

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, skis, 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 back yard. 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

leader knows the area where they're guiding inside out — the culture, the vibe, and even which bathrooms are cycling friendly. If you're going to offer peace of mind, you have to know what you're talking about."

POMG is true to its mission. By being small, they're also nimble. This fall, when Hurricane Irene doused large sections of southern Vermont with floodwaters and mud, First, who was guiding a group when the storm hit, loaded them in the POMG van and headed north out of the weather. The group did a different tour than they signed up for, but they had a riding vacation instead of being stranded in southern Vermont with no water, electricity, or roads.

POMG's Lake Champlain Islands Tour is brand new. Not only is it postcard perfect, guiding guests on roads with so little traffic they almost seem like overgrown bike paths, but it's a favorite of history buffs. The tour passes some of the most important Revolutionary War sites in both Vermont and New York. It also showcases bike-friendly Burlington, Vermont's Queen City, and explores the shores of the other Great Lake, Lake Champlain.

I'm psyched. I've been on my mountain bike nearly every day this summer, but



A peace offering. Until recently, there were more cows in Vermont than people.

My guides are Mary Yates and Philip Galiga, two of POMG's trusted veteran leaders. Philip is known for his wry 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

Shore Acres driveway. The inn perches on one of the most spectacular pieces of sprawling lakefront 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 the Green Mountains in the background. When I arrive, two guests, Suzanne and Chris, are already swimming. I drop my bike in the garage, retrieve my duffel, and am cannonballing into Champlain's brisk and choppy waters within minutes.

All POMG trips start with a quick orientation meeting. I dry off and sprint to be on time. Our group is small: an extended family from Minnesota (grandma and son tagged along in a car), a couple from New York City, two guides, and me. Philip and Mary mysteriously query people on their favorite fruit or vegetable — an icebreaker of sorts.

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 window — it warms up even the grouchy-est cyclist, even mid-bonk.

I roll down the crushed limestone of

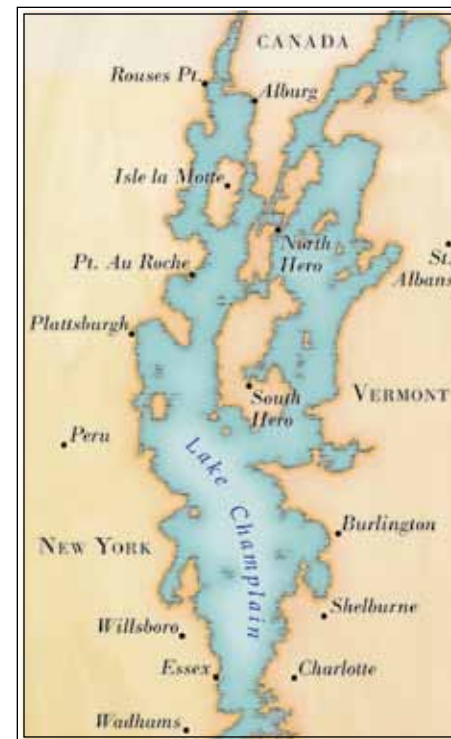
In the morning, after a heaping plate of eggs and home fries and a quick route review, we walk out to our bikes, now adorned with water bottles with our favorite vegetables drawn on them, a cute way to help Mary and Philip tell whose is whose when they dutifully fill them each morning. We set out on our tour. The van is like a border collie, periodically sweeping 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 embark on a career in teaching chemistry to high-school students. 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 sons, daughter-in-law, wife, and grandson along, is a fanatic. Kyle is biking in sneakers and a T-shirt. Mark looks like a logoeoed 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

VERMONT'S CHAMPLAIN ISLANDS



park to refill water and graze, and Marcella is hurting. She's on a men's saddle and it's set high. Her knees hurt. Mary and Phillip 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 spoons, 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 blastingly windy 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 lakefront 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 and South Hero), and a furniture company bear their names or refer to the brothers. We pass Hero's Welcome, a classic white clapboard general store that sells every kind of trinket as well as gourmet sandwiches and home-baked goods. Fortunately, everyone has just eaten, so we power past, hugging the shoreline with sun streaming through the clouds. Next stop is over the bridge in Alburg, Vermont — considered an island, 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 Valcour Island, which sits just off the shores of the Champlain Islands, 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 landscape. After miles of Adirondack-view lakefront and exceptional 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 cracked 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 is bathed in sunshine, and the lake is sprinkled with sailboats. Our final reward is a five-mile downhill into Willsboro.

I've logged less than 500 miles on my road bike and it's nearly August. Because I can, I drop my luggage at POMG headquarters the morning the tour starts, and I ride from my house to Shore Acres Inn in North Hero, Vermont.

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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



A taste of the grape. The group stops by Snowfarm Vinyard and samples some local wines.

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-the-ceiling windows, a 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 glassy 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.

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