



Author Cassie Zupke aboard the Bosch-equipped Triot trike along the Route of the Hiawatha in Idaho.

Riding the Route of the Hiawatha on a Triot

By Cassie Zupke
Photos by Cassie & Brian Zupke

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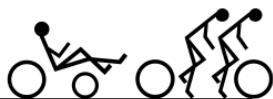
I was a thousand feet below ground, pedaling my way through the 1.6 mile St. Paul Pass (Taft) Tunnel in the Bitterroot Mountains, heading from Montana to Idaho. The tunnel had curved here enough that I couldn't see either entrance. I was in complete darkness, except for the light from my trike's headlights, which bounced off the puddles on the trail ahead and traced wavering lines across the tunnel's concrete walls. Fat, cold drops of water fell from the ceiling and splatted on my helmet, my legs, my jacket, and down my collar. Everywhere, the trail was wet and muddy. Water whispered in the drainage ditches that ran along either side of the path. I felt isolated and alone, despite the occasional disembodied sound of a rider somewhere ahead or behind me, calling out to their friends, or the solitary spots of light that would appear as cyclists passed me, breathing heavily as they made their way back the way I'd come. I was cold, wet, and muddy. It was awesome.

The day hadn't started out awesome. For months, my husband had planned our trip to the Route of the Hiawatha rail trail. It was one of his favorite rides and he was eager to share it with me. He was excited as we prepared for our three-week trip: clearing our work calendars, making travel reservations, gathering our gear, arranging for my mother to stay with our kids, and cleaning our house top-to-bottom so my mother would not get tetanus or rabies from her stay. I, on the other hand, was exhausted. I have rheumatoid arthritis, and between the fatigue, joint pain, and the mountain of preparations we had to make, by the time we were ready to leave for our trip, I wanted nothing more than to drive to a local hotel and sleep for a week.

By the time we got to the trailhead, I was not a happy camper. Four long days of driving and sleeping in less-than-comfortable hotel beds had left my arthritis aching. Here we were, on a beautiful, spring day, high in the mountains, the air smelling of pine and sunshine, a light breeze ruffling through the tree-tops, my husband grinning like a monkey as he got the trikes ready, and me – tired, shaky, and hoping I could make it through the trip and back to the car without needing help.

There was a ray of hope, though. We had been loaned two Triot Bosch Electric trikes for the trip. These tadpole trikes, (two wheels in the front, one in the back), were fully loaded. Both had Bosch electric assist motors that would provide an adjustable amount of power when we pedaled. My husband's trike was equipped with the Rohloff Speedhub,

Recumbent & Tandem Rider #69



while the trike I was riding had a Nuvinci automatic transmission that would take care of shifting gears for me. Both came with two Powerpack 500 lithium ion batteries, that were supposed to last a long time.

Our plan, however, was to ride seven miles, downhill, on a dirt and gravel path, then turn around and ride back up it. The Bosch was supposed to have enough torque and the batteries were supposed to last long enough to get me back up the hill, but in the shape I was in, I was going to be using the assist a lot. I wasn't completely sure I wouldn't end up pushing a fifty-pound trike uphill, in the mud, in the dark.

My husband set my trike up for me, then handed me the cushions I normally put on the seat of whatever trike I'm riding. I've got an oddly curved spine that makes most trike seats extremely uncomfortable. The Triot's seat, however, is different than most. It consists of a carbon fiber contoured shell that is supportive, yet flexible, and an air-cushioned seat cover. Tucked underneath my trike's seat cover were additional Purple honeycomb polymer cushion pads – a large pad on the seat bottom, plus a few smaller ones I could move to where my spine hit the seat back.

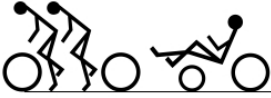
The first time I saw the seat, I wasn't convinced it would work for me. I'm 5'10" and broad in the beam. Between the flexible seat and the air cushion, I figured either that using the seat would be like sinking into a marshmallow that robbed me of leverage to peddle, or that the cushion would leak and I'd spend the ride with my spine grinding against a hard seat shell. A short test ride had eased my fears somewhat; the seat had seemed supportive, yet comfortable. I wasn't certain the seat would prove comfortable for my ride on the Hiawatha, but when the time came to make a decision, I left my cushions in the car.

