

TRAVEL

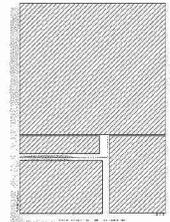
by Dalma Heyn

MELLOW YELLOW
Hitting the road
near Middlebury,
Vermont.



Pedal Power

New England Biking Getaways



A self-guided tour in New Hampshire and a guided tour in Vermont offer gorgeous back roads scenery, quaint inns and gourmet dinners. Get your vacation in gear!

BIKE TOURS CAN ELICIT a host of surprising anxieties. They only peek out at arrival and then, at dinnertime, flow as freely as the chardonnay: *I'll be pathetic tomorrow! I won't get up the first hill!* Or the reverse: *I've trained! I want to go 80 miles tomorrow! Look at these slackers. They won't be able to keep up! Will I have to stay with them? Eat with them?*

Bike Vermont, Vermont's largest bike touring organization (with 165 trips per year in the state, plus 35 others in Ireland, Scotland, Maine and Italy), is no stranger to every possible configuration of infantile regression and adult aggression. But by the time the 15 of us had finished dinner at the lovely Lilac Inn in Brandon, Vermont, on the first night of our weekend tour (the newest weekend itinerary on the Bike Vermont roster) last May, we were sated and calm. It wasn't just the chardonnay and homemade strawberry shortcake that did it, but the tour leaders so adroit at banishing neurosis they should be awarded post-docs in psychology and, to our great good luck, in stand-up comedy as well. Thus, assured that we wouldn't have to adjust to anyone's agenda or pace, that whoever wanted to dawdle could, that whoever wanted to race could, that whoever wanted to get a "boost" in the van for a few miles (or even back to the inn) could, we all slept relatively neurosis-free.

This was my second bike trip through the dreamy countryside of New England in the past year. While both of the tours were moderately priced and covered a minimum of about 20 miles a day, they were very different—not just because one was in Vermont in the spring and the other in New Hampshire in the fall, not just because one was two nights and the other three, but because one was guided and one was not.

O N BIKE VERMONT'S two-night guided Lilac Inn tour last spring, we cycled along smooth, mostly rural

roads, with a sweet dose of the farmlands, lakes, covered bridges and lush verdant hills for which this countryside is famous. We chose a route, and I took off with seven others after breakfast. Our ride culminated in the college town of Middlebury, 22 miles from the inn, in time for lunch and a bit of poking around. The serious bikers (not us) then biked back, some taking additional detours and different routes. We went slowly, stopping for breathers and photographs, and returned tired and ravenous that afternoon.

Five hours on the road is long enough to understand the popularity of guided tours. I once would have fallen into the "I'll do it myself" category, but I may have changed my mind on that one. It's deeply comforting to have sophisticated local cyclists along who not only excel in bike mechanics and road awareness (are the roads bike-friendly? is there any unexpected construction?) but who also know the idiosyncrasies of the routes (any 18-wheelers coming? are the biggest hills at the beginning or the end?) and how to reroute guests accordingly.

Tour leaders, by the way, don't ride in front of the group. The leader who drives the van patrols the entire area chosen by the guests—cyclists in our group selected routes covering from 22 to over 85 miles—while the other leader rides behind the final cyclist. Even with so much time and space between bikers, the leaders know, via cell phone and positioning, how we're all doing and where we all are. Guides Elaine Parker and Barbara Naple had the uncanny ability to be largely invisible until needed: Just when I thought, "A Snickers bar soon or death," along came the maroon van, glowing ahead in the distance like a mirage, its open arms bearing chocolate.

THE LILAC INN, to which some of us returned at tea time and others not

until dinner, was built in 1909 in the grand Newport mansion style as a summer house for a Chicago banker who wanted a good place to entertain. The sprawling inn's "bones," its architectural spaciousness, its gracious atmosphere and elegant wide street have a literary feel, and I could imagine Edith Wharton writing in the garden's gazebo or Zelda Fitzgerald flirting under the chandelier in the ballroom, which seats 130. Dinners (at eight) were cooked by owners Doug and Shelly Sawyer, and guests were given a choice of vegetarian or meat dishes and offered a simple array of wines and drinks at the pub.

