Sweet orange peel and coriander tickled my nose as the top popped off a sweating beer bottle in the summer heat. I tipped the cold amber ale into a tall glass while sitting in the shade at Brewery Ommegang. The Rare Vos smelled heavenly and tasted as delicious and ideal as the ride we’d just finished through the green hilly lakelands of central New York.

Our ride started in the town of Utica and wound through the hills and dales of the Mohawk Valley and surrounding area, on narrow country roads rolling sharply up and down for miles. We passed flourishing farms, country markets, rivers, cornfields, and houses with lawns so expansive and perfect one might mistake them for parks.

Finally we rode along the shoreline of beautiful Otsego Lake before reaching the brewery on the far side of Cooperstown. The July day glowed sunny and hot, and the ride undulated just long enough to make that beer go down easily. In other words, it was a perfect road ride, the first of several I’d enjoy in this part of New York where the back roads are empty and plentiful.

I’d heard good things about the road riding in New York state from other cyclists, although my own past experience had been far from perfect. In 1993, I’d been a few weeks into a cross-country ride and things came a bit unglued when I reached the Empire State — a combination of black flies, persistent rain, and a poorly laced back wheel that resulted in many a broken spoke. I remember huddling under a poncho by the side of the road in Lake Placid, furiously putting new spokes in the rear wheel while being eaten alive by flies. I hadn’t returned since, but I was ready for another try, and I’m glad I did.

This time, I chose to ride farther south and base out of the city of Utica (where there are no black flies) and ride routes through Oneida County and slightly beyond. As far as communities in America go, Utica represents a fair slice of the country’s history — the push to move westward, conflict between natives and settlers, canal systems that opened the northeastern U.S., industrialization and success, followed by collapse as companies went offshore and military bases shut down. Today, locals say Utica is experiencing a resurgence, fueled both by longtime residents and by new immigrants from around the world as they move in from less fortunate places and find a city waiting with opportunity and open arms.

My home away from home for the week was the attractive Hotel Utica, which opened in 1912 and hosted its share of the rich, talented, and famous — President William Taft, Franklin Roosevelt, Amelia Earhart, Rita Hayworth, Judy Garland, Johnny Cash, and many more. Recent renovations have returned the hotel to its former glory, right in the heart of the city.

Near the city center there remain places rough around the edges, but I chose Utica because I was seeking a place of authenticity in this homogenizing country, a place working hard to promote cycling, and I found both here.

I found other treasures in Oneida County too — long public trails, interesting architecture like the Stanley...
Theater, unique local food, a train depot that still serves trains, neighborhoods built around village squares, an Andy Warhol exhibit, cool people dedicated to cycling, and interesting hole-in-the-wall bike shops like AAA Welch’s Bicycle & Ski Shop in Utica, which literally has buildings stuffed with bikes from all eras.

On the first day of my tour, I joined local bike advocate and triathlete Matthew VanSlyke. Part of his job is helping run Cycle Adirondacks, a week-long tour to attract more cyclists to the area. He also works to improve the lives of many of the new immigrants to the area by helping run a community bike program called the Utica Bike Rescue. This program gets people on bikes, some for the first time ever, and teaches mechanical skills so people can maintain the bikes on their own. Often, when immigrants arrive in Utica, they don’t have money for a car or they don’t know how to drive so a bicycle immediately makes them mobile in their new land.

It quickly became obvious that Matt was more fit than me as he led us on a beautiful 55-mile ride through the Mohawk River Valley where we found little traffic, scenic roads, and enough short, steep hills to make my legs burn off. We wound through a countryside lush with crops, forests, and lakeside villages before dropping down into the Susquahana River Basin and the town of Cooperstown. Best known as the birthplace of baseball and for being the home of the Baseball Hall of Fame, the quaint town heaved with baseball fans. We quickly pedaled through downtown straight to the nearby Brewery Ommegang where they offered me samples of all of their award-winning Belgian beers. There’s nothing like heat, hills, and hops to make the legs grow heavy but happy.

