

Erie Canal Bicycle Trip
July 11, 2008 – July 21, 2008
118 Years on the Erie Canal

In 2006, I participated in PTNY's Erie Canal Tour. I found the ride to be very well run and supported, entertaining and challenging. I did the ride without my wife Candice who is also an avid touring cyclist from a family dedicated to bicycle touring. (Her father did a solo cross-country trip at age 64 to celebrate his retirement!)

Candice & I have toured together before including trips from Bar Harbor, Maine to Durham, CT, Montreal, Quebec to Gananoque, Ontario, Cape Cod and the Islands, and the C&O Tow Path from Washington DC to Cumberland, Maryland.



I had really enjoyed my PTNY experience and the towns and people of New York state. After much discussion of the pro and cons (for us) of an organized ride vs. our own somewhat disorganized ride, we decided on the latter, seeing it as a chance to be alone together without any commitments or distractions. We selected the week following the 2008 PTNY ride and began planning in the spring. The planning was a big part of the excitement. As the departure date drew ever closer, we got more and more excited. Doing the trip unsupported obviously required additional logistics. The tour materials from 2006 and the book Cycling the Erie Canal proved to be invaluable

The first challenge was getting the bikes and us to Buffalo in a reasonable manner. Amtrak's Lakeshore Limited met this requirement. The train leaves Albany/Rensselaer at 7:05 PM. and is scheduled to arrive in Buffalo at 11:55 PM. The cost of a ticket was \$ 61.00 per person. With the assistance of station personnel and a total additional charge of \$40.00 we rolled our bikes into Amtrak provided boxes and they were placed in the baggage car. Amtrak recommends that you get to the station two hours before the scheduled departure. The Lakeshore Limited is the **only** train crossing New York State that has baggage service and will accept bicycles.

The second challenge was how to deal with arriving in the middle of the night with two bicycles and 8 to 9 days' worth of camping gear. The Millennium Hotel in Cheektowaga ((716) 681-2400) was an excellent solution. They have van service until 1:00 AM. I had made a reservation in advance requesting a first floor room and indicated that we were

traveling with bicycles. I called the hotel from the train station upon arrival. Their driver picked us up and there we were safe and sound in Buffalo, fully self contained, ready to cycle back to our vehicle left in long-term parking at the Albany/Rensselaer Amtrak station. After a good night's sleep, we loaded the bikes with our camping gear, wended our way across Buffalo to the Nichols School and on to the PTNY bike route. It was approximately 10 miles from the Millennium to the bike route. What a great sense of freedom knowing that we were together with the goal of 400 great miles! We started each day with no specific destination, leaving ourselves open to the day's adventures.

Our experience on the ride reinforced my positive view of the people of upstate NY and their towns. We used the Cycling the Erie Canal guidebook extensively and PTNY's bright pink route markings. Our first night's stay was in Lockport at the Niagara County Camping Resort, which provides a discount to people who find them in Cycling the Erie Canal. Arriving after a serious downpour and exhausted, our first night of camping was a true pleasure.

Sunday morning dawned damp and misty and we cycled towards Albion. As the day moved on, it cleared and turned into a beautiful sunny day with a strong tailwind. We did a quick loop through downtown Medina and admired the old buildings along the quiet Main Street. The scenery along this part of the trip was beautifully pastoral with miles of waving cornfields along the canal and delicious ripe cherries to be picked off the trees. We arrived in Albion in the evening where the bridge keeper pointed out where we could camp and where water and hot showers could be had. In Albion, as in other towns along the way, we met families using the trail that stopped to talk and ask questions about where we were going and what bicycle camping was like. Others asked if we were part of the big organized ride. We're slow but not that slow!

The next day we continued along the canal trail, took breaks in Brockport, Rochester's Genesee Valley Park, and Fairport, and then spent the night at the hiker-biker-boater campsite in Macedon at Lock 30. The lock keepers and bridge keepers are great tourist ambassadors for New York State. They were invariably friendly and helpful and did their best to make us feel safe and wanted at their facilities.

