Touring Champlain with POMG

As a Vermonter, I consider cheddar cheese and maple syrup to be staples of my diet, like milk and eggs are for other people. I eat them with most meals. But Vermont wine? I am unsure if drinking wine at all is a good idea at 10:00 AM on a Monday in late July. And, although Vermont produces some darn good hard cider, rye, and maple liqueur, I can't say I've had a Vermont wine I've loved. But I am a team player. When my bike tour rolls into Vermont's Snow Farm Vineyard, I join my tour mates, enthusiastic midwesterners and New Yorkers alike, and head straight to the bar for a tasting.

We're on a five-day tour of Vermont's Champlain Islands, and even though we're only an hour into the first day of riding, I feel like we're in a rolling postcard. Standing in front of Snow Farm, lush green fields fill my view, with tidy rows of smartly trimmed vines splaying out to where the dirt road curves east with the lake shore. Black and white Holsteins contentedly chew their cud in the background, ambling unhurriedly through the landscape. A picturesque red barn and a glimpse of Lake Champlain add interest to the brilliant meadows.

I love Vermont. Since I moved here, I've logged thousands of miles by bike, plane, boat, train, skies, camel, and on foot, but I've yet to visit a state, province, or country that's more soulful. Every day that I ride my bike here, I am struck by how lucky I am. So when the opportunity to bike through my home state with Peace of Mind Guaranteed (POMG) Bike Tours on their new Champlain Islands route arrived, I immediately signed up.

I've done a lot of touring as a guide, a guest, and a self-supported rider, but I've never gone on a guided ride in my own backyard. I assumed that I'd be revisiting places I already knew and enjoying myself as first-time visitors discovered Vermont under the tutelage of POMG's expert guides. But within an hour of getting on my bike, I am already discovering things about Vermont I never knew existed. I sipped a sweet and sophisticatedly fruity ice wine, a 2008 Estate Vidal Blanc, that is so smooth, every one of us packs a bottle into the support van before we roll on.

POMG Tours (pomgbike.com) is based about a mile from my house in Richmond, Vermont. Rich First, who founded POMG in 1995, named the business after his grandfather's Hartford, Connecticut jewelry store, also called POMG. First's grandfather always said, "Practice the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you." And those are the words that dictate First's business. He keeps it small and personal, taking about 250 guests per year around his home state of Vermont, with an occasional dip into New York or New Hampshire to round out the route. First is hands-on — in fact, he frequently co-guides. Experience and a love of Vermont define his dozen tour leaders. They're not the starry-eyed, just-outta-college-with-legs-like-tree-trunks guides of some tour companies, but Vermonters passionate about their state and cycling.

"My goal was to connect likeminded people who love riding, and to provide a way for them to bike tour without having to worry about logistics, all at a price that's barely more than if they organized the tour themselves," said First. "We aim to provide a high level of service, lots of autonomy each day, and exceptional local knowledge. Every

Story and photos by Berne Broudy
My guides are Mary Yates and Philip Galiga, two of POMG’s trusted veteran leaders. Philip is known for his very sense of humor and mischievous smile. He is a high-school art teacher by day — a favorite among his students for being down to earth, honest, sincere, and slightly irreverent. Mary arrived with home-baked zucchini bread and fresh-picked blueberries to add to the ample pile of snacks in the support van. Mary doesn’t have a cell phone, and her smile is about as broad as the van’s port van. Mary doesn’t have a cell phone, and her smile is about as broad as the van’s port van. Mary doesn’t have a cell phone, and her smile is about as broad as the van’s port van. Mary doesn’t have a cell phone, and her smile is about as broad as the van’s port van. Mary doesn’t have a cell phone, and her smile is about as broad as the van’s port van. Mary doesn’t have a cell phone, and her smile is about as broad as the van’s port van. Mary doesn’t have a cell phone, and her smile is about as broad as the van’s port van. Mary doesn’t have a cell phone, and her smile is about as broad as the van’s port van.