One of the nifty things about the Triots, is that they had plenty of room for us to pack our gear. A rack over the rear wheel held a trunk with foldout panniers that easily carried tools, a spare, a jacket, gloves, lunch, extra water – everything we wanted to bring with us. A small trunk on the tube, right in front of seat, provided easy access storage that was great for phones, wallets, sunglasses,



*Above: The Triot's dual batteries provided ample power in reserve for a two-week trike tour.
Below: Daylight on the other side of the tunnel is 1.6 miles away. Dress warm and dry or suffer the consequences.*





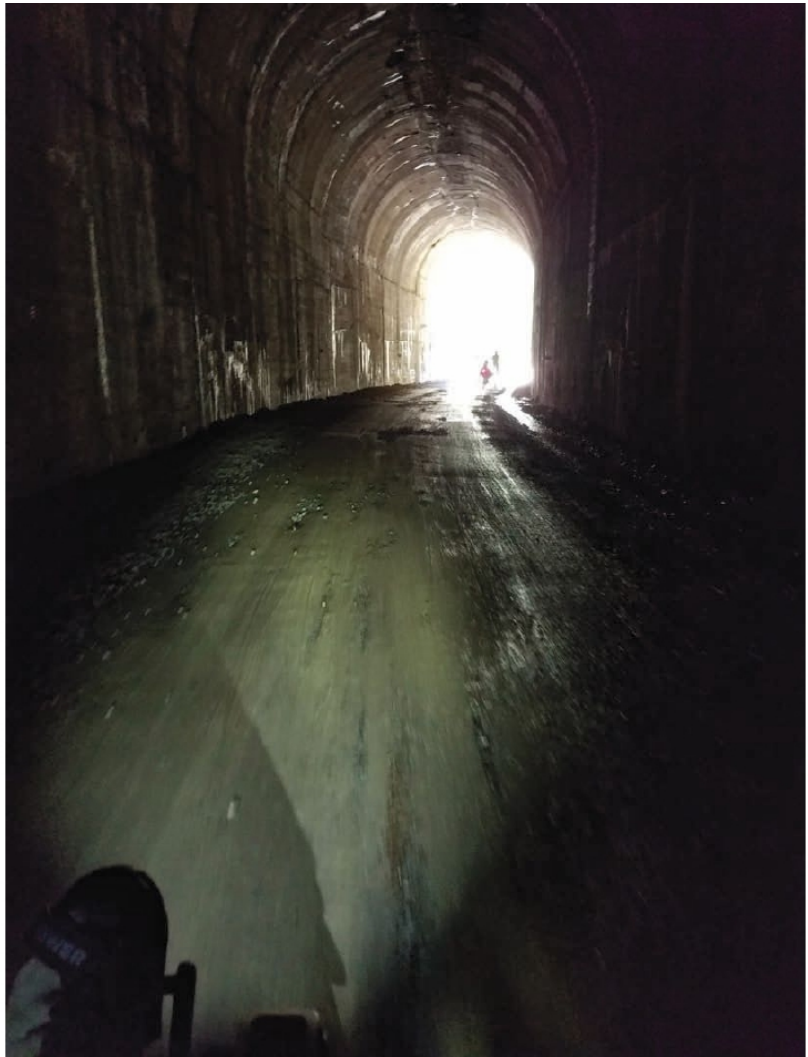
sunscreen, etc. Once we stowed our gear, we were ready to ride.

