

Vermont by Bicycle: A Look Through the Handlebars

by Marley Braun, PassPorter Guest Contributor

I am not what you would call athletic by any stretch of the imagination. I am a person who simply likes to ride her bike when the air has a slight chill to it and there is low humidity. Those days are few and far between in balmy North Carolina so you can imagine how often I am on my bike.

Needless to say, when I signed myself up for a weekend bike tour in Vermont, no one thought I would actually do it. Not only did I do it, I loved every minute of it and intend to go back someday for a week-long tour.

My main criteria for choosing a tour was that it had to take place over a weekend, it had to be affordable, and it had to have a support van just in case I needed the help. Bike Vermont met all of those requirements.

Bike Vermont has been in business for over 31 years (<http://www.bikevt.com> or 800-257-2226). They have biking tours in Vermont, Maine, Ireland, Italy and Scotland. They offer different biking options so that you can set your own pace. You can choose to ride with others or ride off on your own. You can bring your own bike or, for an additional fee, you are able to rent quality bikes. If you are a beginner, no need to worry. The support van is always nearby with water, snacks, tools, encouragement, or a much needed ride back to your inn. If you are an advanced cyclist, they offer alternative routes during the ride to challenge you, if you so choose. Bike Vermont is very low key and limits the size of their tour groups and their inns to make sure you have very personalized service.

I ended up choosing their new Churchill House Inn tour outside of Brandon, VT and with their help over the phone; chose to rent a hybrid bike. I brought my own helmet, although they do offer those for free during your tour. My tour package included two nights at the Churchill House Inn, two four-course dinners, two huge breakfasts to start my day off right, 54 scenic miles and two very experienced guides.

My friend, Andrea, and I decided to make it a girl's weekend. Andrea is a tri-athlete and her best piece of advice before leaving for Vermont was to just try and get used to sitting on my bike seat a few times a week, it didn't matter how far I rode. Just get used to the seat, build up some endurance and buy padded bike shorts. The shorts are not very attractive but they are definitely worth the investment.

Our bike tour began on a Friday night. We were greeted by Seth and Olya Hopkins, who were marvelous cooks and very accommodating hosts. Tom Walsh and Danielle Ondrick were our guides. Both of them clearly had a love of cycling and their enthusiasm was infectious.

We got to know the other seven cyclists on our tour over a delicious, intimate dinner. After dinner, Tom and Dani conducted an informal introductory and safety meeting. They gave us maps of our Saturday route and assured us the support van would always be nearby. This was comforting to know, considering that the most I had ever ridden continuously was 11 miles and that tomorrow I was going to be riding 36 miles through rolling Vermont! Were they serious?

At 8:00 am, we met for breakfast and then went out and got "fitted" for our bikes. One by one, we took off down the winding hill. At first, we all stayed close together but slowly we broke off and began to take our ride at our own pace.

Saturday's ride was mainly how I pictured Vermont. There were rolling hills, stunning green mountains, and farmland dotted with cows and horses. The great thing about going at your own pace is that you can stop and take pictures or water breaks whenever you want. The van was always nearby and I never felt unsafe or alone. I felt completely content and in no hurry whatsoever. Andrea and I even strayed off the route a few times to find four hidden covered bridges that Tom and Dani had told us about.

As promised, the van greeted us for lunch outside the Vermont Marble exhibit. It was a lovely, shaded area with picnic tables and a blanket that they had set up for us. We dined on gourmet sandwiches and they even remembered the previous night's request for chocolate and showed up with a big bag of M&Ms (along with the healthy stuff, of course).

After lunch, Andrea and I felt invigorated and decided to add on an optional 7.8 miles to Wilson Castle, which is Vermont's only 32 room "castle," built in 1872. We could have stopped and taken the tour but it was at the top of the hill and my legs decided it would be best to only take a picture and continue on.

Winding my way through the small town of Brandon, I spotted a few of my fellow bikers stopping for ice cream and one hopping a ride back to the inn after enjoying the air conditioning of the local book store. Did I mention that it was 96 degrees in Vermont that day?

Despite the heat, four hills (yes, I was counting), and a tired backside, I made it back to the inn six hours and 46 miles later. Andrea, of course,

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added on the optional 8.2 mile steep hill to the stunning views of Brandon Gap, but I was content to take a well-deserved rest on the shaded porch of the inn and wait for my fellow bikers.

Later that evening, we basked in all of our glory at beautiful Lake Dunmore a few miles up the road and then returned to the inn for another delicious meal.

Sunday's ride was much easier, only 18.1 miles. Thankfully, it was mostly flat and the route was mostly shaded. The ride was glorious. It meandered around Lake Dunmore and offered plenty of lovely photo ops. The lake was lined with hundreds of unique cottages and I took my time taking in the wonderful views.

By lunchtime we were back at the inn and bid farewell to all of our fellow cyclists and our two extraordinary guides. Andrea and I agreed we would have to do it again. Maybe we would do a week next time or maybe we would bring our families. Or maybe we would just keep the secret to ourselves. I felt like anything was possible after the 64.1 miles this non-athlete had conquered.

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