

CLOSER TO HOME

One-Tank Trip / Ontario

All aboard the Bike Train to explore Toronto

VIA Rail Canada takes your bicycle and you to paths of adventure

By MICHELE PETERSON
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Between dodging clouds of Monarch butterflies and Canadian geese, cyclists in Toronto's Tommy Thompson Park could easily imagine they're on a wilderness agility course rather than a summertime sortie in the heart of Canada's largest city.

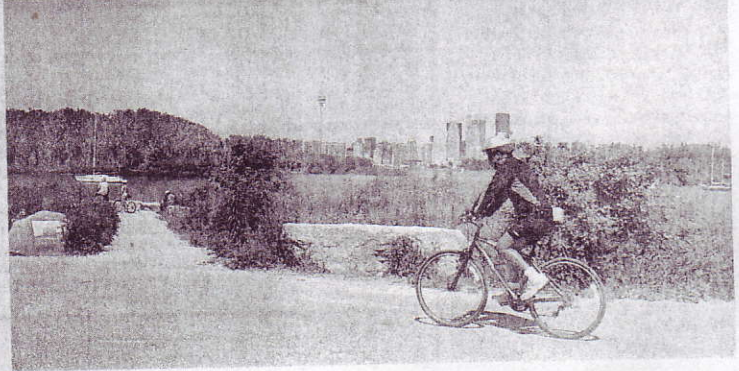
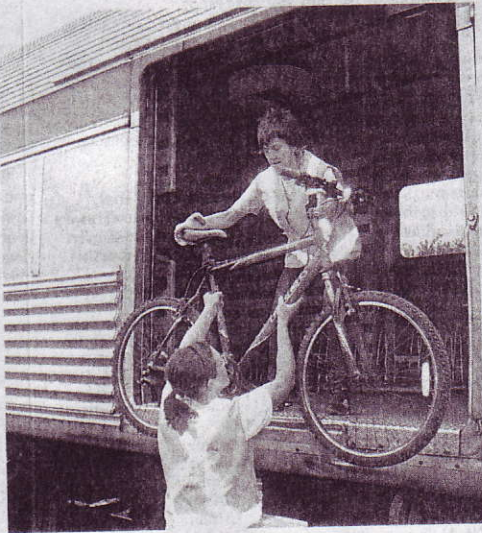
There's no denying that Ontario's capital is a destination well suited for exploring. With a wealth of history, architecture and green spaces, there's something enticing at every turn. What many people don't know is that Toronto is one of North America's most bike-friendly destinations and that exploring it from behind a set of handlebars reveals a side of the city most people don't get to see.

Thanks to a new service by VIA Rail Canada, it just got a lot easier for out-of-towners to experience Toronto's hidden attractions. Launched in the summer of 2007 as a pilot project, the Bike Train introduced bike racks on board select VIA Rail departures between Toronto and Niagara Falls, Ont. Back for the 2008 summer season with an expanded schedule of 27 departures, it's proving to be a popular way for cyclists to explore scenic routes at both ends of the trail.

Each Bike Train has the capacity for 56 bikes. A ticket gets you a passenger seat, a bicycle rack reservation and a cycling map. Riders stow their bikes in the special baggage compartment (panniers, helmets and other gear must be removed) and then relax for the two-hour journey into Toronto's Union Station. Enroute, they sample complimentary wine tastings from Ontario's top wineries while enjoying a rolling slideshow of fruit orchards, vineyards and lake views through the panoramic windows. Bike Train staff are on board to answer questions and offer trip planning advice.

"It's no surprise that Toronto should be the first Canadian city with a bike train," says Justin Lafontaine, founder of the Bike Train initiative. "Cycling is a key piece in the city of Toronto's official plan for low-impact, sustainable tourism."

The city has enjoyed a long relationship with cycling. As far back as the mid-1800s when the Comet Bicycling manufacturing plant introduced cycling as an elite mode of transportation, cycling has shaped the cultural, social and political fabric of Toronto. The next stage in its evolution is the completion of the official Bike Plan which calls for more than 600 miles of bicycle lanes, off-road paths and shared roadways linking cyclists with



At left, a bicycle is loaded onto the Bike Train in Niagara Falls, Ont., for the trip to Toronto. Above, a cyclist explores Toronto Islands, with the city's skyline in the distance.

Photos by Michele Peterson

various destinations across the city by 2011.

Whether you choose to pedal for exercise or relaxation, Toronto's current bike trail network suits both novice and advanced cyclists. With more than 250 miles of bike pathways already in place, it's easy to clock plenty of distance on the odometer.

On your way

Upon arrival at Union Station, the gateway hub for the Bike Train, there's plenty to explore within easy pedaling distance. Easy rollers will appreciate the scenic waterfront trail. Access it by heading south on Yonge Street until Queen's Quay and then proceed east. Make a stop at St. Lawrence Market, one of the world's top food markets, to stock up on chow for your journey. Alongside bins of organic produce displayed in tempting array, you can scout out finds such as organic apple cider, fresh goat cheese or Churrasco Portuguese BBQ chicken.

