



OFF TO SEE THE WORLD

Mason Cassady and **Rachel Irvine** wanted to learn about everyday life in other cultures. *Bicycles, they felt, would be the best way to go.*

By **Barb Berggoetz**

Photography by **Mason Cassady and Rachel Irvine**



Mason Cassady and Rachel Irvine on the bridge connecting the Thai mainland to the inlet island Uthai Thani. *Courtesy photo*



Mason Cassady and Rachel Irvine weren't looking for tourist attractions, five-star hotels, or posh restaurants when they set off to see the world. They sought reality. Ordinary people. Day-to-day life in the many countries they would visit. And they figured they'd experience it best traveling by bicycle.



All of the photographs in this story were taken on Rachel and Mason's cellphones. Rachel took this artistic photo of her bike in Montenegro near the Bay of Kotor.

In all, Mason traversed 17 countries in Europe and Asia. Rachel joined him two months into the trip and traveled through nine countries on the two continents. Their journey ended in April with a route across the southern United States. Many times they were tested both physically and emotionally. Days of rain, snow, extreme heat, and freezing

temperatures beset them. Numerous flat tires slowed them. And, at times, total exhaustion overcame them.

"We are not expert cyclists with the latest high-end gear and training," Mason says. In fact, what they took were the road bikes they had used in college for commuting, a compact tent, and a small cookstove. "We just knew we would have extra-special

encounters, experiences, and challenges if we did the trip on bikes," he says.

And they did. No matter where they went, the couple report, people were gracious and giving, willing to share a bit of their lives, often their food and homes as well, and offer a helping hand, if needed, to these two young American strangers.

Mason, 24, and Rachel, 25, came home with a treasure chest full of stories. "We were constantly seeing new things and meeting new people," Rachel says. "There were ups and downs, like a microcosm of everyday life. The trip also gave us a chance to meditate and be in our own mental space during those many hours of riding."

While pedaling 40 to 120 miles a day, they were enthralled by views of lush forests, pristine mountain vistas, and fields fat with wheat, corn, pomegranates, and other crops. But they also saw pollution, poverty, and shocking inequities. They gained insight into other religions and other ways of life. And they learned lessons, too, they say, about living a meaningful existence.

Beginning on July 6, 2014, Mason cycled some 7,000 miles in 10 months. After Rachel finished teaching a yoga class at Vibe Yoga and Pilates Studio, she flew to meet him in Hungary on September 6, 2014, and the two traveled together for more than 5,000 miles over the next eight months.

Their grand plan

The couple met through mutual friends in late 2013 and found they had much in common. Mason had recently taken a cycling trip, and Rachel had gone on an extended backpacking vacation in Vermont. Both were working in Bloomington and trying to decide what to do next in their lives. Together, they formed a small book club that focused on works dealing with the philosophy of being and living a meaningful life. During those book club discussions, their relationship evolved. They began dating, and the idea of a cycling trip took shape.

One of the books that influenced them was *How An Average Man Lived an Adventurous Life* (self-published) by Bloomington friend John Linnemeier about his world travels. They carried that book with them on the trip. Another seed was planted when Mason heard a talk in Indianapolis by Scott Stoll, who wrote *Falling Uphill* (self-published) about his four-year-long world bicycle tour.

Rachel and Mason had both graduated from college in December 2013 — Rachel with an environmental science degree from Indiana University and Mason with a sociology degree from IUPUI. She was working as a literacy coach at The Project School and teaching yoga. He was working at The Uptown Café, owned by his father, Michael Cassady. "We were either going to get full-time jobs or we were going to have an adventure," Rachel says. "We were young and healthy, and we just realized we could do this. We just had to get the courage to get out and do something like this."

