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Business cycle with profit potential

By [MARLENE KENNEDY](#) COVERING TECH VALLEY

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Long ago, I suggested a bicycle honeymoon to Husband, covering a route from central New York, where we then lived, to the Capital Region, where I had relatives.

Since we planned an unconventional wedding anyway -- married in a favorite state park, by a female county court judge presiding over a murder trial (I loved the shock factor of both of those points) -- cycling and camping our way east seemed in character.

Husband, though, saw it for the disaster it would have been -- our cheap tent regularly leaked and he had no bike -- and talked me into a trip to Toronto instead.

Had he been open at all to my idea, I'm not sure how I would have proceeded. There was no MapQuest then, no "smart phones" with embedded GPS -- come to think of it, no extensive cellphone network either.

These days, though, it's a lot simpler to plan such a trip -- if you know where to look.

"The less people have to do to put together their trip, the more likely they are to come," Robin Dropkin, executive director of Parks & Trails New York, told a group drawn to Glens Falls the other night by a forum titled "Bicyclists Bring Business."

Parks & Trails, an Albany-based nonprofit that advocates for using and preserving open space, sponsored the program, the eighth it has held statewide over the past three years.

The idea is to assemble diverse groups with an interest in capitalizing on the infrastructure already in place -- New York has developed 280 miles of biking and hiking trails along the Erie Canal -- and then build momentum for the ultimate prize: a New York State Canalway Trail System for recreational use that spans more than 500 miles upstate along the Erie, Cayuga-Seneca, Oswego and Champlain canals.

Parks & Trails works closely with the state Canal Corp., which has done the actual heavy lifting on developing the canalway. The two groups, for instance, promote big biking excursions each summer: Cycling the Erie Canal, an eight-day, 400-mile trip from Buffalo to Albany, and the Great Hudson Valley Pedal, a six-day, 200-mile trip from Albany to New York City.

Each costs \$520, but riders get meals, camping accommodations, luggage transport, bike repairs, and guided tours of wineries, museums and historical sites.

Last year's 10th annual Buffalo-to-Albany trip drew more than 500 participants, two-thirds of whom were from out of state.

That's one example of the economic potential of bicycle tourism, but it's just the tip of the iceberg.

The state of Maine, for instance, conducted a study that pegged the overall impact of visiting cyclists at \$66.8 million annually -- some \$36 million in direct spending and the rest from "spin off" in wages and investments in related industries such as retail and entertainment. In Colorado, the annual numbers are more striking: some \$193 million directly and \$1 billion overall.

Parks & Trails' Dropkin said it's a myth that bicycle tourists don't spend money, citing the \$25,000 spent by a group of 10 women from California who contacted her organization to help plan a 10-day bike trip in New York. They kept careful track of their expenditures, so Dropkin said she's certain of their economic impact.

And their spending wasn't atypical. The Maine study and others offer similar demographics of bicycle tourists: They range in age from 30 to 55, hold white-collar jobs with annual incomes of \$60,000 or more, will spend \$150 to \$300 a day, and seek out destinations that offer bicycle-friendly accommodations, hearty meals, and unique culture or scenery. They don't just camp trail-side, but stay in five-star hotels, too.

For all that potential, though, too many communities have done little to capitalize on the cycling tourist, Dropkin said. "It doesn't take much -- one brochure," she said.

"We have to want to do it," she added. "It's not that hard to attract them and make them happy."

Parks & Trails is a firm believer in the power of brochures, and has produced many, including handy ones on self-guided, three-day excursions called "Inn to Inn" (the nonprofit says bicyclists often favor bed-and-breakfast inns). These give start and end points, routes to take, and where to stop along the way for historical, commercial or geological sightseeing.

The one for a Little Falls-to-Albany trip, for instance, tells me about the formation of "The Noses" near Sprakers in Montgomery County, where the Adirondacks force the Mohawk River to narrow, and provides a quick history lesson on Schenectady's Stockade District, where some buildings hark back to the 17th century.

Hmm. With all this information readily at hand and Husband now in possession of a bicycle, could a second honeymoon on the canalway be far behind? Luckily for him, our summer already is too full to squeeze in either the Cycle the Erie or Hudson Valley Pedal rides.

But there's always next year.

Executive Business Editor Marlene Kennedy can be reached at 454-5492 or by e-mail at mkennedy@timesunion.com.