The next day Matt and I drove north to the hamlet of Old Forge in the Town of Webb in the southern Adirondack Mountains. We traded our skinny tires for fat ones and joined a group of local mountain bikers who wanted to show us the mountain biking potential of that part of New York.

Right at the edge of town, they’d scraped thin singletrack into the wet green hillside and we climbed, slipped, and scrambled to the top of McCauley Mountain, a ski resort on the edge of Old Forge. From there mountains, forest, and lakes stretched out in every direction as far as I could see. There is certainly enough wild country out there to build all the trails you could want.

While enjoying the view from the mountaintop, Chad Hiatt, then-manager of the Mountainman Outdoor Supply Company, suddenly exclaimed “We’ve got to go now!” We all raced each other pell-mell down the mountain and into town, Chad yelling on his phone, “Can you hold the train for us?” Train? What train?

We sprinted through town like a wild pack of dogs to Thendara Station where a train from the Adirondack Scenic Railroad sat running and rumbling, waiting for us. We’d delayed all the other visitors already sitting on the train, but because they loaded us in a special car just for bicycle riders, no one said a thing.

With a lurch and a whistle, we headed out of town and the conductor handed each of us a map for all the bike trails we could access along the route. We simply had to tell him when we wanted off the train, and they’d drop us and our bikes right there.

A few miles later, we gave him the sign, he stopped the train, and we jumped down to start riding in the 6.1-million acre Adirondack Park. It’s huge — the biggest park in the Lower 48, about the same size as Vermont and bigger than the Grand Canyon, Glacier, Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Great Smoky Mountains national parks.
combined. If you took a wrong turn and got lost in Adirondack Park, you might never be found.

The local riders took off riding hard into the forest. Dirt roads and trails took off in every direction, and I raced to keep them in sight. There were few signs along the way to guide us, but the riding was fun and fast, through pedal-grabbing grass meadows, along gravel roads, and over tea-colored creeks that meandered off into the vast forest.

“There are hundreds of miles of snowmobile routes here in the park. So, just imagine if we can make mountain bike trails on all of those in the summer!” said Mike Farmer, the Town of Webb’s tourism director, who wants to foster the mountain bike scene in Old Forge. “We just don’t have the manpower to do it, but it could be a great opportunity for someone.”

The next day began in an ominous cloak of gray as I spun around Utica on a Sunday morning. There was hardly another soul on the streets, and I headed up the road with instructions to “meet a guy on the side of the road with a bike.” That is how I met a cyclist named Dick Jordan.

We shook hands, and Dick laughed. “I’m happy to see you! Some other guy rode by and I chased him down yelling your name, but I guess it wasn’t you,” he said. Dick was a tattooed 70-plus-year-old, fit as a fiddle. We started riding northwest from Utica toward the shores of Oneida Lake and the village of Sylvan Beach, a 70-mile round-trip ride. The threatening clouds drizzled, then upgraded to a rain that turned to a hammering torrent of water.

By the time we reached Sylvan Beach, the water razored up off our front tires into our faces and gushed out the top of our shoes with every pedal

Howard Welch and his son Marty have been meeting the needs of Utica’s bicyclists since the 1970s at AAA Welch’s Bicycle & Ski Shop.
stroke. We sloshed our way into Eddie’s Restaurant and cozied down at the counter, water dripping off us everywhere. They didn’t blink an eye, just handed us hot coffee and asked if we’d like to bring our bikes in around the counter where they’d be safer and drier.

Eddie’s was a place that started out selling hot dogs and three generations later has become the cornerstone of Main Street. The counter at Eddie’s proved to be a good place to hear stories too. As soon as Dick sat down, the people at the counter immediately started in saying, “Do you know so and so?” and going through names until they found someone they all knew. I think Dick even found out he was related to one of them in some distant cousin’s brother sort of way.

