

Ebiking by Equestrian

This week I took my first ebike ride. I suggested it to my non-equestrian friend Chuck so we could get out and enjoy the weather. He has a regular mountain bike and was all in for the idea. We are both sixty plus, so it was about time to check out the new-fangled bikes.

I like to think I am open minded. I rode a bicycle as a child and rode to classes in college on my ten speed girls Schwinn bike. I even went mountain biking once! That was a trip. Once your muscles go numb, you just keep peddling and keep up. I was astonished by the lightness and agility of the modern mountain bike.

On this beautiful spring week, I wanted to explore a rail trail that is in the making. I always like to have a mission for my expeditions into the Jefferson National Forest. This one was to check out the potential for equestrian use on a section I had not ridden before.

So, we go all the way to Roanoke, an hour away to rent these fancy “old-people” bikes. The nice athletic fellow at the bike shop suggests we try two styles of e-bikes and see which we like best. They were both for sale in the “used” section. He gives us a short lesson in the parking lot showing the gears and brakes and digital controller. I think, “This is really just to make sure we can actually ride a bike.” He shows us how you can set the power to 1,2, or 3 by a little electronic button. Basically, the rest of it is just like a regular bike.

On the silver bike, the battery is located on a rack behind the seat, so it looks rather like a regular mountain bike. On the yellow bike, the thick battery is in the “down tube” of the frame, giving it that typical ebike look just above the pedals. There in the parking lot I try the electric assist at level one. Whoa there! Off I go, a little faster than expected. I say, “I’m not sure I like a bike with a brain.”

After another hour’s drive west, we arrive on a dirt road and unload the bikes. The day has become hot now with gnats swarming around our faces and the sun beating down on the dusty road. Pedaling away, the breeze is just right to cool everything down and wow, this is easy! Maybe it’s like horseback riding for a biker: it seems really fabulous for the first 15 minutes. As we whiz along, I see beautiful wildflowers I’d like to inspect, but it’s too complicated to stop. My partner is too far away to hear a suggestion to stop. I see a box turtle and wave a quick “hello turtle”. It is the perfect season for finding the elusive Morel mushrooms but at this speed it is impossible. Looking down, I see 5.6 mph on my speedometer. It seems so much faster than riding my horse at 5.6 mph!

Somehow mushroom hunting and wildflower viewing seems impossible today, even when I am just tooling along, going at a very conservative and safe speed on the gravel surface.

We stop for a break after what seems like a long time, and my tailbone hollers out to me. The seat is a cushy triangle thing but nothing like my saddle that is form fitted to my buttocks. With a bike saddle, one cannot ride in multiple different positions, like I do in my trail saddle to stay comfortable. The bike is not thrilled to slow down like my horse is. It just keeps speeding along until you use the brakes.

Another thing: When my attention strayed off to the side of the trail to gaze at an interesting plant or tree, the bike followed. Maybe it does have a brain! It heads towards whatever you're looking at. It must be some of that discreet body position that a horse can detect!

One has to be constantly on guard not to go off the side of the trail. What will I do if that stick ahead is a snake stretching halfway across the trail? Looking down at every bump, stick and pothole, I am vigilant not to lose control. I much prefer that my horse does all that business so I can gaze around at the scenery! It is not surprising that bikers seem to come up behind horses without noticing them when their attention is focused ten feet in front of them. This strikes me as a sad thing if you cannot gawk at the scenery, plants and birds.

I admit it's nice you don't have to find a tree to tie to when you stop. The bike just stays where you put her. I will also admit that I have never been kicked or bitten by a bike. The hay bill and vet bills are likely much lower that for horses.

When we rode back down to the truck, there was a stiff wind in my face, bringing me back about 30 years to a bike ride around the periphery of Isla Mujeres in Mexico. The hot wind blew in my face that day and it made the last 10 miles of that trip a miserable experience. Ebikes did not exist but there would have been a very good place for them.

We see several side trails that a real mountain biker would have ridden down with ease, and I wonder "What's down that trail?" "No!" my better judgement screams.

After about three hours of riding, my tailbone is quite ready to quit. Chuck says, "You're used to riding a horse!" as though that would have prepared my derrier for the bike. Not so, my dear.

The ebike would be a wonderful thing for riding around town and for powering up hills as though defying gravity. I can now appreciate the attraction for a biker who has grown older and needs a little assist.

I am glad I tried the ebike but I will stick to horseback riding as long as I can. When I go to the forest, I much prefer my horse. It's a togetherness thing. I am never lonely with my horse. He can find the way back to the trailer better than I can. He is interested in his surroundings and is as relieved as I am when we get home. It's a totally different experience. I can see the other side now, but I'll not be trading soon.