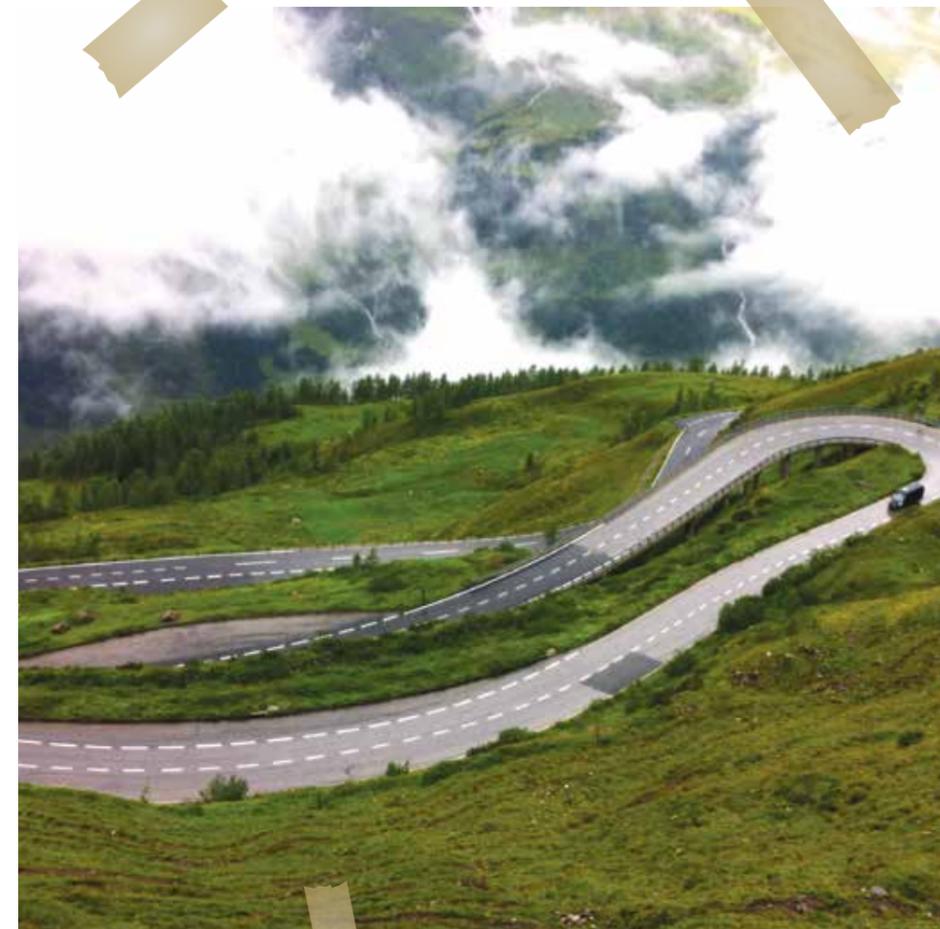
Mason went first.

His seven-country European solo journey began in the Netherlands, a country Mason says is "heaven" for cyclists. Bike paths are separate from roads, making riding safe. The land is flat, so pedaling is easy. The terrain is picturesque, peppered with windmills, dairy farms, and canals. A soccer player, Mason started in Holland partly because he knew the Dutch were big soccer fans, and he wanted to share in the excitement of the World Cup (taking place at the time) by watching it on television with them.

While on his own, he was always glad to join other touring cyclists and share experiences. In Germany, where he marveled at medieval castles and magnificent cathedrals and rode by vineyards along the Rhine River, he encountered a solo cyclist from Seattle at a campsite. Happy to speak English again, they cycled together for two weeks in Germany and into Austria.

Mason had an unforgettable experience climbing the Austrian Alps. His route took him over the Großglockner High Alpine Road, peddling up 5,600 feet of hairpin switchbacks to the end of his climb. It took three hours to ascend to the pass at 8,200 feet and another three hours to descend.

"The ride up was absolutely gorgeous, with views of surrounding mountains, as the clouds moved faster than I have ever experienced," Mason recalls. But at the top, his view was obscured by overcast skies. Going down, tightly gripping his brakes, he could only see a couple of feet ahead. "It was frightening, for sure," he says. "When I got to the bottom, my brake pads were completely worn out."



(above) After biking for hours up the Austrian Alps, Mason took this picture of the switchbacks of the Großglockner High Alpine Road.

