

# Fast Is Fun

RIDING A BICYCLE IS AN ADDICTIVE THRILL, AND THE FITTER YOU GET, THE MORE INTOXICATING IT BECOMES.

BY [PETER FLAX](#) Published: Mar 19, 2024



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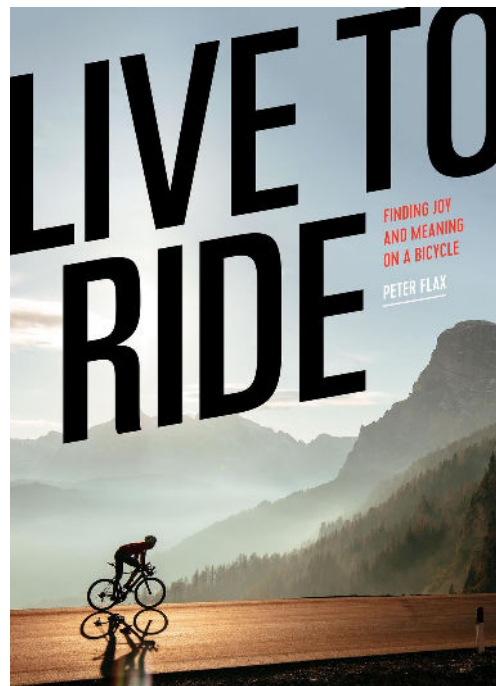
**T**hink back to your earliest days, riding a bicycle as a [kid](#). Chances are, it's a nostalgic exercise. Most passionate bike folks have wonderful memories of childhood riding that stay with them. That feeling of freedom, the way you could explore your neighborhood and then far beyond—that sense of discovery never really goes away for most riders. Likewise for the sense of exciting unpredictability, the way a simple trip so frequently became a grand adventure. The same is true of the thrill of experiencing [speed](#) on a bicycle. You carry your earliest flirtations with going fast with you forever.

I grew up in a leafy suburb of New York City that's full of quiet streets and undulating terrain, and I fell in love with the joys of [descending](#). As I got older, I realized that the hills weren't as big as I remembered them to be, but as a child, I found going down those hills enormously exciting. With the wind in my hair and my eyes tearing, I had this palpable feeling of testing the limits of control. I was so enamored with that feeling that I soon began [pedaling up those hills](#) so I could tear down them again. These days, I climb to test myself or get fit, but back then, I rode uphill just so I could ride downhill. Maybe you did the same.

## **There are so many cycling questions that have nothing to do with racing, where speed is the answer.**

I still access these sense memories, and I suspect a lot of bike riders access theirs, too. I have a catalog of greatest hits that I replay all the time: The forty-five-minute scorchers down legit alpine passes—like the rocket-ship ride on a steel bike down East Rim Drive off the plateau of the Grand Canyon or the whiteknuckle corkscrew down Monte Grappa in northern Italy on a top-of-the-line [Pinarello Dogma](#). Those bucket-list tailwind rides, where spinning 35 mph (56 kph) for an hour was possible, even with panniers on my bike. That morning I piloted a Trek Slash the whole way down California’s Mammoth Mountain without grabbing the brakes once. The fastest commute I ever had coming home from work in LA—on a single-speed with deep-section Mavic wheels. The time I rode through a torrential rainstorm at the Tour de Tucson and somehow still had great legs in my fifth hour of riding. These are all memories that make me smile.

**Excerpted from “Live to Ride: Finding Joy and Meaning on a Bicycle” by Peter Flax**



Bicycles can do so many different things—they can provide basic [transportation](#) and transcendent adventure and physical and mental well-being—but it is undeniable that they also can be instruments of excitement. When I was editor in chief of *Bicycling* magazine, I was pretty cynical about running a cover line like “Fast and Fun,” but it always did well on newsstands. And it spoke volumes to what recreational enthusiasts really love about riding bikes: going fast.