I roll down the crushed limestone of Shore Acres driveway. The inn perches on one of the most spectacular pieces of sprawling lakeshore in the Islands. The motel-style rooms are simple, clean, and comfortable with million dollar views. Vast green lawn rolls down a gentle hill from the lake-view rooms to the rocky shoreline of Lake Champlain, with a full panorama of Lake Champlain, Vermont’s best known Revolutionary War history. Skirting the picturesque lakefront and out to sea, the tour passes some of the most important American Lake Champlain. It also showcases bike-friendly Burlington, Vermont’s Queen City, two guides, and me. Philip and his powerhouse of a wife, Marcella, are right behind. After the above-mentioned wine tasting, we trade in our bikes, now adorned with water bottles with our favorite vegetables drawn on them, a cute way to help Mary and Philip tell whose is whose when they dutifully fill them each morning. We set out on our tour. The van is like a border collie, periodically weaving by with the cowbell clanging to make sure no one needs more water, more of Mary’s banana bread, or encouragement. One of the best things about traveling with guides who know the roads is that you stay on quiet ones. We’re off the main drag and onto meandering country lanes within a couple of miles of leaving Shore Acres. I’m riding with twenty-something Kyle, who is starting his career in education with a summer vacation. In September he’ll enter his first year of high-school chemistry and he’s a high-school student. He’s fit and cranking along with the rest of the pack, but he confesses he’s never ridden his bike farther than around the block, and in fact he hasn’t had a bike since he was a kid. He’s riding his dad’s spare. His dad, Mark, who brought his adult son, daughter-in-law, wife, and grandson along, is a fanatic. Kyle is biking in sneakers and a T-shirt. Mark looks like a logoed racer, but he’s just out for a good time. Kyle’s brother, Kevin, and his powerhouse of a wife, Marcella, are right behind. After the above-mentioned wine tasting, we’re back on our bikes, and we get the first taste of why locals say, “If you don’t like the weather, wait five minutes.” The sky is suddenly dark, and a light rain is falling. The Champlain Islands are the flattest part of Vermont, but between sprinkles, we’re rolling up and down some short but punchy climbs — about 50 miles of them. The group stops en masse in a small park to refill water and gravel, and Marcella is hurting. She’s on a men’s saddle and it’s set high. Her knees hurt. Mary and Philip swap her saddle for a spare, and with her informed consent perform surgery with a hacksaw on her too-long seat post. After a few more miles, Marcella and Kevin call for a lunch stop at one of the islands’ greasy spoon cafes, and a shuttle back to the inn. Mark speeds away into strong headwinds with Kyle’s brother, Kevin, and his powerhouse of a wife, Marcella, are right behind. After the above-mentioned wine tasting, we’re back on our bikes, and we get the first taste of why locals say, “If you don’t like the weather, wait five minutes.” The sky is suddenly dark, and a light rain is falling. Marcella and Kevin call for a lunch stop at one of the islands’ greasy spoon cafes, and a shuttle back to the inn. Mark speeds away into strong headwinds with Mary and me chasing behind. The weather has gone from serene to blasting winds and drizzly by the time we reach the inn.

The rainy weather has blown through and we head north through North Hero, skirting the picturesque lakeshore and biking into Revolutionary War history. Vermont’s best known Revolutionary War heroes are the Allen brothers, Ethan and Ira. Forts, parks, roads, mountains, islands (North Hero, it’s actually a peninsula connected to mainland Quebec). At the base of this bridge is Windmill Point, where, in 1776, Benedict Arnold anchored his fleet prior to the Battle of Lake Champlain. Benedict Arnold also spent a lot of time in Vermont. In 1997, Benedict Arnold’s Spitfire, the last vessel unaccounted for from the Battle of Valour Island, which sits just off the shores of Lake Champlain, between South Hero and Plattsburgh, New York, was discovered perfectly preserved on the floor of Lake Champlain.

We’ve forgotten the buffeting winds from the first day’s ride as we count cows and admire stone houses sprinkled through the agricultural land. After miles of Adirondack-view lakeshore and except- tional pavement, we cross another bridge onto Isle La Motte. We pedal the perimeter of the island, stopping at Fisk Quarry to see 480-million-year-old fossils, and the ancient Chazy Reef, cemented into the quarry’s rock floor. There is no entry fee, and there are no velvet ropes directing traffic. In fact, we’re the only ones here. We leave our bikes on the rocky slab and wander through what looks like an old abandoned parking lot. Previous visitors have made small circles of pebbles around the most evident fossils. There is no security — nothing to keep someone from prying one of the fossils out and taking it home. It's...
Vermont, it’s assumed that kind of thing is inappropriate, and people leave the fossils alone. It’s refreshing.

Back on the bikes, we pedal on to the former site of Fort St. Anne and home of St. Anne’s Shrine. We honor the saint with a swim in the lake and then draw silly pictures in the sand by the statue of Samuel de Champlain. Then we pedal north within a mile of Canada (stopping at a farm stand for fresh-picked strawberries, peas, and tomatoes) before cresting over Rouses Point Bridge into New York.

Remember that part about the weather changing abruptly? At the apex of the bridge, guide Philip and I are treated to a spectacular light show — explosive fingers of lightning slapping the ground and thick gray clouds moving quickly toward us. The hairs on my arms and neck stand up.

We sprint into Rouses Point, where the rest of our crew has already tucked into Lake Street Café and Bakery for lunch and refuge from the storm. Kevin is sinking his teeth into the shop’s signature grass-fed burger, which is piled with bacon, ham, bleu cheese, an egg, and a few token veggies on a bun. It’s revolting and delicious at the same time. Philip and I order poutine for the table. It’s a Québécois specialty (we’re practically in Quebec) — Canadian gravy fries loaded with smoked meat and cheese curds. We don’t care about the calories. We’re cycling!

It hits the spot. We chow down while Mother Nature unleashes her wrath. Torrential rains and dime-sized hail pelt the road outside and bounce off passing cars. We buy an entire just-baked blueberry pie and raid the diner’s freezer for several orders of locally made Island Ice Cream. The maple bacon flavor is the biggest hit.