(left) Mason at the summit, 8,200 feet above sea level. Courtesy photo



Simple acts of kindness

Throughout the trip, Mason and Rachel utilized Warm Showers (warmshowers.org), a free, worldwide hospitality exchange for touring cyclists that turned out to be a blessing because of the families they met and got to know. Invitations to sleep in churches, mosques, temples, and even small police boxes were also frequent, with local people always eager to lend them a helping hand.

In a tiny village in Slovenia — one of the most gorgeous countries Mason says he visited, with mountains all around, emerald green forests, and clear blue rivers — a family in the network let him stay for a week. The father, who had once cycled around the world, was a kindred spirit. “The family took me on a monstrous hike up Mount Krn, which is in the Triglav National Park,” he says. “It had some of the best views I have ever experienced.”

On occasion, Mason had to ask for favors. He was seldom turned down.

One family in Croatia, where he rode along the beautiful coast of the Adriatic Sea, invited him to stay in their home after he asked if he could pitch his tent in their yard. Such simple acts of kindness were more significant to Mason than any particular sights he saw. “Simple is not mundane,” he says. “Traveling through areas that are not touristic is fully engaging in its own right.”

Spending hours pedaling in solitude allowed him to become immersed in thought about what he was observing and experiencing. “It’s a peaceful type of thinking, like a moving meditation. You have a lot of time to be aware and attentive to your thoughts,” he says.

Rachel joins him

Rachel and Mason’s travels together, which started in Budapest, Hungary, were filled with unexpected and humorous encounters, immersion in village life, and a major route change.

They continued traveling in southeastern Europe heading toward Turkey, a country rich in history and culture, and the one both wanted to visit the most.



(top) The view of the Soca Valley from the top of Mt. Krn in Slovenia.

(bottom) Mason (far right) with the Lebas family and their friends at the summit of Mt. Krn. Mason stayed with the family for a week. *Courtesy photo*



They stayed in Budapest for a few days, exploring its ancient streets and ornate buildings and walking along the picturesque banks of the Danube River, its bridges aglow at night, lit by thousands of sparkling bulbs. They found the Hungarian countryside, flat and with large-scale agriculture, to resemble the midwestern U.S. Bicycling on, the journey turned grim, rain and clouds following them for weeks.

In Serbia, they were pleased to find a national network of clearly marked cycling routes and extremely friendly people. On many occasions they were offered rakia, a homemade fruit brandy popular throughout the Balkans. On one of their first nights in the country, they were invited to stay overnight with a family in the village of Karavukovo. They met all of the family’s relatives, toured the village, enjoyed a fish fry, and drank rakia late into the night.

Homesteading and gardening were common in the village and throughout rural Serbia, and as Mason and Rachel departed the next morning, this welcoming family insisted on loading down their bicycles with home-jarred jams, pickled peppers, and rakia for the road.

Bad weather wins out

After days of cycling in the rain, Rachel and Mason gave in and took an 18-hour train ride from Belgrade, Serbia, to Montenegro, a small nation on the Adriatic Sea that used to be part of Yugoslavia. Mason says the country has a pristine coastline with many hotels and tourist attractions, mountains all around, and fertile land used to grow figs, pomegranates, and olives. The mountain roads were very steep, he recalls, the lakes and rivers clean. When they arrived at the train station in Podgorica, Montenegro’s capital, they were surprised to be met by a Warm Showers host who took them to his home for a breakfast feast. For four days, he treated them like honored guests, showing them the city, introducing them to his family and friends, and giving them anything they needed.

Biking through Albania for four days seemed like a trip back in time. They saw donkey-drawn carts and people herding cows and sheep in the streets. Clusters of elderly men wore dusty suit coats and old-style caps, their trousers held up by suspenders. Pigs feasted on heaps of trash in dumpsters and chickens roamed the streets.



(top) Map showing Mason and Rachel’s route through Europe. *Illustration by Ethan Sandweiss (above and right)* Typical scenes in Albania: In the city of Durres, elderly men gather to talk, and in Shkoder, vendors trade ducks and chickens.