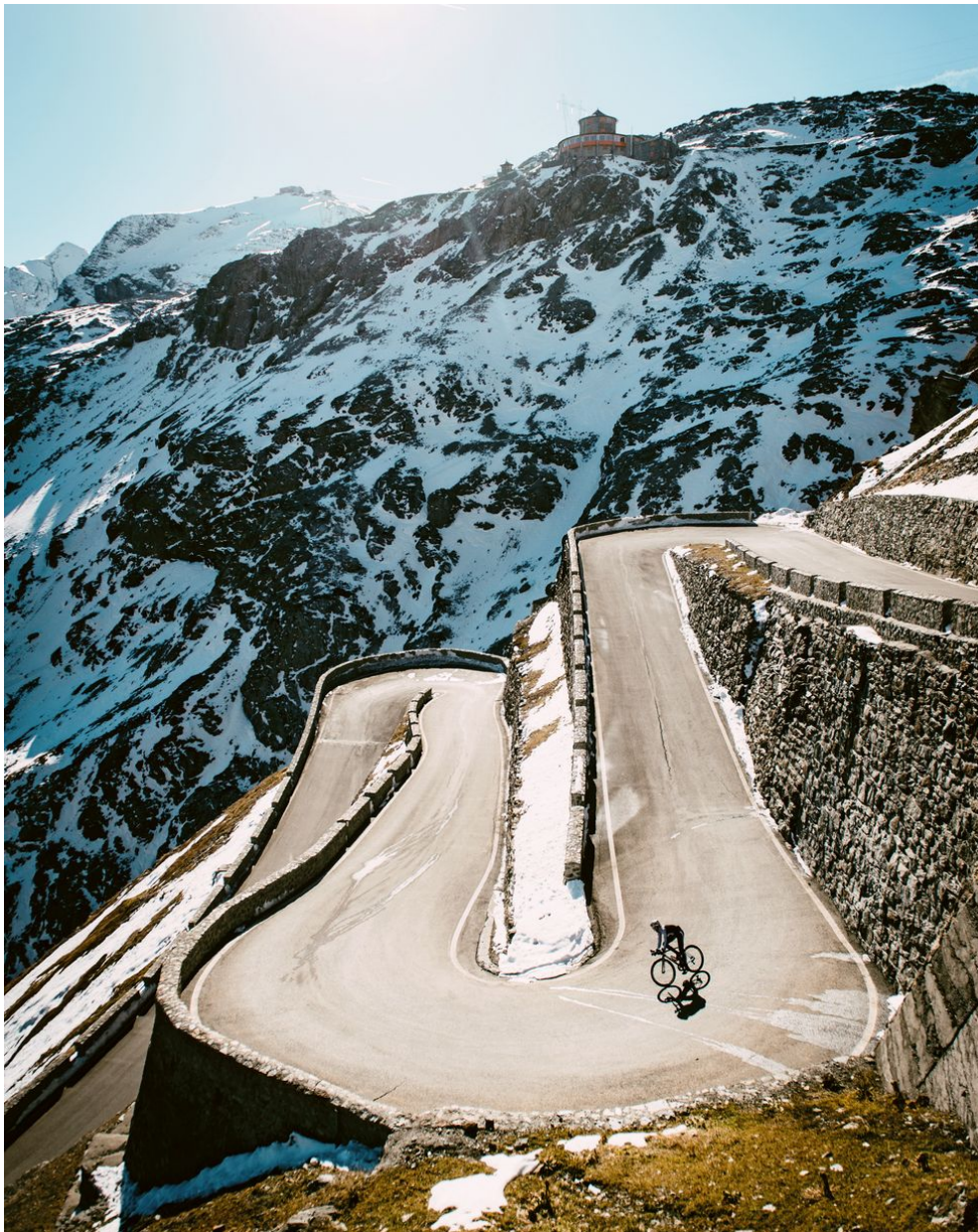
There are so many cycling questions that have nothing to do with racing, where speed is the answer. What's the best way to get through a tricky technical section on a mountain bike? What if you're [riding to work](#) and are running a few minutes late to a meeting? What if you're cruising through rolling terrain in the countryside and want to put a big smile on your face? Going a bit faster is the answer.

This is not an essay about competition. In my life, I've raced bikes enough to know that I am not particularly good at it, but also enough to see how the whole enterprise of racing can trigger an enormous visceral response. There are elements of the sensations and experiences of racing that say more about poetry than [performance](#). Racing can provide a heightened sense of awareness, a flood of adrenaline and other euphoric stuff, and an overload of visual stimulation.

Over a rather prosaic decade of racing bikes, my happiest memories involved sitting in the middle of a huge pack of considerably stronger riders, as completely in the moment as one can be. There were so many bodies and bikes within inches of me, and I was completely shielded from the wind and as fit as I ever will be. It was like being an integral part of a human roller coaster. It was as if the world slowed down as the pack sped up, and there was this intoxicating immersion in going so fast in such a dynamic environment.

