



ESCAPING NYC

STORY BY ANNALISA VAN DEN BERGH | PHOTOS BY JOE NOCELLA

Long before Joe Nocella, owner of 718 Cyclery and Outdoors in Brooklyn, downsized his shop to his current one-man show, he'd play a game with his employees every time a certain major national bicycling magazine arrived. "We'd have a pool of the typical words used on covers: hot, climb, burn, speed, strong, shape, new, lean, fit, fast. We'd each put in some cash, guess three words, unwrap the magazine, and whoever won got the pot of money."

Over 15,000 miles of cycling around the world, I've yet to come across a bike shop as down-to-earth as my hometown's 718 Cyclery and Outdoors. Joe, a former bike messenger and architect, established the shop in his backyard in 2008. Prior to landing at its present-day South Slope location, a cozy former watch shop, 718 Cyclery and Outdoors really grew into its own between 2011 and 2019 at its previous, larger Gowanus location. Here, the addition of "Outdoors" was added to its name to mark the store as New York City's only small-business competitor to REI, to differentiate it as one of the country's only adventure cycling-themed bike shops, and to pay homage to their signature event that has become my favorite part about them — Micro-Tours.

Every season except winter (and those affected by global pandemics), 718 organizes regular overnight weekend bike trips that start in the heart of the city. About seven years ago, the first Micro-Tour was launched by accident after staff members would constantly reminisce among themselves about their bike tours, prompting inquisitive customers to keep asking, "When's the next one?"

Word quickly spread because, as any adventure cyclist knows, overnight bike tours are the gateway to bicycle touring. 718's Micro-Tours can now draw in up to 50 people, cycling to places like the Catskills, the Hudson River valley, Westchester, and even as urban as across Brooklyn to the airport-turned-park Floyd Bennett Field.

In a "Mappy Hour" webinar, Joe talks about the power of finding adventure in the unlikeliest of places. "I always like going to Floyd Bennett Field

just because you get to camp in Brooklyn. Not incredibly immersive — there are planes flying overhead, you can hear the Belt Parkway, there are idiots drag racing their cars all over the place, and there are fireworks and RVs everywhere. [But] there are brief moments where you can almost bend reality and imagine that you're in the woods. I always think of it like the Brady Bunch in their backyard where it was obviously a set."

Last fall, I finally joined a Micro-Tour myself and brought along my then-cycling-hesitant friend, Leeron. She felt immediately comfortable on the ride up to Westchester as the group's wide spectrum of cycling styles created a net that left no one behind. The group's bikes ranged from road bikes to cargo bikes to one with a trailer hauling a 130-pound Great Dane.

That inclusivity breeds a Micro-Tour and staff demographic that has never been male dominant. Mal Johnson, a 718 regular, shared with me that, "Seeing trans and gender-nonconforming people on staff made me, as a trans person, feel more welcomed and safe in the shop and especially on Micro-Tours."

Unlike other bike shops' intimidating paceline group rides, Micro-Tours have a low barrier to entry and create an environment that favors the journey over the speed. The Micro-Tour proves that in just one day, you can pedal your way from the city to the country on any bike and out of any town — even the most populous one in the U.S.

Those memories and connections reach back into the shop. In his webinar, Joe continues: "For me as a business owner, someone can walk in and buy a helmet or a lock and leave, and that's great. But someone can also walk in and say, 'Remember that trip last October, [when] we were on the side of the mountain in the rain?' You're living with people and you're sleeping with people and you're surviving with people. You have these connections that are far bigger than retail. And those connections to me are just unbelievable."



718 has become a reminiscing point and a starting point for adventure. New Yorkers, many of whom lack cars, don't typically think of their city as accessible to nature. But a total bike touring newcomer could walk into Joe's shop and, instead of investing in fancy equipment, be oriented to everything they need to dip their feet in the water: a rental bike, a gear loan, and a Micro-Tour registration.

My theory is that the more Joe and his former team have treated cycling as a way of life instead of a hobby, the more grounded they have become in it. Joe knows the bicycle is a vehicle with a purpose that goes beyond maximizing wattage or burning calories — it's a gateway and a tool for empowerment, learning, storytelling, freedom, and so much more. He uses his now tiny shop to not just sell things but also as a platform for free maintenance lessons, talks, grant programs for under-represented groups in the bike industry, and short, intimate historical bike tours around Brooklyn.