After fuelling up, it's time to experience the biking scene along the popular Martin Goodman Waterfront Trail. Here, cyclists roll past wildflowers, historic architecture and bright blue waters of the historic Portlands Area, Toronto's working inner harbor. Worth a short detour is the Distillery District historic site, a 13-acre urban hub of art galleries, unique boutiques and restaurants set among the largest and best preserved collection of Victorian industrial architecture in North America. Don't miss stopping in at Mill Street Brewery to sample Ontario's first organic lager, one of 13 handcrafted artisanal beers on tap.

Back on the Waterfront Trail, a highlight of the pathway is delightfully secluded Cherry Beach. Scheduled for renewal by the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corp., it currently offers a cottage country vibe. One of six Toronto beaches awarded the Blue Flag eco-label

recognizing high standards for beach water quality, it makes for a refreshing swimming stop. Further along, the multiuse pathway winds alongside tall grasses, beach dunes and wooden bridges where you're more likely to pass dragon boaters and sailboats than vehicles.

At Leslie Street, turn south to explore Tommy Thompson Park (also known as Leslie Street Spit). With tangles of wild rose bushes, towering cottonwood trees and eagles soaring overhead, it's hard to imagine that from the early 1800s to 1950s, the area was the dumping ground for everything from raw sewage to industrial waste. Today, this vibrant eco-system, located on a man-made peninsula that extends three miles into Lake Ontario, supports many threatened species including owls, bald-headed eagles and goldfinches. Accessible to cyclists on weekends and holidays, this car-free urban oasis features a network of wetlands, meadows and forests. A lighthouse anchors the end of the trail and is ideal for photo-ops of the downtown skyline and CN Tower.

Continuing east along the Waterfront Trail, the pathway passes through The Beach area, a series of connected beaches that have served as Toronto's summer playground since the 1800s. Today, beach volleyball tournaments, lawn bowling clubs, ice cream vendors and swimmers share this wide stretch of sandy shore.

Woodbine Beach is worth a stop even if it's just to soak in the view. This picturesque park is a hub of activity with people paddling kayaks, couples pedaling bicycles built for two and teens zooming by on in-line skates. Cyclists looking to stretch their legs will enjoy strolling along the intriguing streets of nearby Queen Street East where an eclectic mix of shops and dining opportunities await. Velotique, a stylish bike-accessory shop is a popular spot to catch up on bike club news or browse for hip cycling gear.

If stamina levels permit, loop back to Yonge Street and head to the Toronto Islands, a pastoral archipelago of islands each with its own character. Accessible by ferry, the short trails offer an opportunity to explore the history of early settlers on Ward's Island or indulge in Toronto's eclectic character at Hanlan's Point Beach, Toronto's only official clothing-optional beach.

With the promise of expanded trails, enthusiasm for cycling is building throughout the city and routes stretch in all directions. Those looking to boost their heart rate can head north along the Don Valley trail where steep inclines and winding trails offer a challenging ride.

Those looking for culture can cycle to the heart of downtown where the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) recently unveiled a set of 12 new bike stands lining Queen's Park. Designed by two leading Toronto artists, the unique sculptures are inspired by works within the ROM's collections.

Heading west along the waterfront is the vibrant Harbourfront Centre, a 10-acre site offering innovative cultural festivals, music events and the World Cafe, a smorgasbord of international dining featuring food from El Salvador to Thailand.

Whether it's the Music Garden, a landscape that interprets musical classics or stylish HTO Park, Toronto's newest waterfront playground, you can be sure that no matter which cycling route you choose to explore, you're sure to find the unexpected.

If you go

The official Tourism Toronto Web site is www.toronto-tourism.com. Browse a street guide, get updates on routes and other cycling information at www.toronto.ca/cycling. On designated Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) routes, cyclists can load their bikes on a rack in the front of the bus. Bikes are also allowed during off-peak hours on subways and Go Trains.

Accommodations: Bike-

friendly options include the Fairmont Royal York (www.fairmont.com), for bike storage and bike racks as well as proximity to Union Station. Another option is Days Inn—Toronto East Beaches. Located near the beach boardwalk, they don't have a bike-storage area but with advance notice can book cyclists into a ground floor room with extra space to store bikes. Visit www.daysinn.ca or call (800) DAYS INN.

Bike Train: Cyclists who cross the Canada-U.S. border at

Rainbow Bridge pay only 50 cents for their bike. The Niagara Falls (Ont.) Station is located at 4267 Bridge St. Check in 45 minutes prior to departure. Round-trip tickets cost \$59 CAN including taxes and bike transport fees. Reserve in advance at www.biketrain.ca or (888) 619-5984.

Bike rental: If you don't have a bike, rent one for \$50 for a special two-day weekend rate from Wheel Excitement located at Harbourfront (www.wheelexcitement.ca).

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