But tons of riders chase this euphoric [flow state](#) without ever pinning on a number for a race. People who are passionate about mountain biking obviously love to connect with nature, but most of them also love the sensations of speed—whether they are bombing down a steep trail at a ski resort or railing banked turns on a purpose-built trail or simply flowing down technical singletrack through a blur of greenery. Like so many other kinds of bikes, [mountain bikes](#) can be a bit wobbly or balky at slow speeds and get more stable and capable as they go faster. Anyone who has pedaled through rocks and roots and sand knows that picking up speed almost always makes these obstacles easier to navigate. Well-designed mountain bikes always want to go a little faster.

The folks who like to wander on road bikes have their own love affair with speed. Even at moderate speeds, pedaling a bicycle on rolling terrain is work—it can range from invigorating effort to existential toil—and cruising downhill is almost always glorious payback. There is something undeniably delicious about coasting down a hill that you surmounted under your own [power](#). The bicycle allows you to recover as you are treated to a theme-park quality experience. I have been on many group rides in such a moment, and if I have the presence of mind to look around at my companions, I often notice that everyone is smiling. It's that childhood sense memory coming back in full glory.



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**Nearly every sort of ride is a little bit more fun if you can go a little bit faster.**

You don't have to fly downhill to feel it. You can be with a small group of friends, riding faster and with less effort than you possibly could alone. You can receive that gift when you're lucky enough to have the wind at your back, when small shifts in hyperlocal weather can bring joy and sorrow. You can get that feeling when you do fifteen hard pedal strokes to get through a traffic signal before the light turns red, that tiny burst of euphoria that comes from knowing your body can respond when called upon.

Thankfully, the bike industry is full of good engineers, framebuilders, and product managers who enable all this fun. It's easy to criticize the biggest companies that make and sell bikes—for catering to the high-end consumer; for making racier bikes than most folks need; for making too many black, white, and red frames—but the reality remains that the quality of nearly every bike in your neighborhood bike shop is very high. Within a few years, the technology and designs that debuted at the [Tour de France](#) have trickled down to bikes that cost a fraction of those rarefied thoroughbreds. The pace of such improvement has gotten so fast that even entry-level bikes from second-tier brands can be counted on to deliver a surprising amount of spirited performance. They are designed to be fast and fun.

Specialized, one of the two giants of the industry (Trek being the other), has made a decade-long bet on the marketing campaign “Aero Is Everything.” Like any catchy marketing slogan, it's a bit ridiculous—because comfort and weight and reliability and other things are still something—but I admire the way Specialized has chased and disseminated this point of view. Chris D'Aluisio, a longtime development guru at the company, is an articulate advocate for how incremental aerodynamics and stiffness do more than help pros (and recreational racers) win bike races—they allow the rest of us to ride a little bit faster without making all the sacrifices demanded of elite athletes. “What I notice by working with the best riders is that their observations always translate to the average rider,” he says. “We all go through the same air, and we all generally want to go farther and faster with less energy.”

And while the most obvious applications of these observations relate to enthusiasts chasing fitness and performance, they also apply to the least sporty corners of the bike world. Nearly every sort of ride is a little bit more fun if you can go a little bit faster. This is true on rail trails and gravel roads and urban bike lanes. Anybody who has ever ridden anywhere with a kid knows this is true: Each ride can be a lively escapade.

I log thousands of miles every year on the beachfront bike paths of Los Angeles County and see folks on stately cruisers and big-box-bought hybrids—I see them extending their feet off the pedals when they coast downhill and rocking their shoulders with pleasurable labor to get a little extra speed in a tailwind. And likewise, I've seen thousands of bike-share users in big cities like New York and Washington, DC, pursue the inconsequential glory of a speedy-ish commute, the way a trip borne of utility and purpose sparked some moments of playful effort. Even a heavy city bike likes to go a bit faster if you're up for it.

E-bikes are changing the game, too, in the way they let people commute to work or run errands or otherwise replace car trips. E-bikes will revolutionize urban transport and have the potential to be a vital climate-action tool. They are staggeringly efficient machines.

But they also are a shitload of fun to ride. Many people have never experienced the feeling of getting a well-engineered bicycle up to speed—and many others haven't done it in decades or associate it with suffering they don't find appealing. [E-bikes](#) can be a gateway drug to the addictive, exuberant sensations of riding a bicycle. It's really a glorious privilege if you are a committed road cyclist who, thanks to the right mix of training and equipment and experience, can regularly pass through the world at 17 miles (27 km) per hour or faster, but there's really no downside to expanding that thrill to other demographics, as long as they do it safely.