On a hot Tuesday morning in July, I finally made my COVID-19–delayed visit to Joe's new 320-square-foot shop in the South Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn. Joe's a quirky guy with a soft voice who's filled with knowledge about the city. One of his life goals is to never break his streak of wearing shorts year-round.

He had just opened up his shop after having to close it for a week to catch up. The pandemic has made for a busy few months of selling out of bikes. It's a classic New York hole-in-the-wall with trinkets and stickers from past trips filling every corner and bike frames hanging from the

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some odd sensations. I heard a rushing sound, my vision blurred, and I started feeling dizzy. Strangest of all, my right arm and hand didn't respond normally. If I willed to move my arm six inches, it only moved one inch.

Anyway, I was fortunate because I wasn't alone. My daughter called 911 and paramedics transported me to Monument Hospital in Rapid City, South Dakota, which was only one mile away.

While there, I was diagnosed as having suffered a stroke and administered tPA. I noticed positive results within a few hours and ended up only having to spend one night in the hospital.

I went through a bunch of tests while at Monument. The source of the blood clot was not definitively identified, but through the testing

it was discovered I had a hole in my heart. The emergency room doctor mentioned that about 25 percent of the population has this condition and is not even aware of it. He believed that hole allowed a blood clot to enter my brain, causing the stroke.

In a sense, I was fortunate in several ways. If I had never had the stroke, I probably would not have learned of my medical condition, which apparently I've had all my life. I am now working with a cardiologist here in the Seattle area to determine ways of possibly repairing the hole.

The theory of what caused the stroke in Gray Rushin's story is also intriguing. I will have to mention it to my doc the next time I see him.

Ryan Kleps | Des Moines, Washington

someone who might be interested in getting started with bike travel, please pass along your *Adventure Cyclist*, give them a gift membership, and most important — take them on an overnight trip with you!

We're also looking forward to launching a prototype of our Cyclists Choice layer on our app, with continually updated and curated service and route information. This will make our app a must-have for any bike trip. Thanks to our many members who joined me in supporting the development of these new routes and tools for our current, and growing, community.

Twenty twenty-one will continue to be a year of development for Adventure Cycling as we push ourselves to better meet the needs of our growing community. If you've got ideas on how to accelerate this work and our value in support of your adventures, don't hesitate to let me know.

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brick wall. He told me he had tried opening the front glass window at one point to make it easier to interact with customers, but that didn't last long. "The shop became a sort of ice cream truck, and I actually had too many customers to handle on my own. I guess it's a good problem to have."

He rolled his eyes with a smile every time a customer knocked on the door and asked the most frequently asked question: "Can you fix my bike?" When he made the move to his tiny shop, he did it with the intention of cutting out bike maintenance entirely. It accounted for just 20 percent of

profits but demanded the most stress, overhead, and employees. Now he feels more free and able to focus on what he really cares about: community and the "Outdoors" part of 718's name.

Joe's always been a huge supporter of mine. He's hosted several events at his shop to promote Miles of Portraits, a series I co-create with my friend Erik about the people we meet as we ride our bicycles around the world. But he's also made the point to me time and again that while it's great to read and hear about exotic bike trips like ours, not everyone can afford to travel to such far-flung places. We need more

stories of the everyday, more accessible adventure — especially now that we're living in a global pandemic.

On our Micro-Tour to Westchester last year, the group had to spend a good 20 miles simply getting out of the city. At one point in the Bronx, we rode under an elevated subway line with cars honking and exhaust filling the air. The sun cast rays of sunshine through the train tracks and onto the street. Joe, riding in the back, sneaked a photo of the group on this industrial adventure. As we were held up by bumper-to-bumper traffic, Joe rolled up next to me and showed me the picture on his phone: "See? This is the kind of photo we need to see more of out there." 📷

Annalisa van den Bergh is a visual storyteller, graphic designer, and writer living with type 1 diabetes. On her 2017 TransAm bike trip, she founded Miles of Portraits, a magazine and film that documents her favorite part of bike travel — the people. Follow her journey on Instagram at @annalisavdenbergh and @milesofportraits.