"I remember simply being in awe at all that was around," says Mason. "My senses were going off the charts — seeing mosques instead of churches, people crossing the streets at all points, cows being herded down the highway, cars interspersed with carts drawn by donkeys, scooters, bicycles, and tractors. A man was riding a scooter with a live sheep in his rucksack."

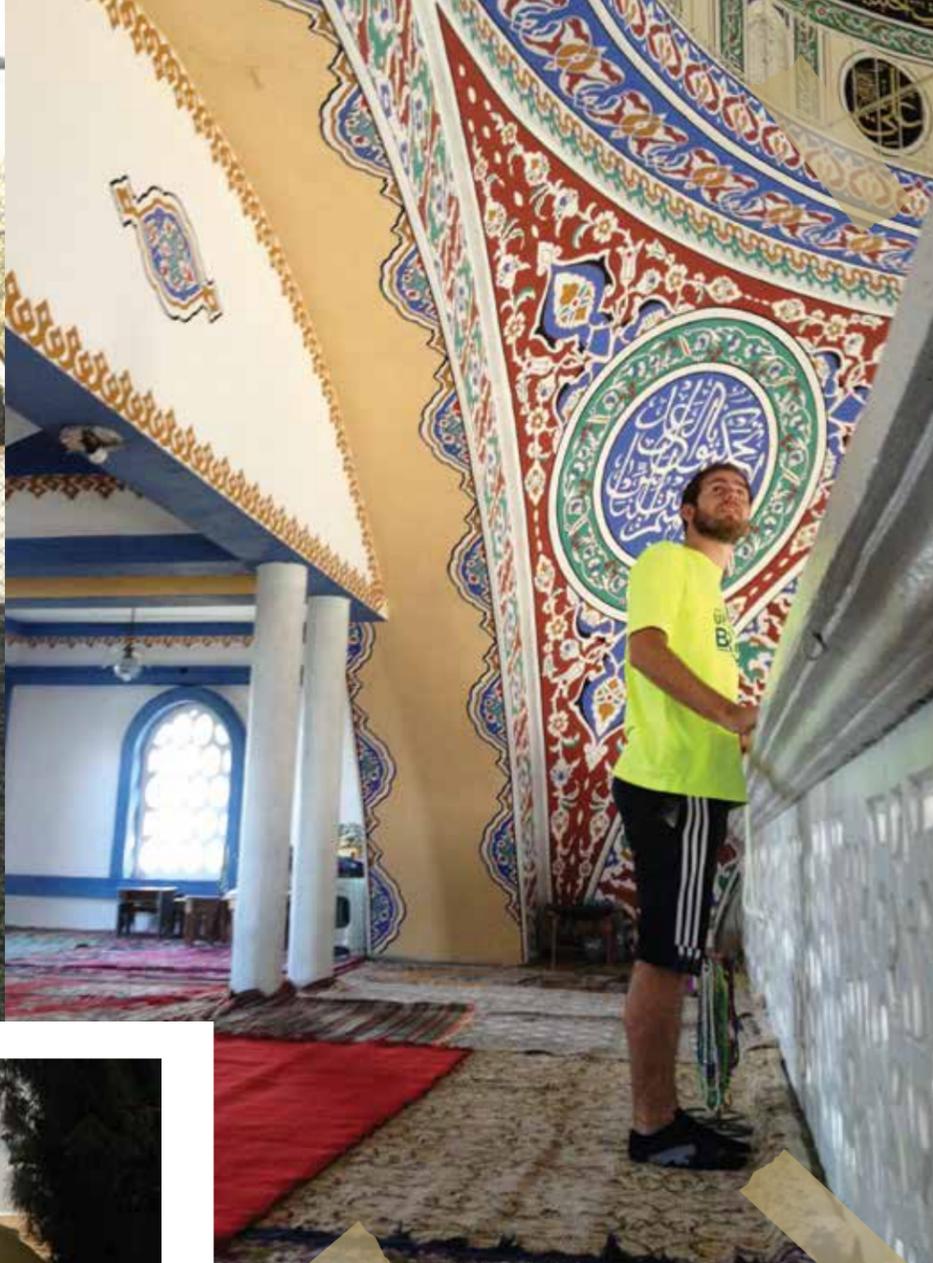
Their connections to adults often developed through encounters with children and students, who were curious about these two young Americans riding through their villages. Children often chased them through the streets, and Mason and Rachel sometimes let the children ride their bikes. Lost in a neighborhood on their first night in Albania, they were fortunate when a group of young people came up to them and one college student who spoke English inquired, "What are you doing here? We have never seen foreigners in our village."

