



A nice week for a ride

Annual tour takes hundreds of cyclists from Buffalo to Albany

BY KYLE ADAMS
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Robin Sarnacki and her daughter, Emma, rode into the Waterford Harbor Visitors Center on Sunday morning for a short break before the final 12 miles of their 400-mile bike trip from Buffalo to Albany.

"We did it last year, and it was so fun we decided to do it again this year," said Sarnacki, of Niskayuna.

Sarnacki joined the 17th annual Cycle the Erie Canal bike tour, a program of Parks & Trails New York, at the urging of some friends. They all teach fourth grade in the Bethlehem Central School District, and saw the tour as an opportunity to learn more about the Erie Canal, a topic they teach, while having a good time with friends.

"It's been great, the weather's been a lot better than last year," Sarnacki said. "And you meet all sorts of great people from all over the world, really, and all different ages. Some of the older people, they're very inspirational. And the little kids are inspirational, too."

Emma, 18, said she was looking forward to the reception at the Albany Visitors Center, where the tour officially ended under an arch of balloons.

"There's a sense of accomplishment that comes with crossing the finish line," she said. "It's really fulfilling."

For most, the tour is not a race. The 700 or so riders, including volunteer staff, ride 40 to 60 miles each day, with two breaks and plenty of time spent sightseeing as they follow the Erie Canal for eight days, mostly along the Canalway Trail.



Cyclists with the 17th annual Cycle the Erie Canal made their way through Waterford on Sunday during the last leg of the 400-mile ride that started in Buffalo. **At top**, riders pedal over to the Waterford Harbor Visitors Center. **Above**, cyclists continue their journey after a pitstop in Waterford. **At left**, Mateo Diz of Rochester and Kate Graham of King Ferry pose with Danny the mule from Broken-New Farm of West Sand Lake at the farmers market. View a photo gallery online at dailygazette.com.

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Above and below, cyclists stop in Waterford on Sunday during a bike tour from Buffalo to Albany. **Bottom**, Kate Marshall of Ossining glances over fresh vegetables at the farmers market in Waterford.

Canal

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They camp each night in "tent cities," accompanied by support services like a mobile bike shop, first aid, showers and bathrooms, meals and even massages in the evening.

Sandi Willsey of Lima and husband Jim Pamper have been volunteering with the tour for the past five years. This year, they served as "Bike SAGs," meaning Support and Gear, or, as Pamper preferred, Support and Guidance.

"We fix flats, we render first aid, we give directions, moral support," Willsey said. "We'll give people suggestions, let them know attractions that are coming up, places to eat, because this is our fifth time doing the tour."

They've seen plenty of people join the tour along the way. This year, the biggest they've seen, had riders from as far as Afghanistan, and from ages 2 to 91. Some have been riding the tour for 14 years, and some were joining for the first time.

"It's just really interesting who you meet along the way, and hear their stories and maybe the challenges that they've overcome," Willsey said.

Take, for instance, the woman who rode the tour again this year after having to drop out last year when she broke her collarbone.

"She wanted to finish it," Willsey said.

Sherry Dudeck of West Haverstraw joined the race alone and soon met Jacques LaMarre of Charles Town, West Virginia. The two bonded quickly over the fact that they had both hiked the Adirondack Trail, and within a year of one another.

At the Waterford Visitors Center on Sunday morning, they sat at a picnic table and snacked on a box of blueberries they had bought at the farmers market.

"On my bucket list, I want to be able to see and try and understand a little bit more about all our national parks," said LaMarre. "I'm a big national parks supporter. I have the passbook, I put stamps everywhere I go. I wouldn't call myself an environmentalist or an activist, but I believe in having these places available for everybody."

Dudeck had already kay-

aked the entire Erie Canal, and said she's fascinated by its engineering, its history and the people she's met along the way.

With less than a day left on the tour, both were feeling a little sad that it was coming to an end.

"It's amazing how fast eight days goes," Dudeck said. "Like any vacation."

Cyclists continued to trickle into the Waterford Visitors Center throughout the morning, poking around the farmers market and picking up a few snacks, or snapping a photo with Danny the mule — playing "Sal" for the day — provided by the Waterford Historical Museum, before getting back on their bikes to complete the last short leg of the journey.

"We came to kiss the donkey," said Dudeck. "And we'll have some blueberries, and

then we've gotta go. Fifteen more miles, that's it."

Willsey and Pamper knew what to expect at the finish line: music, food and drinks, cheering, a "very festive" atmosphere.

"People are hugging and saying goodbye, exchanging phone numbers, and 'See you next year,'" Willsey said. "For some of them, this is such an incredible personal accomplishment that they're just thrilled to have achieved it."

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