I had worried that the controls for the Triot's Bosch motor would be a little complex for me. I've ridden other e-trikes whose motor controls were complicated enough that I had to keep looking down at my hands or even pull the trike over so I could figure out which screen I was on, how to get where I wanted to be, which settings were which, and what buttons I need to push to do what I wanted. The Bosch's controls are much more simple and intuitive. There are two sets of buttons. One set of buttons controls the screen you are on and allows you to change settings, letting you cycle through displays that show your heart rate, speed (current, average and max), battery power levels, estimated remaining range, distance traveled, cadence and ride time. The other set of buttons lets you set the level of assistance you want, no matter which screen is showing. The buttons are easy to reach and easy to use. By the time we got to the trailhead, I was operating them with no difficulties.

The Route of the Hiawatha is maintained by Lookout Recreation and Ski Area, in partnership with the US Forest Service. We pedaled to the trailhead, where we bought our day passes and listened to a brief talk on trail safety and etiquette, and were checked to make sure we met trail requirements: we wore helmets; our trikes had lights; and our trikes were not motorized. Trikes and bikes with electric assist motors are allowed on the Hiawatha, as long as they do not have a throttle that allows the motor to supply power without the rider pedaling.

We started at the top of the trail, right at the entrance of the St. Paul Pass tunnel. Watching riders emerge was an education. All kinds of people were on the trail, from spandex-clad, seasoned riders to families with little kids perched behind their parents or being pulled in trailers. They all looked like they were having a great time. You could tell who the aggressive riders were from the stripe of mud that ran up their back to their hairline. (Fenders are your friends.) The riders were filthy but still smiling. (Trail personnel ensured that kids being pulled in trailers were protected from mud flying up from the bike's rear wheel.)

A weathered wooden framework marked



Lights are a requirement for riding through the seven tunnels on the trail. Wearing rain gear in the tunnels is also recommended.

the entrance to the tunnel. Riding through it was like riding into another world. Once the path turned enough to hide the tunnel mouth, we were in total darkness except for whatever light we brought with us. Both the Triots were equipped with dual Supernova LED headlights and a tail/brake light, so we were well-served, both in being able to see the path before us and by other riders being able to see us from behind or ahead.

On advice from my husband, I had worn my rain gear into the tunnel and I was glad I had. It protected me not only from most of the water dripping from overhead, but from the little bit of mud that wasn't diverted by

the Triot's fenders. I'd also been warned that the summertime temperature in the tunnel averaged in the mid-to-low 40's, but when you're standing in the warm sunshine, outside the tunnel, it is hard to imagine. Once we were under the mountain, though, it didn't take too long before I was thankful I'd worn gloves and long pants.

Riding 1.6 miles, in the dark, with water dripping overhead, and sounds echoing weirdly around you, is a heck of an experience. It wasn't scary, (though without good lights it could have been), it was more other-worldly, especially when I was riding in front of my husband. It was a completely

different experience than following his taillight. Looking into the darkness and watching reflected light bounce off the tunnel walls, I suddenly realized that the months of planning and preparation for this trip had been worth it.

Emerging from the tunnel was like pedaling back into the world, a world of fir trees, purple and white lilacs, and sunshine.

Though some people consider the St Paul Pass tunnel the highlight of the Route of the Hiawatha trail, the rest of the path is spectacular, too. Originally built to accommodate freight and luxury liner trains, the restored 15 mile trail traverses ten tunnels and seven trestles. The Bitterroot Mountains there are sharp and steep, which means the trestles seem almost impossibly high. The trail has a gentle grade and the path's hard-packed dirt and gravel make for an easy ride. The trail hugs the side of the mountain and provides a spectacular view across the valley far below to the lower portion of the trail as it traces its way across the opposing mountain ridge.

The train trestles across the way looked spindly and fragile, and I was a little

apprehensive as we approached the trail's first trestle. I needn't have been. Although watching the hillside fall away from the sides of the trail as we pedaled onto the bridge made me feel a little like we were riding over the edge of the world, the trail is wide, the guardrails are sturdy, and everything is very stable. We paused for a moment and enjoyed the feeling of being suspended between heaven and earth.