Within minutes, Rachel and Mason were being led to one of the student's parents' homes, where they were invited in. The family served them a huge meal of shrimp, fried potatoes, roasted peppers, hard sausage, cheeses, vegetables, breads, wine, and beer. A couple of family members spoke English, and they talked for hours. "Rachel and I were so exhausted, but we were compelled to push through because of their kindness and hospitality," says Mason. "That was a common thing." They stayed two nights.

While the couple found people everywhere to be friendly, often their local hosts were concerned for them, warning them to be wary of dangers in the next country over. "It was interesting to hear a repeated pattern of nationalistic pride joined with some level of distrust of neighboring peoples throughout southeastern Europe," Rachel says. "Ultimately, though, by keeping a trusting outlook of people, paired with common sense and being aware of the circumstances around us, we found that people everywhere were welcoming." (The only incident on the whole trip occurred in Turkey, the country in which they felt the safest. Some food and Rachel's rain gear were stolen.)

No language barriers

The couple arrived in Greece via ferries from Albania and Italy and stayed there for a month. They were captivated by Greece's northern mountainous countryside and



(clockwise from top left) In the Greek mountain village of Metsovo, Mason played soccer with local kids; Mason taking in the beauty of a mosque in Troy, Turkey; Byram, the Turkish truck driver who insisted on giving them tea and a lift, and took them 100 miles; the couple spent a night in their tent on a beach by the Aegean Sea; at the top of Mt. Katara in northern Greece, Rachel surprised Mason with a treat of baklava.

peaceful way of life, exemplified by the shepherds with their flocks of sheep. And they were grateful for the sparse traffic, the early autumn weather, and the good inexpensive food, especially the cheeses, breads, pastries, and wines.

Mother Nature spoiled a few days with heavy rain that left them trapped in their small tent in a field of tall grass where snails and mosquitoes ruled. "We are both go-with-the-flow kind of people," says Rachel. "It was uncomfortable, and we were ready for a hotel by the third day, but there was no animosity or tension between us."

Next, they traveled to the mountain village of Metsovo, Greece, where they enjoyed the fresh mountain air and Mason played soccer with local kids. Then they biked up Mount Katara, using one of the highest roads in Greece, Katara Pass. When they parked their bikes next to a road sign and walked up the hill to the highest point, they shared a few quiet moments, the spectacular view, and two pieces of sticky, nutty baklava, a surprise Rachel had purchased before leaving Metsovo. "It was sort of a reward for us," Mason says.

Sometimes, their encounters with local people were a little unusual.

In the village of Livadi, Greece, they had a humorous encounter with Georgios, a man who spotted them camping. "He kept speaking in Greek when we obviously had no idea what he was saying," remembers Rachel. "He took over Mason's attempt to build a campfire. He broke out in song. He had eyebrows like the feathers of a great horned owl. He left and then he came back in the middle of the night and made sounds of a creature — howling, yipping, yodeling. We were thoroughly scared."

But the next day, Georgios and his English-speaking granddaughter gave them grapes and spinach-cheese pies and brought them to their home, where they met his wife and friends, drank Greek coffee, laughed, and sang songs.

