

News

Tourists bicycle through area along Erie Canal

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VERONA — Just more than 500 bicyclists passed through the area as part of a tour along the Erie Canal Thursday.

The riders spent the fifth day of their week-long trip from Buffalo to Albany biking from Syracuse to Rome, some taking rest stops in Chittenango, Canastota and Verona. They came as part of the Cycling the Erie Canal tour organized by Parks & Trails New York, a non-profit organization that promotes trails and natural spaces in the state.

"It's an opportunity for us to promote the canal system and the trails along side it," said Martin Daley, one of the chief organizers for the ride.

The tour is in its 11th year and boasts just more than 500 riders this year, coming from 39 states and two other countries —Canada and Germany. Participants in the tour range in age from four to 82. There are many families on the tour, some on tandem and triple bikes.

Daley said the tour is a good way to promote the Erie Canalway Trail, now about 70 percent complete. Once it's done, he said, the trail will be the longest multi-use trail in the country. Roughly three quarters of the ride is on the trail.

"They see it as a vacation, we see it as a promotional opportunity," Daley said.

Parks & Trails New York, with the help of sponsors, works to make the ride accessible to people of all skill levels and families, Daley said. Trucks follow the bikers along the tour to carry their gear and provide maintenance and medical help. With the exception of a couple meals, food is provided on the tour. At night, the 500 plus riders camp in a "tent city," a sight, Daley said, that is something to see.

"People are always laughing, having a good time," he said. "It's an interesting spectacle."

Daley said local communities have been welcoming to the tour. In Canastota, he said, there was even a table set up to welcome the bicyclists as they came into the village.

The tour started Thursday at Burnett Park in Syracuse, where it had stopped the night before. The first rest stop was at the Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum for a morning snack. Next, the riders passed through Canastota where the Canastota Canal Town Museum opened its doors to the bicyclists for the day. In the early afternoon, cyclists stopped at the Verona Town Hall for a rest and snack.

Jack and Sam Koford, a father and son from Buffalo, paused to take a rest in Verona. This is Jack's third year doing the tour and Sam's second. Sam's 11-year-old younger brother had accompanied them from Buffalo to Rochester.

"Most people, when you mention it, there's one of two reactions, they think its a really cool thing or they think you're nuts," Jack said. Your own opinion of the trip, he said, switches back and forth between the two. As the weather started to turn rainy during

the rest stop in Verona, Sam had a clear view of why they were doing the tour.

"We're insane," he said.

The two enjoyed meeting some of the different characters on the tour. Like, for example, Bruce, one of the participants who bikes shirtless and plays classical music as he rides. Or the oldest member of the tour, an 82-year-old man, who, Jack said, passed him several times.

"It makes you think," Jack said. "I'm just tired, what have I been complaining about?"

They enjoyed many of the stops along the trail, although it tends to get a little repetitive. For example, in visiting the many canal museum, the two have learned how a canal lock works far many more times than they ever cared to. The stops along the canal have a similar trend, they said. There's a bridge into a town (usually "something-port," like Brockport or Weedsport).

"You go past the canal museum, cause every town's got one," Jack said. "And they'll have a sign in the window telling you about the canal festival, cause every town's got one."

The Kofords don't do a ton of biking so this tour was good because it's laid back, they said.

"This is not a group of hard-core bikers," Jack said.

Peg Erway, of Albion, expressed similar thoughts. The group is supportive, she said. If you stop for a break, they'll ask if everything's fine. And no one cares if you need to walk a hill, in fact, there's usually a bunch of people that do. If you run into bike trouble, there's a mechanic that follows the group.

"If it wasn't for him there'd be a lot less people here," she said.

Erway came with a small group of her coworkers and some of their family members. So far, they've enjoyed the trip.

"I can't believe how well this is organized and run," she said.

Erway especially liked the educational talks that came to the group at points throughout the trip. When they stopped in Syracuse Wednesday night, a professor from Syracuse University came to talk to them about some of the history of the canal.

One of the highlights, Erway said, is the "tent city," where all the bicyclists gather around to sleep. Sometimes there's music and the kids play sports but most everyone falls asleep right away after the ride.

"We sleep well at night," said Barb Vanderlaan, of Pasadena, Md., a member of Erway's group. "It doesn't matter if anyone's snoring."

The bikers have three more days left of their tour. They are riding 63 miles from Rome to Canajoharie today and will arrive in Albany Sunday.

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