Despite the fact that we were riding peak season and the trail did not seem crowded, the Route of the Hiawatha gets over 15,000 riders and hikers a year. Because of this, the Lookout Recreation and Ski Area and Forest Service provide something that the few other trails I've ridden do not have – support personnel. Several times that afternoon, we encountered trail volunteers who asked if we needed help. Trail marshals staff the rest stops and patrol the path on bikes. They provide assistance as necessary: change tires, do simple bike repairs, give first aid, maintain the trail and restrooms, and answer endless questions. The marshals were friendly and knowledgeable. One was happy to name the



multitude of wildflowers we'd encountered, and another described the changes in animal life in the area due to the reintroduction of grey wolves. The marshals not only made the trail more safe, they added immensely to our enjoyment of the ride.

By the time we reached the trail's half-way point, we had passed through several tunnels and crossed a few trestles, and although the trail beckoned, it was time for us to turn around. Shuttle busses wait at the bottom of the Hiawatha to take riders and their bikes back to the trailhead, but we had decided to ride back up, something that we wouldn't have even considered without my trike having an electric assist motor.

Even with the assist motor, we weren't completely certain we could make it back to the car without having to push my trike. We'd ridden e-trikes up and down hills before and we knew that whether you had enough

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power to make it back up the hill came down to complex math equations involving torque, watts, the terrain, the distance you'd ridden, your speed, and how many candy bars you'd eaten in the last six months. We were pretty sure the Triots would make it back to the top, but not sure-sure.

So, I started our return trip by using the assist as little as I comfortably could. Then as I got tired, I used more assist. Then more. Pretty soon I was using a whole lot of assist. The Bosch motor provided plenty of torque to haul my ample backside up the mountain and the Triot's dual batteries had no problem supplying the power required to do so. I don't recall exactly how much battery we used that day, but during the three weeks we spent riding the Hiawatha and other mountain trails, we didn't charge the batteries every night and we never fell below 40% battery. The dual batteries gave me a long worry-free riding range, whether we were riding up a mountain or racing across a lake's causeway, trying to



Here later. Author Cassie Zupke pauses for a photo on the trestle seen in the previous photo.



beat a thunderstorm back to our hotel.

I had expected that by the time we got back to the top of the Hiawatha, two things would have happened. The first was that I'd be exhausted. I wasn't. The Bosch motor's four levels of assist had allowed me to successfully navigate the balance between the amount of power provided and the amount of battery used. It had allowed me to conserve my energy. I was happy tired, rather than dead-to-the-world-why-did-I-agree-to-do-this tired.

My second expectation was that I'd return to the car aching from being beat half to death from spending the day bouncing over a dirt trail. Again, I didn't. The Triot is built for comfort. In addition to the specially engineered seat that continued to be comfortable all day, the arm position and wrist rests are designed to allow you to relax your arms. I didn't have to clutch at the grips all day; I could just relax and let the trike do the work. Also, the Triot's full, independent suspension really smoothed out the trail.


Before riding the Triot, I had anticipated that it would be less stable than it was. The trike's seat is positioned higher than that of other trikes, which made it easier for me to get on and off, even with my bad knees. I had expected the higher seat meant a higher center of gravity that would make the trike more



Here now, there later. One of the seven converted railroad trestles that are contained on the trail. Detailed trail info is available online: <https://www.ridethehiawatha.com/>



likely to tip, but it didn't. The Triot was very stable. Its tires stuck to the ground even if I took a corner hard at speed, (which I have to admit, was a lot of fun).

I made it back to our car, safe, sound, tired, and happy. My fears that I would end up pushing a trike up the side of a mountain had proved unfounded. As my husband loaded up our gear and the trikes, he kept up a running litany of the other trails he wanted us to ride before we made our way back home. The day before, just listening to him would have left me apprehensive and exhausted, but now it was different. I had ridden the Hiawatha and enjoyed it. Spending the next two weeks riding trikes in the Pacific Northwest instead of dealing with work, life, and kids sounded like a whole lot of fun. As it turned out, it was. 

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