Everywhere, generosity and respect

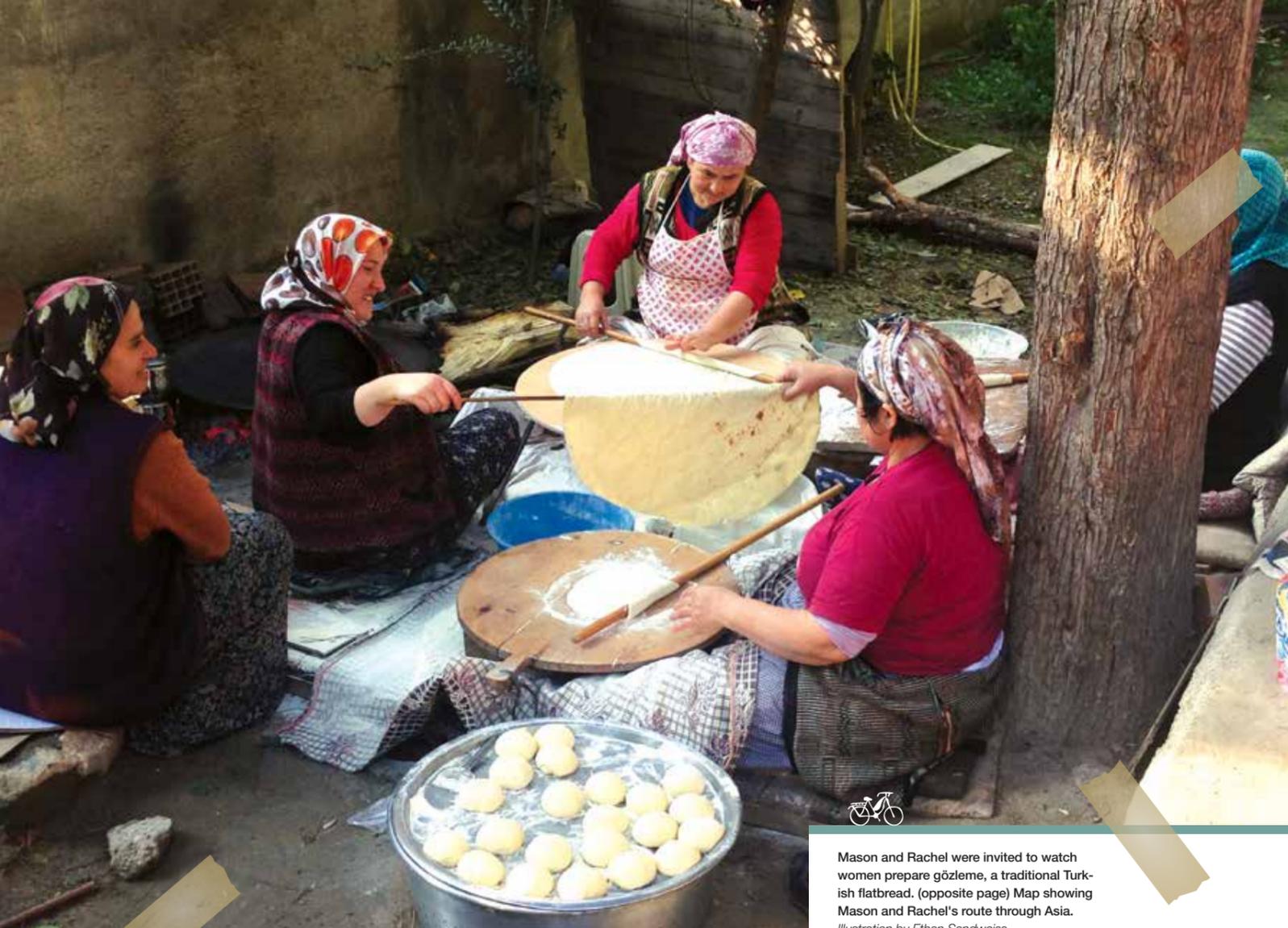
If there was a place where the couple was most eager to learn about the culture, it was Turkey, where they stayed five weeks through December. Five times daily, they heard the Muslim call to prayer broadcast through speakers from minarets. A few times, they were invited into mosques where they saw that men and women pray separately. Everyone they met, the couple agreed, treated them with respect. They were told that helping people and giving to those in need are integral to the Islamic faith. People frequently invited them to drink Turkish black çay [a type of tea] and invited them to share in evening-long meals.

One particular incident that occurred when they were on their way to a Warm Showers host's house has stayed in their memories and illustrates the generosity they experienced in Turkey.

