

The Ottawa Citizen

A Great Adventure; Sign up now to join the chain gang next summer

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Page: H4

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The first thing to know about the Great Waterfront Trail Adventure -- a 730-kilometre bicycle ride from Niagara-on-the-Lake to the Quebec border -- is that it isn't as impossible as it sounds.

You are probably thinking (as I first did): hard bodies, frisky twenty-somethings, tight spandex, supersonic speeds. But the eight-day event isn't a race, nor is it the exclusive province of the young and the fatless. It is an affordable, unusual, active vacation for anyone who is reasonably fit -- trick knees, arthritic backs, cranky hips and all.

In fact, most of the 200-odd participants in the second-ever organized waterfront ride in early July were middle-aged or older, a little soft in the middle and more likely to be riding serviceable hybrids or touring bikes than high-end Italian racing velos. There were wire baskets and chrome fenders. And more cotton than spandex. (If you want stats, 58 per cent of riders were between 40 and 59 and 17 per cent between 60 and 77.)

That said, some preparation is advised, given that daily distances range from approximately 80 to 120 kilometres. Andrea Lockwood, for instance, has been commuting to work by bicycle forever -- in recent years, 15 kilometres from Chelsea to her job at the federal justice department in downtown Ottawa. Still, the waterfront trail was her first extended cycle tour and she wondered how she would do.

In the end, she was exultant -- and actually continued from the end point at Rivière-Beaudette, near Cornwall, to Montreal. She had wanted a physical challenge to mark "a significant birthday" this summer and, as a committed environmentalist, she wanted an intimate encounter with Lake Ontario -- something more profound than the blur of blue glimpsed from a car window on Highway 401.

She found that and more: a brush with the culture, history and architecture of some 41 towns and cities along the route, many shoved to the margins by "progress;" an amiable group of travelling companions; and varied terrain that moved from upper-class suburb to lush wetland, to butterfly meadow, to nuclear power plant, all within an hour or so. (As a bonus, she thinks she has convinced her skeptical husband, who joined us for a few days, that

cycle-touring is more pleasure than pain.)

Louise Mayer, 49, and her husband Gilles Lessard, who just turned 50, were also looking for a memorable vacation -- but they didn't prepare much, unless you count a spring holiday to Cuba. "I'd never done 100 kilometres before," said Louise, although, as manager of a municipal pool in Lowertown, she does swim daily. (And both are members of Gatineau's popular Vélo Plaisir cycling club, where a good lunch is as important as distances covered.)

But the pair persevered, enchanted by the "breathtaking" views of Lake Ontario and the camaraderie with fellow riders from California, Toronto, and Edmonton (including a couple in their late 60s who have already cycled thousands of kilometres). Mayer was also touched by the warm welcome we received at so many towns -- complete with free yoga, massages and bowls of cut oranges and watermelon.

In Grimsby, for instance, a leafy lakeside town between St. Catharines and Hamilton, we were waylaid by church ladies who delivered a colourful history lesson about an American Methodist summer camp that long ago located in their village -- and left behind real-life gingerbread cottages in vivid pastels.

There were better-known attractions, too: staggeringly-huge mansions strung along Oakville's Lakeshore road; Toronto's distinctive skyline, in a silvery morning sun, viewed from Hamilton's tranquil and verdant Confederation Park; the Darlington power plant, a brutal concrete eruption springing up from surrounding wetlands that were noisy with birdlife, and situated, incongruously, next to tidy farmers' fields.

Arguably, the most beautiful sustained stretch of riding was within easy reach of the national capital -- the link from Cardinal, through Iroquois and Morrisburg, on to Cornwall. Here the trail wanders down country roads, past lazy rivers, along stone-dust paths through dense forest and flowery meadows, by riverside beaches and along Cornwall's extensive waterfront.

But the lake -- too polluted, too cold for swimming in many places, too often inaccessible -- is the real star

of the tour. As much as possible, our route followed its contours. Whether viewed from rolling farmland near Port Hope, from Cobourg's sparkling harbour, from Pickering's smart new boardwalk, or from hidden coves, its immense reach, its blueness and illusion of purity are compelling. It is a true inland sea, with sandy beaches, rocky shores, tiny sailboats and huge freighters; with ducks unlimited, soaring, screeching seabirds and numerous pockets of wildness resisting the relentless creep of development.

The lake -- the lakeshore, actually -- is the reason this tour was conceived. The idea is to infect everyone who travels the waterfront with a fire to protect what remains and improve what exists. A 1988 royal commission headed by former Toronto mayor David Crombie led to the establishment of the Waterfront Regeneration Trust, now a charity, and it has been assembling land and negotiating access with farmers, businesses and municipalities for years.

The challenge remains closing dangerous gaps (like one between Ajax and Whitby), getting the trail off service roads and city streets and closer to the water's edge, and convincing recalcitrant land-owners to do the right, public-spirited thing.

The trust has worked hard at selling municipalities on the benefits of cycle tourism -- a message that appears to be sinking in.

To varying degrees -- from a memorable barbecue chicken dinner provided by Edwardsburg/Cardinal municipality, to a helpful shuttle from the Port Hope campsite to town, to the handful of municipal councillors who cycled with us -- communities, especially those hard-hit by recent economic reversals, are increasingly eager to be involved in this pioneering venture.

As for riders, the tour can only accommodate 250, so get your application for 2010 in early (www.waterfront

trail.org). There is talk of adding two shorter tours in coming years -- one at the eastern end, one to the west -- but nothing is confirmed. Except this: once you've ridden the length of this always-changing trail, you will have new respect for the immensity and often hidden beauty of Lake Ontario -- and for your own untapped potential, too.

Susan Riley writes a regular political column for the Citizen and is an avid recreational cyclist.

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Great Waterfront

Tour Adventure: 6 fundamental facts

1- The eight-day annual ride from Niagara-on-the-Lake to the Quebec border runs the first week of July and costs around \$450 per adult -- or \$225 if you only want to ride two days. That covers camping fees, organization and a support van.

2 -Breakfasts and dinners are usually provided at campsites by local service clubs, or restaurants, and vary in quality and quantity. Lunch can be purchased en route, or, sometimes, at scheduled stops in town parks or lake-shore picnic areas. Allow up to \$40 a day for food.

3 -Thirty volunteers accompany riders and can change tires and give directions -- although you may have to wait for help. Your bags will be trucked from campsite to campsite.

4- Because the mostly-paved route includes stretches of stone-dust, rough country roads and even a bit of single-track terrain, sturdy bikes are best -- ideally a touring bike with slightly wider-than-usual tires.

5 - You don't need to join a group to do the trail, nor do you have to do the whole thing. Look for the Waterfront Trail and Greenway Mapbook at outdoor stores, or contact the Waterfront Regeneration Trust at info@wrtrust.com

6 - The most challenging aspect of the tour for anyone living east of Toronto is getting gear and bikes to the Niagara start point. You can leave your car in Cornwall, package your bike and take it by train -- the one daily train from Cornwall that includes a baggage car, that is -- to Toronto Union station. You leave your bike and bags in storage overnight and take the bike train the next day from Toronto to Niagara Falls. You can rent a van and drive -- although that can be expensive. You can call upon a generous friend to drive you and your gear to Toronto (where you can board the bike train to Niagara) -- then pick you up in Cornwall eight days later. This year, there was a shuttle from Cornwall back to Toronto for \$100. Maybe, next year, they'll make it easier for non-Torontonians, too.