

Cycling the Erie Canal Tour:

A SNEAK PEEK BEHIND THE SCENES

Every July, Parks & Trails New York leads a group of more than 500 bicyclists across New York on an eight-day tour along the Erie Canalway Trail from Buffalo to Albany.

During the course of the Cycling the Erie Canal (CTEC) tour, participants spend their days riding leisurely along the historic Erie Canal, learning the history of the world-famous engineering marvel, and visiting the communities that sprouted up along the waterway to provide goods and services to canal traffic. The tour is certainly a spectacular sight, but it's the hard work that's going on behind the scenes that makes the ride a truly remarkable undertaking. Considering that tour organizers must coordinate the daily activities, overnight accommodations, meals, transportation, supporting services, and volunteer assistance while on the move for over a week – the effort requires a great deal of preparation and teamwork.

Ring Leader Al Hastings directing the show

If many refer to Cycling the Erie Canal as a travelling circus, Al Hastings, a veteran leader who has coordinated the tour for nearly 10 years, would certainly be the tour's ring leader. Al is in charge of day-to-day operations.

Al starts preparing for CTEC in December of the previous calendar year. Once the date for the ride has been established, he makes reservations with each of the overnight locations, rest stops, and group tour and service providers. Al works with caterers to provide each of the tour's meals - eight breakfasts and six dinners along the way (two of the nights cyclists are directed towards top-notch local fare).

During the tour, Al oversees the army of over 50 volunteers that lend a helping hand from everything from loading gear trucks to staffing the information tent. When snacks need to be supplied for the rest stops, a route change must be made to avoid a hazard, or a night's entertainment is booked – Al Hastings is the man behind the scenes.

Al's annual sidekick is the Assistant Ride Director. Usually a graduate student with an interest in cycling, the Assistant Ride Director is responsible for overseeing the registration process, updating the website and literature, and being the liaison between registrants and tour organizers. During the tour, the Assistant Ride Director oversees the Vehicle Support Team (called SAG for support and gear). SAG wagons, as they are affectionately known, provide weary or lost riders an opportu-



Al Hastings, CTEC's tour director, meets with the Volunteer Crew to brief them on the road ahead.



Al emcees each day's morning announcements



Volunteers lead participants through the tour registration

nity to get refreshed and back on course. SAG wagons ferry the occasional mechanical breakdown to the tour mechanic. There are three to four SAG wagons out each day, patrolling the route making sure everything is progressing smoothly.

Volunteers - priceless

It's no surprise that CTEC attracts a large dedicated core of volunteers who keep coming back year after year. A large part of the ride's continued success is attributed to the expertise and dedication of these seasoned CTEC veterans. Participants are most familiar with the fleet of peddling CTEC volunteers that help keep folks on route. Bike SAG, as they are collectively known, assist with the occasional flat tire, make simple on-route bicycle repairs and will radio the SAG wagon if a pick-up is needed. Each day two bike SAGs will operate on sweep – making sure they are absolutely the last riders to come in from the day's segment. Like the military, CTEC doesn't leave anyone behind!

There are several volunteer opportunities on the CTEC tour. Four truck drivers load and ferry gear from one tent city to the next. Volunteers staff each of the day's rest stops. If participants need assistance in the tent city to find something in the community, there are information booth volunteers to provide answers. The list of special jobs on CTEC goes on: Rest stop drivers, route markers, two nurses – all provided thanks to volunteer labor.

Local community benefits

To ensure that the Canalway Trail communities directly benefit, PTNY contracts with local caterers, schools, and not-for-profit organizations such as the Elks, Kiwanis, and YMCA to prepare the tour's eight breakfasts and six dinners. All lunches and two dinners are on your own so riders can further contribute to the local economies by visiting shops, restaurants, and other attractions along the route.

“We've been part of the tour for a decade,” said Jim Trapini of the Glenville-Scotia Elks. “We do a spaghetti dinner and then a big bacon, eggs and French toast breakfast the next morning. It provides some extra funds for our organization's projects, but most importantly it's a great team-building experience for the 40 members who participate. We start preparing days before the event to make meatballs and sauce and ten sheet cakes. Local restaurants help us by preparing appetizers and donating cooler space. It's intense feeding more than 500



The tour mechanic is often kept busy with repairs



A SAG vehicle, ready for action



Riders are welcomed into Canastota by local officials

riders dinner and a 6 a.m. breakfast, but the camaraderie that develops makes it well worth the effort.”

Warm welcomes filled with pride

All along the 400-mile route, the Chambers of Commerce, village and town governments, and civic groups volunteer to warmly welcome, entertain, and assist the riders at the eight overnight and two daily rest stops. The Village of Seneca Falls plans an especially full series of events. As riders arrive in the late afternoon, they offer Seneca County wines, cheeses and ice cream at their village park. Shops and museums stay open late and buses are available to take riders to restaurants and swim at the state park. Later in the evening, riders can enjoy a local storyteller and a concert by the community band.

Adriene Emmo, Director of the Seneca Falls Heritage Area Visitor Center summed up the feeling of most communities on the tour, “We try to welcome the riders in a big way, not only because we are just that kind of community, but because we know they come from all over the country and we want them to learn about our village and especially want them to come back.”

A typical day for the CTEC crew

Most of the staff and volunteers on the ride must be up and at ‘em before the sun begins its ascent. Caterers are hard at work preparing breakfast well before dawn. The volunteer truck drivers start loading gear and tents by 7:00 a.m. The volunteers that check route markings, who must be out before the pack, have likely left for their day’s task well before many of the ride participants have their first sip of morning coffee.

The tour vendors are up early too. The tour mechanic is finishing up repairs to assure each rider can peddle off. The Comfy Campers staff is breaking down rented tents, rolling up mattresses, and folding up chairs. They will cart the gear to the next overnight to set up again.

Rest stop volunteers are loading a truck for delivery of fruit and snacks to the rest stops. The vehicle SAG team is reviewing the day’s route.

After the last rider has handed off their overnight gear and cycled away, a few volunteers remain behind to pack up the information tent, load the last bits of gear, and clean the overnight site. As the day progresses, bike and vehicle SAG vol-



The rest stop supply truck is loaded each evening



Rest Stop volunteers keep riders fueled and hydrated



The Pattersonville Volunteer Fire Department always puts together a great rest stop—complete with a cool-down

unteers patrol the route while volunteers oversee the snacks at the rest stops. The bike mechanic is in the field fixing broken spokes or a loose crank. The truck drivers, if not en route, have already arrived at that evening's overnight site to unload cyclists' gear, set up the information tent, and lay out way finding signage.

During the late afternoon dinner is prepared by the caterers. Local representatives, usually members of the local Chamber of Commerce, are staffing the information tent, answering the usual questions.

The lead SAG Driver and bicycle sweep are the last to come in from the road, and arrive just in time for evening entertainment. Some nights it's folk music. Other nights it may be a storyteller or a wine and cheese reception.

Each day is full of energy and excitement on the CTEC tour which is why it is often referred to as a rolling party on two wheels and a travelling circus. No matter what you call the tour one thing is for certain - riders and volunteers alike have a really, really wonderful time along the way.



Comfy Campers tents await their overnight tenants each and every afternoon



Empty luggage trucks parked at the Canajoharie Tent City