



Riders participating in the 13th annual Cycling the Erie Canal tour pedal toward their second stop in Lockport on Sunday.

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Bike tour showcases state's heritage

By **Jonathan D. Epstein**

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More than 500 bicyclists from 36 states and three foreign countries are riding across the state along the Erie Canal this week, as part of a 13th annual bike trip designed to draw attention to upstate New York and its heritage.

The riders — ranging in age from 6 to 89, but averaging 50 — set out early Sunday morning from Buffalo's Nichols School on the 400-mile Cycling the Erie Canal tour.

They spent the night in Medina, after stopping for boat tours in Lockport, before continuing on toward Albany, where they are scheduled to arrive July 17.

Along the way, plans call for them to visit various towns and villages dotting the canal path, including scheduled stops for sightseeing, historic sites, recreation and a little bit of education about upstate and the canal itself. Several hundred volunteers are helping.

"They were particularly cheery [Sunday], because the weather is so perfect," said Robin Dropkin, executive director of Parks & Trails New York, a statewide nonprofit group that is sponsoring the program.

Keith and Mary Kay Schwab of Rochester are celebrating their 40th anniversary on the ride. The couple often ride canal trails around Rochester, and have biked the Niagara Parkway from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie, the Welland Canal in Canada, the Cayuga trail and trails in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. But this is the longest trip they've made.

"I've been retired for two years now, and it just came to me," said Keith Schwab, 63. "It's very inspiring when you see the group."

The trip is not a race, but a more relaxed tour, with riders traveling at their own pace to enjoy the sights and sounds along the way, Dropkin said. Bikers will cover 40 to 60 miles per day, with additional overnight stops in Pittsford, Seneca Falls, Syracuse, Fort Stanwix, Canajoharie and Scotia.

"If you've gotten in last, you've gotten to see everything along the way," she said.

The group even includes about 75 kids and tandem bikes. About 25 participants are from Canada, with others from England and France. The oldest rider, at age 89, is from Colorado.

"Besides having people have a great time and get great exercise, it really is partly to introduce them to upstate New York, our rich history and the great cycling that is available," Dropkin said, calling it a combination of both bicycle and heritage tourism. "We're promoting upstate and the Erie Canal Trail as an iconic experience."

Tour participants even enjoyed an architectural bike ride in Buffalo on Saturday, before the official ride began. "People just loved it and were so impressed with what was available," Dropkin said. "We don't do a good enough job of tooting our own horn."

Jill DeLucia of Niles, Mich., is enjoying the combination of history and biking. The 55-year-old native of the Catskills region calls herself "a pretty avid bike rider," who's done some rides of 100 miles in a single day. But she's never done a multiday trip, camping out in between, and was intrigued by the idea.

“The biking, together with the historic part of the canal, that’s what made me want to do this. I think that’s a really interesting thing about the ride,” she said. “When I saw I could do a ride in my home state and it was something interesting to me about New York, that was perfect.”

About three-quarters of the ride will be along the Erie Canalway Trail, which will be the longest statewide trail in the country when it is completed. It still has about six gaps, including one in Amherst, one around Lyons, a big one in Syracuse and one near Amsterdam and Rotterdam in eastern New York. So the riders will use the shoulders of public roads in those areas.

Dropkin said about \$20 million is needed to fill in those holes, and supporters — including Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.

Y. — have been pushing the affected communities to work together and find resources to complete the trail.

The group also is working with communities in general to make them more “bicycle-friendly.” Ultimately, she said the group would like to see 50,000 people crossing the state on their own “and really adding to the economy.”

jepstein@buffnews.com

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