From Macedon, we continued east towards Syracuse. This day, which was extremely hot, featured some serious hills along beautiful country roads. We found an excellent campground (Oak Orchard Marina & Campground) listed in Cycling the Erie Canal. This campground is on the northern edge of the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge. It was immaculate with terrific shower and laundry facilities. The camp store has a great selection of

ice cream. The owners were on site and the place was bicycle friendly with a very pretty area for tent campers. After a long, hilly day, Candice made good use of the swimming pool.

We got off to a well-rested good start the next day. After once again joining up with PTNY's route markings, we followed the route to the Syracuse area. We stopped at a roadside Amish stand on Route 31 and purchased all kinds of great stuff, homemade bread and cookies, fresh eggs, tomatoes, and other vegetables. Perhaps the highlight of the trip was stopping to cook a lunch of boiled egg & tomato sandwiches on Amish wheat bread at a gazebo in Weedsport washing it all down with a root beer float from DB's Drive-In right next door.

We followed the PTNY markings into and through Syracuse and eventually rode on the Old Erie Canal State Park route. The PTNY route through Syracuse to the Old Erie Canal State Park was invaluable. Unfortunately, or fortunately, (it depends on your point of view,) we ran out of daylight along the canal path on the way to Green Lakes State Park. A full moon and an escort of hundreds of fireflies lighted our night. Green Lakes State Park is not to be missed. The facilities are terrific and the otherworldly green lakes themselves are worth the trip. For hiker/walkers the paths to and around the lakes are a real treat.

Leaving from Green Lakes State Park, we rejoined the Old Erie Canal State Park route and followed it directly into Rome NY where we spent a very comfortable night at the local Quality Inn. The staff was very accommodating and provided us with a first floor room where we could roll the bikes right in. I highly recommend the Franklin Hotel a couple of blocks away for a great Italian meal at a great price, with portions suitable for self-contained bicycle tourists.

After our night of luxury, we faced another challenging day. Dodging thunderstorms, we managed to stay dry and found ourselves riding past the entire population of Illion, NY as they sat on the curb awaiting this year's Illion Days parade, which of course we had to stay and watch. What a good time! After the parade, with daylight beginning to fade, we made our way to Lock 18 for the night. Once again, the hospitality of the lock keeper spoke well for the NYS Canal System.

The ride from Lock 18 to Lock 10 was approximately 50 miles. By the time we got to Lock 10, it was getting dark (again) and we really appreciated being able to put up our tent for the night even though the lock was officially closed for repair. After some discussion and weighing some very unattractive alternatives, looking very exhausted and very middle-

aged, we asked for permission anyway. We were directed to a safe area away from the construction site. The lock keepers told us a lot about the extensive Mohawk River flooding of 2007 and the rebuilding project. They also provided us with a lot of great info regarding the history and navigation of the canal. It was a pleasant end to a difficult and tiring day

The next day was short on riding and long on adventure. I think that in some ways it represented the tremendous diversity of the ride. To be able to go from a Native American Pow-Wow to a water skiing show, to an historic district and to a Babe Ruth League baseball game all in one day demonstrates for me the remarkable options available in this part of New York. Near the end of the day, the thunderstorms finally caught us and after finding shelter under a party tent at a marina near Cohoes, we spent the night at the Clarion Hotel at the Century House in Latham. Once again, the assistance of a stranger made our day. While waiting out the storm, we talked to a local person who had his boat in the marina. After a couple of hours of waiting, the thunder and lightening stopped although the rain continued.

Our new friend gave us directions to the nearest lodging and we rode the three miles in the rain to get there. While we dripped in their lobby (it was pretty fancy,) they found us yet again a first floor room and welcomed us for the night.

The final day of riding to Rensselaer, Candice and I followed the PTNY route. What a great feeling of accomplishment as we approached the Albany skyline! More than a little sadness was mixed in as well. It had been a great trip, but now it was over. We'll be on the Erie Canal again; in 2010, we're going to ride across the country to celebrate Candice's 60th birthday!