"We were having a horrible day," Mason recounts. "Our phone batteries had died, so we couldn't use our map to direct us to our host's home. There was horrible traffic. We'd had multiple flat tires, and someone stole food and Rachel's rainwear. Then we had to climb up hills to the host's house. We decided we needed a beer to decompress, but we arrived at the grocery just as the grocer was locking up the doors for the night."

Seeing the disappointment in their faces, the grocer invited them to come home with him and share çay with his family. Rachel and Mason loaded their bikes into his van and off they went. What started off as simply tea evolved into sharing the family's evening meal, a





Mason and Rachel were invited to watch women prepare gözleme, a traditional Turkish flatbread. (opposite page) Map showing Mason and Rachel's route through Asia.
Illustration by Ethan Sandweiss



chance to shower, and a safe place to sleep for the night.

“We talked about ourselves using Google Translate, and he shared things about the Muslim faith,” Mason says. “He and others are very open about their religion and want us to know that it is not the way it’s portrayed in the media today.”

While traveling throughout southeastern Europe and Turkey, Rachel observed how gender roles played out. It was common for women to do most of the cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, as well as the serving of meals to men and guests. In Greece and Turkey, the popular coffee houses seemed to be a male domain, and Rachel was sometimes the only woman present. While it was something she noticed, she says it didn’t make her feel uncomfortable or that she was

being disrespectful of local customs. She did, however, forego tank tops and shorts to dress more modestly when it seemed appropriate.

Because of Mason and Rachel’s interactions in Turkey were with men and children, it was an unusual experience when one day they were invited to share the company of women. While taking a photograph on a side street, a woman called them over to a shady spot where a group of about 10 women were making gözleme, a flatbread often topped with meat, cheese, or vegetables. Some of the women made dough balls; others rolled them out on small, wooden tables and cooked them over a large, hot plate resting on embers. “Although the women spoke little English, we sat with this group for an hour or so, enjoying çay, laughs, and simply enjoying the moment,” recalls Rachel.

Another time when the lack of common language proved no barrier involved Byram, a husky truck driver who saw them riding on a Turkish road. He pulled over and offered them çay, then insisted on giving them a ride, strapping their bikes on his truck and taking them about 100 miles. They communicated through laughs, smiles, pantomiming, and simple gestures — a common occurrence during their trip, says Mason.

Their special encounters with local people in Turkey were innumerable. A family they stayed with for four days in mid-November invited them to a traditional family wedding and even gave them formal clothes to wear. “We were treated like family,” says Rachel. “They insisted we go with them. They just wanted to have us there.”

A change of plans and continents

Cold weather and bad snowstorms made bicycling difficult and dangerous, so Mason and Rachel decided on a new plan; they flew to Bangkok and spent the next two months cycling through Thailand and Laos [Laos People’s Democratic Republic (PDR)].

Congested, polluted, and yet one of the most visited cities in the world, Bangkok, with its 8 million people and innumerable Buddha statues, made indelible impressions on Rachel and Mason.

They could smell the pollution. Images of the king are everywhere, and the royal family gets an hour of coverage on the television news every night. Traffic is chaotic and fast paced, vehicles travel on the left rather than the right, and many people use scooters to get around. Markets selling food are ubiquitous. And they clearly saw the difference between

Bangkok’s wealthy district and the poor, rural areas in the Thai countryside.

“In Southeast Asia, the bare minimum is so much different and less than the bare minimum here,” Rachel says.

They rode north into rural Thailand, but had some difficulty communicating with people there because of the complexity of the tonal language. Through hand signals and a few words they learned, they were able to communicate enough to find a place to sleep and get food, often fried rice and vegetables. They found wonderful tropical fruits and other treats in the many markets — one of the things they most enjoyed about Thailand. “The markets were so festive and served as community gathering places,” Rachel says.

The last leg of their trip abroad was difficult because of the poverty they witnessed and the climate. Still, there were bright spots.



(top, right) Houses on the river by Uthai Thani. The river is the lifeblood of the people in the province.