The rains abate, and we make a dash for Point Au Roche Lodge, which is still 20 miles away. Mark and I tuck and pedal. The sky is steely gray to the northwest, and the corn stalks and red barns are glowing orange when the sun peeks through. We’re skirting the lakeshore, watching the storm barrel across the plains toward us. At every garage, gazebo, or marina, we consider stopping and waiting for the van. It’s drizzling again, and Mary is somewhere behind us likely retrieving other cyclists. Now it’s full on raining, but we’re in an uninhabited stretch. We know from the route directions that we only have three miles to go. We keep our heads down and keep moving. The van arrives with the rest of our group about five minutes after we reach the lodge, as we’re drying off with large terry towels and sipping hot tea.

Pointe Au Roche Lodge looks like it belongs in the Tetons or maybe British Columbia. It’s a rustic log structure with cathedral ceilings, a majestic great room with to-die-for stone fireplace, and inviting overstuffed chairs. I open the door to my room and weep with near-hypothermic joy at the sunken Jacuzzi tub. I trade my tea for a beer from the honor-system bar and don’t get out until it’s time to leave for an Italian eatery in nearby Plattsburgh.

With brilliantly clear weather predicted the next morning, a few riders decide to do dawn patrol and explore Pointe Au Roche State Park before breakfast. It’s an exquisite loop out along the lakeshore and back through farmlands. Mist is rising off the fields as we curve away from the glasly lake. A wind farm in neighboring Peru, New York, looks like a line of floating pinwheels.

While POMG tours don’t stay in the fanciest inns, the breakfast nearly everywhere they stay is world class. At Pointe Au Roche, breakfast is a personal frittata with goat cheese, bacon, and portabello mushrooms or blueberry-banana French toast. I opt for eggs, then we head south skirting the bustling city of Plattsburgh on a bike path with more than its share of bike-savvy bunnies that bolt off the trail as we pass. After a stretch on Route 9, we’re on quiet back roads that surprise us with some lung-busting hills. The smell of baking frittata had clearly dulled our senses, and we’d missed Mary and Philip’s terrain description at the morning’s route review. The only car we see on the route is the support van, which refills our water; loads us with granola bars, bananas, and encouragement; and then cheers us onward. We crest the last hill and descend, still curving around the lake. Vermont is bathed in sunshine, and the lake is sprinkled with sailboats.
Our final reward is a five-mile downhill on new pavement into Willsboro. The light at the end of the tunnel: the Turtle Island Café, which has Kobe beef burgers and pulled-pork sandwiches already cooking in anticipation of our arrival. We dine outdoors, the Boquet River burbling nearby. Willsboro was a paper mill town, and it also has a blue limestone quarry. Stone from here was used to build the Brooklyn Bridge as well as the State Capitol in Albany.

Post lunch, we climb out of town to roads that could have inspired “America, the Beautiful!” We roll through the countryside, through expansive green fields with a backdrop of the jagged Adirondacks. Three cars pass in the 13 miles between Willsboro and Wadhams. Endless serenity, tiny splashes of mustard flowers and clover in the fields, bold black-eyed susans, pointy purple coneflowers and hollyhocks that stand at attention, their flowers buttons of color up the side of the historic homes that line the road. The lake fades in and out of view, and just before I crest the hill into Essex, I can see the ferry chugging across the water.

In Vermont we’re a tribe again. We cross through a covered bridge, curve along Charlotte’s stony beach and past Shellborne Orchard before Mary flags us down. Absoberd by the breathtaking scenery, we had missed the Old Brick Store, our lunch stop. We hunker down in a farmer’s field for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches from the van.

Our final stretch into Burlington is on the bike path, which extends all the way into the Champlain Islands where we started. But Burlington is beckoning. We climb up Main Street through a vibrant downtown and over Church Street market-place, the city’s pedestrian mall. Our last overnight is at the Queen Anne style Lang House Inn. Iced tea and cookies are waiting, as areattique tour-poster beds in each room. The rooms are so nice, a couple of guests have to be encouraged back downtown. This time we go on foot, heading for flatbread and salad at American Flatbread, a pillar of the locavore movement. We haul on dessert at the restaurant, and after a stop at the brass plaque in the sidewalk to mark the site of the first Ben and Jerry’s, we stroll over to the scoop shop for a waffle cone of Chubby Hubby and Bonnaroo Buzz.

It’s our last night, and as we walk back to Lang House, the group is quiet and reflective. Tomorrow, we’ll ride back to Shore Acres. For now, we enjoy the pink glow over the Adirondacks; the glassy lake that’s been our backdrop all week, and the company of friends. I started the tour with friends, and as on any bike trip, I’m ending with more. My legs feel strong, my belly is full, and I have POMG to thank for it. More than 30 percent of POMG guests come back each year for another tour. I may live in Vermont, but it’s likely I’ll be back for more.

Berne Brady is a Vermont-based writer, photographer, cyclist and internet wanderer. Check out her pics at authenticoutsider.com and check out her Gear Shed blog atOutsideOnline.com.

Clinical sight. Vermont really does have countless red barns that dot the landscape.

C L U B M A N

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