

# Putting the pedal to the medal in Peterborough

New cycling routes in the Kawarthas will leave you breathless and wanting more

ANNE BOKMA

It's the shoelaces that give me away.

The three-day 175 kilometre cycling trip to promote the six new bike routes in the rolling hills of Peterborough and the Kawarthas is geared to "avid" cyclists. I've never done a ride longer than 20 kilometres, but I do take the SoBi bikes around town on a regular basis. How hard can it be?

At Wild Rock Outfitters, where the owner and our cycling guide Kieran Andrews fits me on a Trek 7.4 FX Fitness hybrid, it doesn't take long to realize I'm out of my league. The other cyclists are tricked out in layers of high-end performance gear: waterproof overshorts, snazzy breathable jerseys, merino socks to prevent sweaty feet, cycling gloves with short cut fingers for improved grip, and black arm warmers, elegant as evening gloves, that can be rolled on and off depending on the weather. I look down at my decade-old sneakers, dirty laces trailing like a lost preschooler's. Someone in my group takes me aside and advises tucking them in my shoes so I don't get them caught in the bike chain. At least I'm wearing padded cycling shorts. A friend had thrust them at me when she saw how ill prepared I was for this, my first long-distance cycling trip. "You're going to need these," she said. Indeed, they literally save my behind.

Our first day out is an ambitious 90-kilometre route. The day begins with rain, but that doesn't seem to dissuade anyone, certainly not Leigh McAdam, a legit avid cyclist who blogs at Hike, Bike Travel and has trekked up to 175 kilometres a day on a month-long cycling trip from Tanzania to Zimbabwe. She adjusts her waterproof jacket with an oversized hoodie over her helmet and is ready to roll.

I decide to follow her determined lead and maintain a can-do spirit. So when we are caught in a torrential downpour and I can barely see where I'm going, I just smile and open my mouth to taste the rain. When we navigate steep 600-metre hills, I crank down to the lowest gear and consider the calories I'm burning. Flying down the other side at 40 km/h, I revel in the sensation of the wind whipping my face instead of looking for perilous potholes. I do not allow myself to think about the mere metre of distance that separates me from a potentially devastating collision with one of the few vehicles that whiz by. Instead, I marvel at the variety of creatures we pass — an elegant heron standing still as a reed, pot-bellied pigs lolling in muck on a farmer's field, a massive mother turtle protecting her eggs on the side of a gravel trail. The pleasures of cycling, I quickly discover, depend entirely on the attitude you bring to it.

Andrews, a cycling ambassador in the city who has helped the local



PHOTO COURTESY HIKE, BIKE TRAVEL

Writer Anne Bokma takes to the road with coach Kieran Andrews. Six new bike routes have been marked out in Peterborough and the Kawarthas.

tourism board launch the new 40- to 100-kilometre cycling routes with 160 signs throughout the county, says Peterborough is an undiscovered gem for those who love to get around on two wheels. Within minutes you can be out of the city core and cruising the countryside with nary a car in sight.

The routes offer varied terrain from packed trails to paved roads, great views of land and lakes and plenty of points of interest along the way, including Locke 21 on the Trent Severn Waterway, the highest hydraulic lift in the world, and the quaint town of Lakefield, known for its literary heritage — writers Margaret Laurence and Robertson Davies both lived here.

We manage 40 kilometres in the morning and there is something meditative in the repetition of the cycling motion, something thrilling in conquering the crest of the hills. The landscape is alive and humming, the canola fields such a blazing bright green it hurts your eyes.

Getting up after lunch at the The Pastry Peddler in the quaint town of Millbrook, my legs feel boneless. Andrews calls it "café legs," a common midday cyclist's lament. The hills seem harder in the afternoon and I feel myself running out of steam as I lag behind the others. Andrews circles back to pedal alongside me, offering encouragement: "Remember to breathe," he says. "Don't forget to look up." "Don't rush, take your time."

The hills leave me breathless but are an obstacle that looks much tougher from a distance than when you are in the thick of it. Andrews says there's no shame in getting off the bike and walking uphill if I have to. I resolve not to let it come to that.

But my resolve breaks the second day. We're scheduled to do 65 kilometres and I all see before me is one seemingly insurmountable



PHOTO COURTESY OF HIKE, BIKE TRAVEL

The hills of the Kawarthas provide plenty of challenge for cyclists.

ascent after another. I give it my all, but there's nothing left. Twice I dismount and do the walk of shame up a hill. My wrists are sore from white knuckling the handlebars. My back aches from bending over. I lag half a kilometre behind the others. More than once, Kieran puts a firm hand on my sacrum to ease me up and over a hill. I practically weep with gratitude.

After we stop for lunch at the Lantern Restaurant & Grill on the edge of Stony Lake, my café legs get the better of me. Nothing, not even the wonderfully gooey butter tarts from Firefly Bakery next door, can revive me. I call it quits for the day and head to the nearby Elmhirst Resort for a blessedly

soft bed after a nap.

I can't deny there's a hint of elation in my exhaustion. My body hurts in a good way, from the accomplishment of working through something by sheer force of will. Biking on our final day feels effortless — a quick 20-kilometre jaunt along the gloriously flat terrain next to the quiet Otonabee River.

The smooth ride makes conversation easy — no huffing and puffing from love — and I ask Andrews about his love of cycling. It began when he was three, he says, when he got his first taste of freedom riding his tricycle to the end of the block. When he was 12 his dad hauled an old Peugeot out of the

dump and gave him \$40 to fix it up. That summer he was off on his first long distance bike trip with friends to Lake Placid.

Today, in addition to putting Peterborough's new cycling routes on the map, he also leads cycling trips in Tuscany, Barbados and Majorca. "Majorca." I let the word roll around in my head a few times and imagine gliding along the Mediterranean coast of the Spanish island with a pack of bronzed and beaming cyclists.

That does it. I resolve to buy my very own pair of cycling shorts. With extra padding of course.

Anne Bokma is a travel writer based in Hamilton.

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