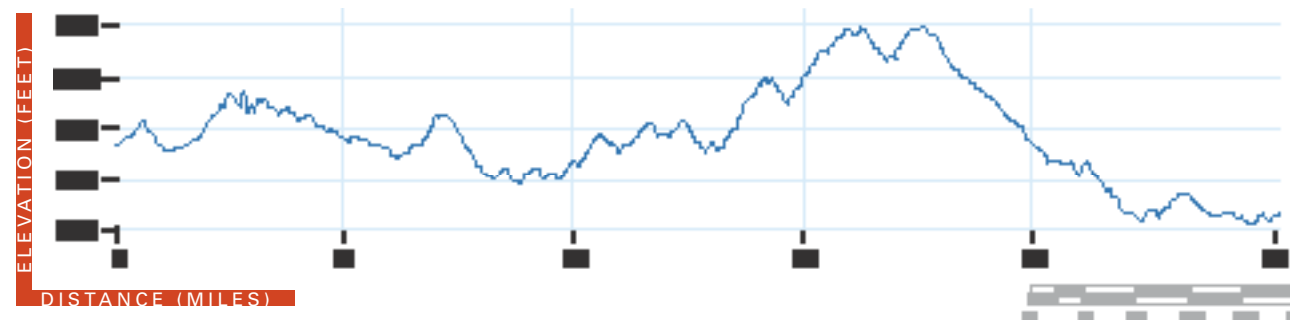
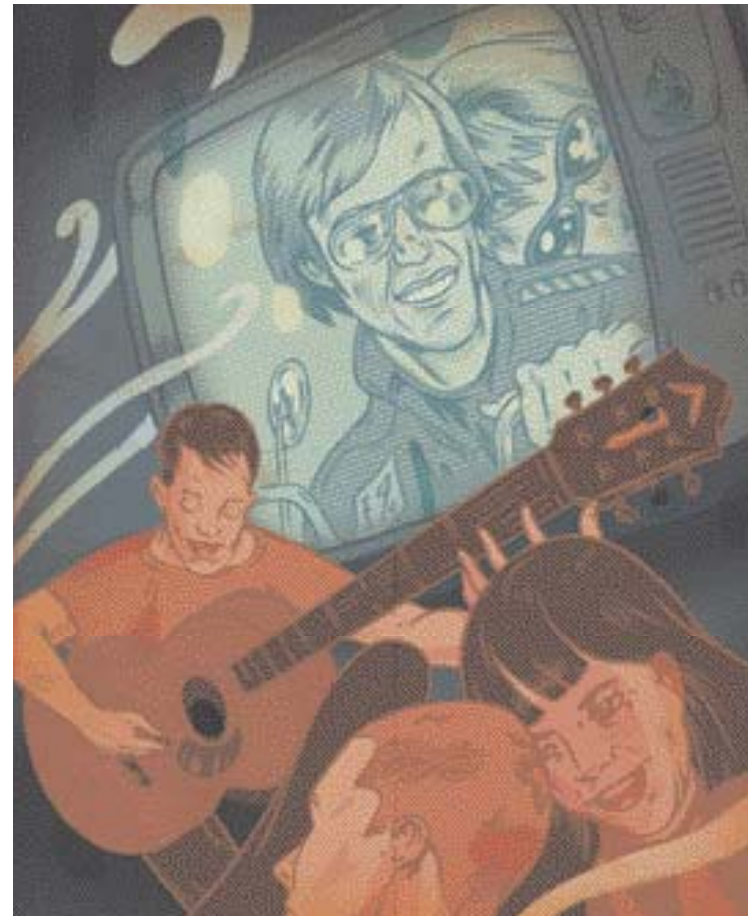
You will note that the group's ability to ride in this manner means that descending on the Blue Ridge Parkway is actually quite reasonable and safe. When geologist Joseph Hyde Pratt conceived of the Blue Ridge Parkway in 1906, his idea was to create "a pleasure road along the summit of the Blue Ridge." Construction didn't begin until almost 30 years later, but Pratt's vision remained intact. This is a road designed for pleasure and for enjoying the view. The grades never exceed 8 percent; there are

GRADES NEVER EXCEED 8 PERCENT, THERE ARE NO HAIRPINS, THE SURFACE IS EXCELLENT—YOU'D BE HARD-PRESSED TO FIND A BETTER CYCLING ROAD IN THE WORLD.

never sharp hairpin corners; the road surface is always excellent and the speed limit on the Parkway, from one end to the other, is 45 miles per hour. You would be hard-pressed to find a better cycling road in the whole world. There's a lot of climbing and a lot of descending, but why be free to ride a machine for climbing and descending?

The next few hours pass as all hours pass for cyclists on the Blue Ridge Parkway. You go up for a while. You go down for a while. One of the afternoon's climbs happens to be the famous the-spirit section of the Assault on Mt. Mitchell, a steady, steady climb from NC-80 to Mt. Mitchell State Park's entrance of the spur road to the highest point in North America east of the Mississippi. And everybody suffers up that climb because it's a hard climb. But

DAY 4



HEAVENLY BLUES

**TOMORROW THE CYCLISTS
HAVE ONLY 81 MILES AND 9,500 FEET
OF CLIMBING TO GO.
NOTHING WILL STOP THEM.
THEY ARE GONNA PARTY!**