The three-night self-guided tour I took in New Hampshire's White Mountains last fall also covered a minimum of roughly 25 to 35 miles a day, but it put less emphasis on the actual biking. Unlike Bike Vermont, Bike the Whites is not a bike company, per se; rather, it's one specific three-night, midweek-only inn-to-inn tour designed with the express purpose of introducing visitors to its three participating B&Bs in New Hampshire's White Mountains: the Tamworth Inn, in Tamworth Village on the Swift River; The 1785 Inn, in North Conway; and the Snowvillage Inn, which sits high on a hill atop 10 acres of woodlands, gardens and lawns in the little town of Snowville.

The route leading to each inn was mostly peaceful—I photographed an alpaca farm and several lakes and streams—but less rural than we'd hoped. (It could be made more so by getting off the main drag on side trips to, say, Diana's Baths, a series of waterfalls, or to the

swimming hole called Pot Holes.) Bike the Whites' focus is on the inns themselves—really, on their award-winning cuisine, and indeed the food and fine assortment of wines made evenings a pleasure. Guests dined at whatever time they pleased, with or without the others on the tour, and chose from the entire menu, which meant, in the case of The 1785 Inn, selecting from a three-course prix-fixe menu that boasted 14 appetizers



(such as blackened scallops, escargots in red wine, smoked salmon ravioli), 17 entrées (raspberry duckling, medallions of venison) and well-earned rich desserts (tiramisu, chocolate butter crunch pie). All-out comfort reached its peak at the Snowvillage Inn, which we had been advised was the tour's pièce de résistance, with its gardens, hiking trails at the base of Foss Mountain, private beach entrance onto Crystal Lake and dining room overlooking Mount Washington. So it wasn't surprising that our last night's dinner, at which I had beautifully prepared whole-wheat pasta with sautéed shrimp, tomatoes, spinach and green beans and then a vanilla-bean crème brûlée, was splendid.

ALL THE GUESTS I spoke with on the Bike the Whites tour felt that, despite the fine evenings, the biking itself was a bit jagged. One man said he found himself at some points pedaling for hours with a map flapping in his hand, his granola bar gone, his water jug empty and no sense of how to get off a main road without adding mileage to his route. The program customizes the tours very informally, letting the innkeepers handle map and route questions—which isn't a problem

for experienced cyclists who understand self-guidance and know what questions to ask.

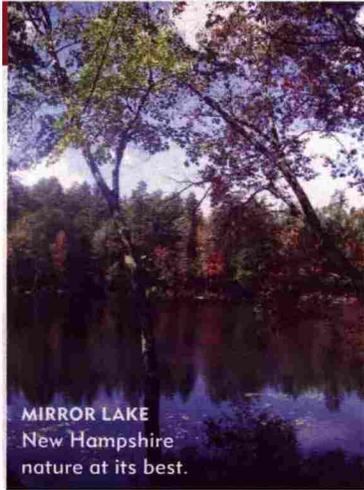
Guests on both trips cited the importance not only of a route's beauty and hospitality to bikers, but of the availability of safety gear and small amenities that make a big difference. Details like roomy bike bags (Bike Vermont offered one that snaps on and off and holds your map under a plastic shield for easy visibility and rain protection) as well as convenient bike repair, roads with good shoulders

and bikes with complete safety equipment can make or break the trip. I had a flat tire shortly after leaving The 1785 Inn in New Hampshire, and since I had no bike pump or bike tools on me (I would advise anyone on a self-guided tour to bring them), I was fortunate to be within a few miles of the inn when it happened. The innkeeper delivered me to a nearby bike shop, but I wondered how long I would have had to wait for assistance had I been 10 miles farther along and, as is often the case in the mountains of the northeast, in a cell-phone dead zone.

