

Bicycle touring's a great way to see the province

By Ian Scott

Their legs are sore, and more than one of them is sporting a blister. The weather has been a thorn in their sides as well; rain clouds blocking off some of the vistas they had hoped to capture on camera, or at least in their mind's eyes. And, after sleeping in tents for a week, the idea of sleeping in their own beds was an appealing thought.

But for the 20 participants in the New Brunswick Bicycle Tour, it has been a wonderful week. After eight days of cycling across the northern end of New Brunswick, the weary travellers stopped for the final night of their journey at the Plaster Rock Tourist Park.

The tour is one of seven tours put on this summer by Atlantic Canada Cycling. Since 1987, the Halifax-based organization has been promoting bicycle tourism, and providing cycling information about Canada's Atlantic Provinces. The current tour is the first the group has organized in the northern part of the picture province.

Tour organizer and "spokes"-man Gary Conrod said the adult group that made up the tour were all dedicated cyclists. They were forewarned about how much time would be spent on the road each day. With large distances between many of the stops and attractions en route, a lot of time would be spent simply pedal pushing.

The tours have proved to be quite successful. Conrod said 75 per cent of the participants in the New Brunswick tour were repeat customers. With a support vehicle following the cyclists, they don't have to carry their luggage, which makes for easier riding. With an average distance of 90 kilometres during each day of the trip, any advantage is a welcome one.

"There's less breakdowns and less maintenance on your bike," Conrod said. "Also, you can pool your resources, if someone has a tool you might need. We share everything; tubes, tires and spokes. We had about 15 flat tires this trip. That's the most I've ever seen."

Atlantic Canada Cycling started out as a hobby for Conrod. He had been invited to a World Bicycle Festival in Poland, and was the only Canadian present out of 1,000 attendees. Returning home, Conrod organized his own festival and drew more than 120 people to the

inaugural rally. Following the rally with camping trips proved to be popular, so he organized others and before long his hobby was taking up more time than his job was.

"I was working at CIBC at the data processing centre," Conrod said. "I had a phone under the desk and it was ringing more than my work phone."

Veteran cyclists have long been aware of cycling's advantages over other modes of transportation. The combination of exercise and ecological responsibility goes a long way towards preserving resources and the environment.

"Everything you get out of it is what you personally put into it," Conrod said. "It's not the rewards of gas-burning, it's mostly just your own energy. It's a lot more direct connection with your vehicle. The bicycle is the most efficient vehicle in the world."

Although the majority of the cyclists on the trip came from across the United States, and from as far away as Australia, Conrod said they bring their own bicycles with them. As pure cyclists, he said most of them own more than one and had brought the bike that was most suitable for the trip. Rental bikes are available, but there's seldom a call for them. Each rider is also responsible for their own food, although Conrod does supply the cooking stoves, dishes and cutlery. He said it would be too difficult to deal with the different menus, such as vegetarian or kosher requests.

Although the price of a high-end bicycle could equal that of a good, used car, Conrod said the cost of bicycles has actually gone down over the years.

"The first 10-speed I bought, from a Kmart, was \$140 in 1976. And those features now come on the most bargain-basement bike you find at a Zellers, and it's still the same price - \$150. So with inflation, the bike's were actually more expensive back then. What you can buy off the rack now, you couldn't possibly even get custom-made back then."

Bjorn Schellenberg, from New York City, drove his car to New Brunswick to take part in the tour. He said he couldn't believe how much rain had fallen over a span of a few days. Once the rain clouds lifted, he said the group's spirits did as well.

"The amazing thing is, once the



A "wheelie" good time

A group of tired-but-happy campers gather at the Plaster Rock Tourist Park on the last night of their eight-day bicycle tour of northern New Brunswick. The tour was one of seven organized this summer by Atlantic Canada Cycling, a Halifax-based company that promotes bicycle tourism. (Scott photo)

rain was gone, we just forgot about it and concentrated on the beautiful days we've had since then," Schellenberg said. "The parks have been great, the riding's been wonderful and the organization has just been perfect."

Schellenberg was on his first-ever cycling tour. He said he hadn't visited Canada in decades, and had never been to the Maritimes. The whole experience had left a favourable impression on him.

"I loved the interplay between English-speaking and French-speaking," he said. "The problem is, after the last day of biking, I'm going to have to start driving home because New York is so far away. But, I will definitely have a nice piece of fish before starting on the road trip."

While Schellenberg's journey home will be a lengthy one, for others, the tour was one chapter in a longer adventure. Jill and Alan Don had come from Queensland, Australia, to tour Canada on their bicycles for four months. Jill, a

librarian with emergency services, said their trip was three years in planning.

"Just by sheer good luck, Gary's tour of New Brunswick coincided with our plans," Don said.

Don said cycling is popular in her hometown, but that it didn't compare to what they had experienced over the past week. The Dons had visited New Brunswick once in the past, but only for part of one day. They had liked what they saw, and returned to experience more down-east hospitality.

"This is fantastic cycling," Don said. "People are helpful. They're friendly. The motorists are really polite. There's good roads, the whole network is great, the camping is fantastic and we just find this is a really wonderful country."

"This, for us, is a holiday, because normally we're pulling trailers with all our luggage," she said. "But on this trip, Gary carries all the luggage, so we just cycle for fun."

Alan Don, who works for National Parks in Australia, said he was also

enjoying the tour; everything from the sand dunes at Bouctouche, to a number of locally-brewed beverages.

"We had a couple of nice beers from the Pump House (a Moncton micro-brewery)," he said.

There's no rest, in store for Conrod. After his group rides the last leg of their journey from Plaster Rock to Hartland, where they will take in the World's Longest Covered Bridge, the cyclists will be driven back to the trip's starting point of Miramichi. Then it's off to Prince Edward Island, where Conrod and his staff will guide close to 60 cyclists through Canada's smallest province.

Conrod said there would definitely be a return trip to northern New Brunswick next year.

"It's a very underrated part of the world for bike-touring," Conrod said. "I hope it doesn't get spoiled like parts of Nova Scotia have. It's our gain, I guess. It's still real. Shippagan's a real place - these are real fishing ports - not dressed up like Lunenburg."