

Stunning East Bay Country Riding

By Dan Shryock

I am alone by the side of the road. To my left are rolling East Bay hills with vibrant green grass stretching like carpet over rises and swales. To the right is a guardrail and a sudden plunge down to the Calaveras Reservoir that extends along the valley floor. Friends have ridden ahead, disappearing around one in a series of panoramic bends.

Tour Highlight

I stopped to enjoy a long, deliberate look across this vast, undeveloped land. I've never been here before; I don't know when I'll be back. It is difficult to find oneself physically isolated in a major metropolitan region such as the San Francisco Bay Area. But, for now, I am alone. I don't want to move.

Our cycling group came here to preview the Primavera Century, the annual spring ride staged by the Fremont Freewheelers Bicycle Club. A ride starting and ending in an urban city may not sound enticing. Who wants to ride through city traffic and urban sprawl? Happily, the Primavera Century is surprisingly beautiful. It's a highlight of our 10-day California cycling tour.

Tour Rides

Three routes are available during this year's event on April 21. There's a metric century that loops north to the I-580 corridor and back. A 100-miler follows the same roads and adds an extension to Livermore and up into the hills around Altamont Pass. Some riders skip Altamont and shorten that ride to 85 miles. The elevation gain is 4,200 feet for 62 miles and 6,300 feet for those heading to Altamont. There's also a comfortable, flat 25-mile fun ride west to Coyote Hills Regional Park.

Find what You want

"The Primavera is good in that someone can change what route they want to do even during the ride," says Andy Sass, chair of the club's event organizing committee. "Since the 100K has two good climbs, there needs to be a decent level of fitness.

"I always tell people to sign up for a bit longer route than what is comfortable because if you are doing well on the metric, it is worth doing the 85-mile option. There is not much climbing involved and you get to ride through vineyards and have lunch at Rios-Lovell Winery. There are some great views there."



Posing with the statue of Bosco Ramos, the four-legged honorary mayor of Sunol. Photo by Dan Shryock.

Rider Input

Route planning isn't easy, especially when organizers can't control external factors such as landslides and traffic. The bike club also surveys participating riders each year and factors that input into route improvements. As a result, cyclists in 2024 will pedal in a new direction.

"We had to do an out-and-back (on the metric loop) because of heavy rains and road closures the past two years," Andy says. "Niles Canyon also has been an issue with construction and traffic seems to be getting heavier every year. So, we came up with the idea of reversing the traditional route to get through Niles Canyon early Sunday morning when traffic is light."

Once in Pleasanton, cyclists can decide to head toward Livermore or continue to Sunol and Fremont.

"A couple of us rode through Livermore trying several routes and we came up with a route that everyone is looking forward to," Andy says. "The question is, 'Why didn't we reverse the route years ago?'"

The longer rides' risk-reward ratios swing positive. Rural roads appear within 4 miles of the start when the route turns east on Niles Canyon Rd. and it keeps getting better on Palomares Rd. While road shoulders are intermittent, safety can be found in numbers when the peloton passes through on an early Sunday morning. Look for summit photo opportunities at the 10-mile marker.



Green rolling hills along remote Calaveras Rd. — a scenic highlight of the Primavera Century. Photo by Dan Shryock.

“The climb on Palomares Rd. is exactly five miles with the steepest portion at the beginning and not at the top,” Andy says. “It is alongside a creek and is mostly shaded.”

There are several appealing, remote roads today. There’s a vineyards segment between Pleasanton and Livermore. There’s a trio of climbs to the Altamont Pass and its windmills, and a gradual 15-mile downhill grade back to Pleasanton.

I think it’s all a prelude to Calaveras Rd. where oaks, laurel trees, wildflowers, and pristine pavement greet you at the entrance to the Sunol Regional Wilderness. Climb 4 shaded miles until foliage clears to reveal the Calaveras Reservoir. Once the sightseeing there is completed, head toward a 4-mile, 1,000-foot descent back to Milpitas and eventually Fremont. This was called “The Wall” in past years because riders had to face it. Perhaps now it should be renamed “The Drop.”

Event Deets & Reg.

Consider registering early for the April event. Andy says the distance

rides are capped at 1,000 cyclists and they usually quickly sell out.

The departure window for the distance rides is 6:30 to 8 a.m. Riders can start the fun ride between 10 and 11 a.m.

Once on the road, there are well-stocked rest stops, SAG vehicles, and professional mechanic support. It may be chilly to start but riders can remove clothing layers once they warm up. “You don’t have to carry jackets and stuff as there are bag drops and your gear will be transported to the finish,” he says.

Sign-in and packet pick-up are on ride day. All rides start and end at Ohlone College, 43600 Mission Blvd. in Fremont. For complete information, frequently asked questions, and registration visit the event website — ffbc.org/primavera.

E-bikes Allowed

Pedal-assisted Class 1 and 3 e-bikes are permitted on all rides. Throttle-assisted Class 2 bikes, however, are not.

Wine Country Weekend

The rest stop at Rios-Lovell Winery on

Livermore’s east side reminds us once more that this is wine country, and we return to sample some vintages there once the bikes are racked. Our time is split between patio tastings and port samplings at the bar inside.

The Tri-Valley area (Livermore, Pleasanton, and Dublin) is our base camp for this ride. We’re extending our stay here to enjoy the food and wineries. The Visit Tri-Valley website — visittrivalley.com — is our information resource. Consider checking the website for wine country events during your stay.

Dan Shryock’s new book, “Cycling Across Oregon: Stories, Surprises & Revelations Along the State’s Scenic Bikeways,” is available March 27 on Amazon.com. For more about his book visit Dan Shryock at www.danshryock.com

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