(above) While passing through a village in Thailand, a group of women at a food stand flagged Rachel over. The women had many questions for Mason and Rachel and said they were envious of their noses.



They spent days cycling along the border with Burma, where they saw Mae La, a camp where more than 40,000 Burmese refugees of the Karen ethnic group live. Huts in the camp are made of bamboo and dried leaves.

They cycled through Thailand and Laos PDR during the dry season, where they observed people living in simple structures without some basic necessities, yet with televisions and stereos. Disturbingly, in Vientiane, the Laos PDR capital, they visited the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) Visitor Centre honoring victims of the U.S. bombing during the Vietnam War. The museum raises awareness and funds for prosthetics and therapeutic support for victims of unexploded “bombies” still scattered throughout densely vegetated areas of the country.

“As we cycled through villages, we were greeted with “sabai dee” (hello) from the bushes, trees, houses,” says Rachel of their time in Laos PDR. “They are taught as babies by their parents to wave and welcome passersby. They lined up for high fives often along the road.” The couple also took pleasure in sleeping across from a magnificent waterfall on the Bolaven Plateau in the Champasak Province.

While the country is developing in certain ways, Mason says he’s read about the high degree of corruption and the exploitation of the poor in Laos PDR. “We were confused, grumpy, and upset because there were so many contrasting things going on in the country,” he says. “But at the end of the day, we are grateful to have been there, to have witnessed what is going on.”

Coming home through the U.S.

While they considered coming home in January, they decided to lengthen their trip and see southwestern U.S., where neither had traveled before. They flew to Los Angeles and rode for two months on a southern route down the California coast and then east through nine states.

By mid-April, eager to see family and friends, the last steep and hilly stretch through southern Indiana was a reminder, the couple says, that adventure and challenge are there for the finding, even in your own backyard. Three of Mason’s brothers met them in French Lick, Indiana, for the final day of their journey on April 18 and rode or drove with them into Bloomington. They celebrated at The Uptown Café the next day with 40 family members and friends.



Reflections on the trip

Rachel and Mason are adamant: It wasn’t just a bike trip. “These travel experiences were such a real education in many subjects — geography, history, gender and race inequality, religion, linguistics, politics, environment, and globalization,” according to Mason.

Rachel says, “While biking, it’s a lesson in accepting the good and the bad things as they come. It makes you appreciate that you can get through down periods when not everything goes as you might like it to.”

“It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” Mason says. “It was more of a psychological challenge, getting through the long day and wondering where I’m going to sleep that night. We would just be so tired sometimes.”

They both learned valuable lessons about traveling with a partner. There were no big blowups between them, says Rachel, adding they were good traveling companions. That’s not to say they didn’t have their grouchy days when they needed space. A nice aspect of

bicycle travel, she explains, is that when you need to, you can spend time cycling apart while still being together. “We tried not to let our emotions get to the point where we weren’t able to treat each other in a good way,” she says.

Now they’re trying to apply what they learned and carry it with them as they pursue meaningful work. During the summer, Rachel worked as an environmental educator at a Banneker Community Center summer camp and a farmhand on a local family farm, in addition to teaching a weekly yoga class. She recently moved to Chicago to take part in a fellowship in social entrepreneurship.

Mason spent the summer working in Indianapolis with Growing Places Indy, an apprenticeship program that focuses on urban agriculture and mindfulness. He’s now employed there.

Neither Rachel nor Mason wants to get caught up in a typical mainstream lifestyle. “Regular life doesn’t have to be mundane

or follow a very set pattern,” Rachel says. “We want to find ways to live our ideals and dreams wherever life takes us.” ✨



(above) Rachel maneuvering through a herd of cows on a Thai roadway.

(right) Mason and Rachel visited the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) Visitor Centre honoring victims of the U.S. bombing during the Vietnam War. The museum raises funds for prosthetics for victims of unexploded “bombies” still scattered throughout areas of the country.



(above) Look closely and you will see Mason on a raft approaching a waterfall in the Bolaven Plateau of southern Laos PDR. (below) Mason and Rachel with Mason’s niece Tacora, 3, at their welcome home party at The Uptown Café.