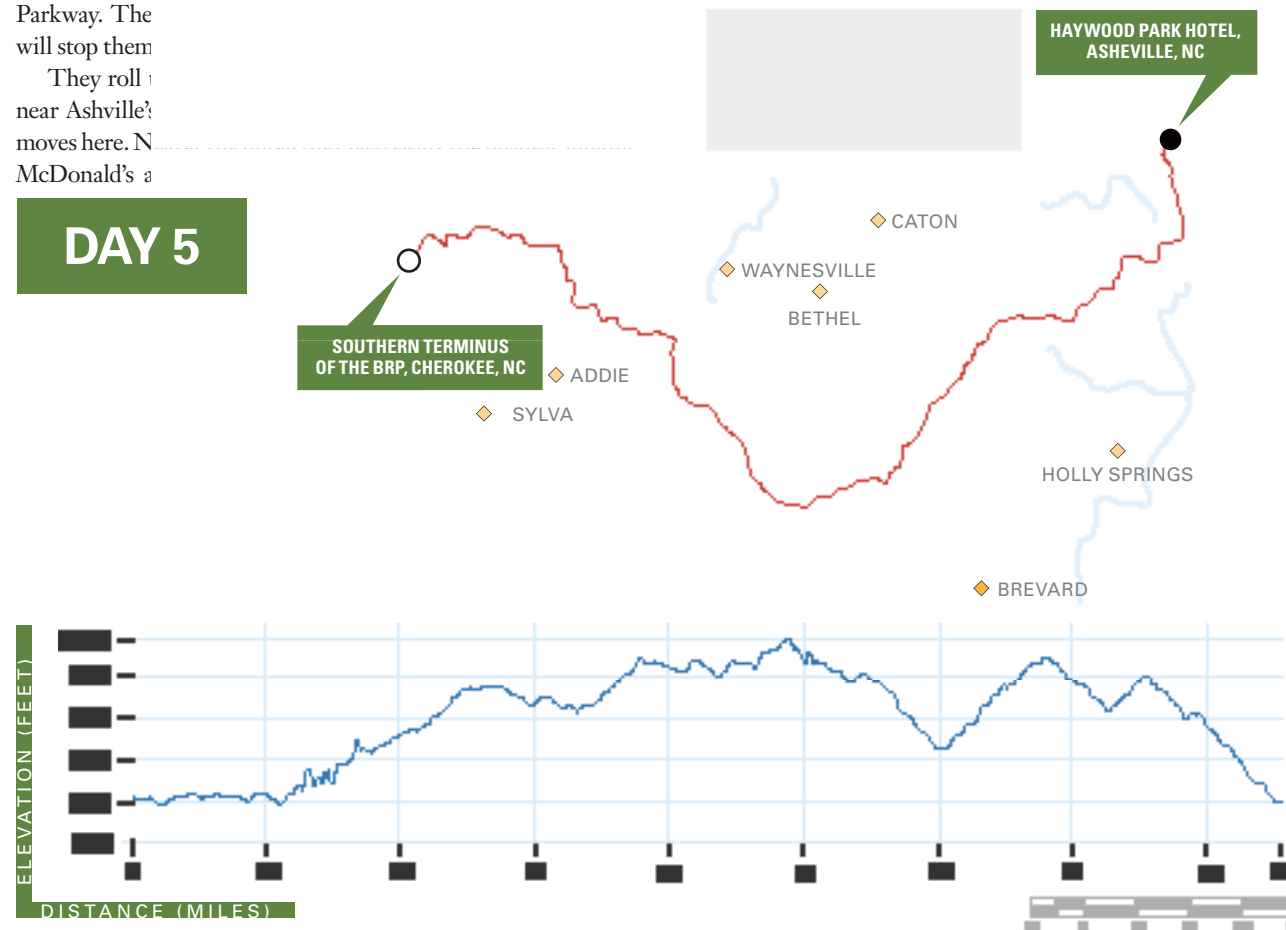
not long after that, when everybody has regrouped and made a plan to stick together as much as they can for the remainder of the day, the Parkway descends 12 miles from the spectacularly eerie Craggy Gardens at 5,640 feet to the outskirts of Asheville, near the French Broad River, which sits at roughly 1,900 feet.

When the group reaches the bottom, the Parkway miraculously flattens for a while, and the cyclists can ride an actual rotating paceline before leaving the Parkway and rolling another 6 easy miles to the hotel in Asheville's center. Only trouble here is late in the afternoon, this close to a city the size of Asheville, the Parkway is packed with cars—commuters taking a shortcut off the freeway or main drag. These people are not using this road as a pleasure road; they're using it as a shortcut to wherever the next place in their bustling lives might be.

None of the cyclists cares about bustling. They've climbed 12,500 feet today, and tomorrow they have only 81 miles and 9,500 feet of climbing to go to finish riding the entire Blue Ridge Parkway. The

will stop them
They roll
near Asheville:
moves here. N
McDonald's a

DAY 5



hippie kids in dreadlocks appear on the sidewalks, walking or riding skateboards or carrying caseless guitars or standing in circles playing hacky sack, and a person can smell organic food in the air, which means the center of Asheville has drawn nigh.

Up ahead, there's one more hill they have to climb to get to the hotel, and it's steep, way steeper than anything on the Parkway. When they eventually get there, everybody in the group will groan a little when the road rises, but they'll stay together. One of the professor's buddies, to lighten the moment, is going to ride up alongside Paul Wood, the tour guide, and say, "Gee, Paul. I don't understand it, but I'm feeling a little tired." When everyone hears that, they will end up laughing so hard their sides, along with the rest of their bodies, ache. Tonight, the group will eat at a great Italian restaurant, the professor and his friends will stay up late playing music and watching TV, and not one thing will be wrong with the world ever again. ⑤

TAKE THE TOUR

Black Bear Adventures (blackbearadventures.com) offers the Blue Ridge Parkway Epic tour June 3–10 and Sept. 30–Oct. 6 in 2007, and the cost is \$2,185 for a single room and \$1,685 for a double room. The price includes most meals plus snacks, hydration and van support. Rental bikes are available, but because the ride covers so many miles, owner Paul Wood says most cyclists are more comfortable with their own gear.—A.G.