The rain still poured down as we crossed the alley to Harpoon Eddie’s, lured by the promise of some special drink they serve to get the beach parties rolling. It was a pastel tornado of drink mixes blended with ice and a whole lot of rum poured on top. Not good for riding, but good for conversation as the rum warmed us.

“When I was young, Sylvan Beach was the only place you could get a tattoo,” Dick reminisced. “It was a real let-your-hair-down sort of scene.” Drawn by tradition and a beach in the forest, generations of families continue to return to Sylvan Beach. It’s the sort of town with amusement parks, beach volleyball, boat rides, and teenage crushes you remember for a lifetime. There must have been some wild times along the way too because the locals kept raising their eyebrows and laughing at memories they weren’t sharing.

The rain didn’t slack off, so we headed back into it for the ride home. On the nearly deserted back roads, we rode side by side, and I asked Dick, “What are the new tattoos you’ve got on your arm?”

“It’s the Ride for Missing Children,” he replied. “A local girl went missing, and afterward a few of us rode bikes to Washington, DC, to draw attention to the case. Then we started a group to try and make sure it didn’t happen again.” Now, every year, over 450 cyclists ride a 100-mile route together and raise several hundred thousand dollars to fund poster campaigns and work by the New York/Mohawk Valley branch of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. They’ve helped locate several thousand missing children, and I thought it was a pretty noble use of the bicycle.

After 70 miles of rain, Dick said, “Let’s eat some blueberry pie?” If you can’t have sun and scenery, seek out great food and tasty drinks along the way. Full up on more calories than I burned on the ride, I rode back to the hotel through central Utica feeling inspired by Dick’s fitness, devotion to cycling, and commitment to working on an issue he believes in.

The sun came out again for my last day in New York as I joined Matt and two members of the New York Bicycling Coalition for a ride from Utica to Rome on a route along the Erie Canalway Trail, then to the Oriskany Battlefield and on to Fort Stanwix in Rome. The Erie Canal still flows right through Utica, a water highway that helped develop the city into an industrial powerhouse at its height. Most people don’t know it, but the boats and barges didn’t sail or motor along the canal, they were pulled by mules. The mules walked
on towpaths next to the canal and towed the boats with long ropes.

Today the boats use motors and, luckily for cyclists, many of the towpaths have been converted into a long multi-use trail paralleling the canal. It's called the Erie Canalway Trail, and it's an ideal touring route through this part of New York — it's nearly flat with no traffic and lots of interesting history and sites along the way. The entire canal and trail are included in the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor. As we happily ped-
aled along the canal, I spotted designated tent camping spots right by the trail, perfect for self-supported cyclists.

When the canal route is completed, it will be a 524-mile continuous trail along New York’s Erie, Oswego, Cayuga-Seneca, and Champlain canals and an ideal bike tour for all ages and abilities.

After some miles, we left the canalway trail to visit the Oriskany Battlefield, site of a horribly bloody fight on August 6, 1777. It turned out to be a decisive battle in the American Revolutionary War, and Daniel Umstead of the National Park Service told us the story with passion—the ambush by the British and Tory leaders, the slaughter, the fierceness of the fight, and the unfortunate end of the Great Peace of the Iroquois Confederacy.

We reached Rome and, with the day’s ride in the bag, we returned to Utica to enjoy one more local institution, the Saranac Brewery and tall glasses of the famed-and-followed Uncle Charlie or Utica Club beer. As we sat in the historic drinking room, I asked Matt how many more great rides there are in the area, and he said “Dozens, maybe hundreds more. This part of New York has so many great little back roads with almost no traffic. They are perfect road riding.”

I agreed. But it wasn’t just the riding. Utica, Oneida County, and the people I rode with made quite an impression on me. The mix of urban American history, land protection on a large scale, the directness and diversity of New York culture, quality local businesses still standing in the face of box stores, and a strong community of cyclists working to make cycling accessible and better for everyone all make this a special place. The riding is pretty ideal too.