For years, I have been watching with interest as different government entities try to regulate the speed of e-bikes. It's impossible to make everyone happy, balancing utility, performance, safety, and manufacturing standards. In my opinion, the Class 3 e-bikes allowed in much of the United States, which can hit 28 mph (45 kph) before the motor cuts off, go a bit too fast for many users, encouraging relatively inexperienced riders to hit bike-racing speeds in complicated and pedestrian-heavy urban and suburban areas. And the EU standards, capping most e-bikes at 16 mph (26 kph), are just a little bit slow—in the United States, at least. That's why I love the Class 1 and 2 e-bikes available in the United States—riding 20 mph (32 kph) is at once thrilling, efficient, and safe in most (but not all) settings. Having the bikes seem legitimately fun will help them change the world.

Whatever kind of bike you choose, riding a bit more and improving your fitness will yield so many positive benefits. You will feel healthier and [more confident](#). You will wander farther and see more of your community. You will likely sleep better and feel more whole and more focused in your work.



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But it's even better than all that. You'll have more fun, too. This is something that people who don't ride struggle to understand, especially if they also spend a ton of time in a car stuck in traffic. Riding is addictively fun, and the fitter you get, the more narcotic it becomes. You can ride a little faster without suffering, it feels like play rather than work, and you often step off the bike feeling more refreshed than exhausted. This is why so many riders chase fitness and plot to get a lighter or more spirited bike—not because they want to win a race or set a [Strava PR](#) or beat their friends to a town line sign. They do it because it just feels so good.

One of the more cinematic examples of this phenomenon was an event called the LA Marathon Crash Race, which later became the LA Marathon Crash Ride. It's now defunct—arguably a victim of its own viral success. It was one of the most strangely wonderful rides I've ever done. It was the furthest thing from a normal race or even a normal ride. You don't usually meet for a ride outside a Vietnamese donut shop at 3:30 a.m. But that's exactly where I and a couple thousand other riders were—on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, near Tang's Donuts (sadly closed now), waiting for the Crash Ride to begin.

Riding the famed boulevards of Los Angeles is typically defined and confined by the ever-present traffic. Millions of people in cars clog things up and force bike riders to tentatively navigate through the margins. But for a decade, there was one brief window where these fabled streets belonged to bike culture—in the early-morning hours of one day in February or March, after the Los Angeles Marathon course had been barricaded but before the starting gun sounded.

The Crash Race started as a renegade free-for-all, mushroomed into a semi-regulated phenomenon, and then collapsed under its own weight. No one ever paid a cent to participate or signed a waiver. The participants represented the full spectrum of LA bike culture—the road racers and the [fixie kids](#), people of every race and ethnicity, folks on every manner of bike, some riders looking to race and others looking to test themselves and others just looking for a predawn parade.

When I did it in 2015, the event was already dying. The police presence was strong, meant to discourage the no-holds-barred racing that had defined the event in the past and made the city’s lawyers understandably nervous about liability. So it had by then become a massive fast-paced [group ride](#) from Hollywood to the ocean in Santa Monica.

Even in this watered-down form, it was pretty wild. I saw some spectacular crashes; I heard the sound of [carbon fiber](#) fracturing; I smelled the aroma of burning rubber as riders on fixed-gear bikes without brakes slid through high-speed corners. It was a parade of reckless joy. The wide streets of car-obsessed cities were ours for sixty minutes, and we lustily flew down Rodeo Drive and Santa Monica Boulevard and San Vicente Boulevard. People hooted and hollered. The point wasn’t to win something; the point was to experience this communal and intoxicating rally. The lead pack reached Santa Monica right before the sun came up—the ocean was starting to glimmer—and then wave after wave of riders barreled to the finish. Strangers high-fived each other. It was like we’d been given an hour to be kids again.

The magazine cover line should have said “Fast Is Fun.” It’s the truth.

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*Excerpted from [Live to Ride: Finding Joy and Meaning on a Bicycle](#) by Peter Flax. Copyright 2024 Peter Flax. Used with permission of Artisan, an imprint of Workman Publishing, a division of Hachette Book Group Inc., New York, NY. All rights reserved.*

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PETER FLAX is based in Los Angeles and writes about sports, adventure, and culture; his book [Live to Ride: Finding Joy and Meaning on a Bicycle](#) is out in March 2024.