So yes, I adore gourmet food and glamorous wine, but I also love cycling when I'm being taken care of by pros. The real joy of any bike trip, guided or self-guided, inn-to-inn or single-inn based, for two nights or two weeks, is that it be stress-free. You should know all the details of the trip you've signed up for and be fully prepared. That way, when you arrive at your B&B on the first night, you can dispel any hidden anxieties with one simple phrase: "I can't wait till tomorrow!" ☉

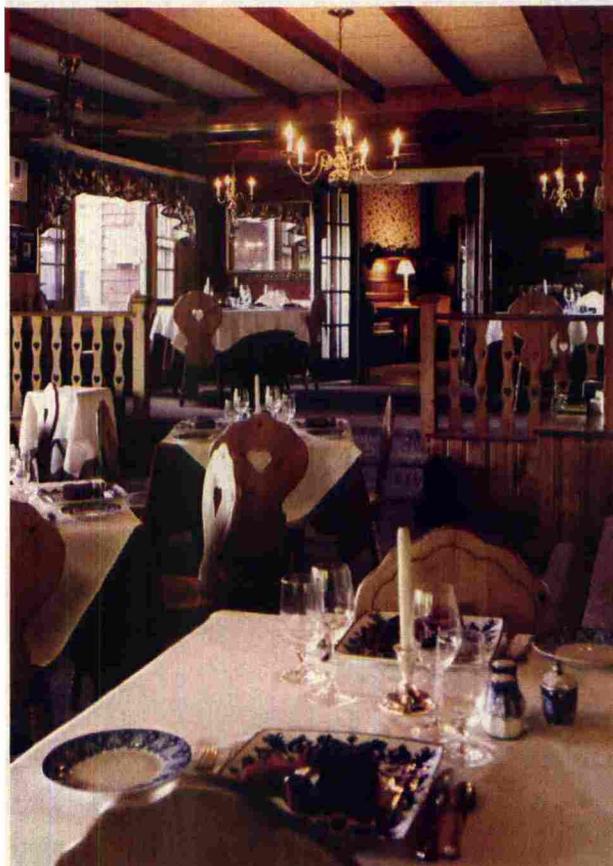
**On Bike
 Vermont's
 guided Lilac
 Inn tour, we
 cycled along
 rural roads,
 with a sweet**

**dose of
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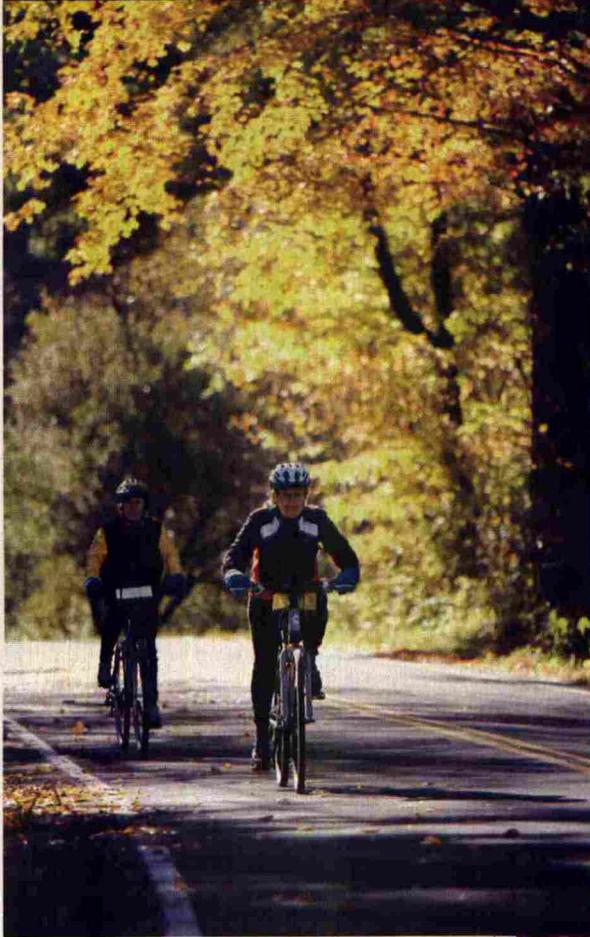


DALMA HEYN

THE PAYOFF
Dinner at the
Snowvillage Inn
(above and below) is
a worthy reward for
Bike the Whites
participants.



TRAVEL



WHEEL DEALS

BIKE VERMONT Two-night **Lilac Inn tour** (arrive Friday, depart Sunday), including breakfast and dinner: \$420 per person in the spring, \$450 summer and \$730 fall (four days and three nights). **Bike rental:** 24-gear Cannondale and Trek hybrids with upright handlebars and 27-gear Jamis road bikes with dropped handlebars from \$40 for three days/two nights.

BIKE THE WHITES Three-night, midweek-only **inn-to-inn tour**, including breakfast and dinner: \$299 per person in May, \$379 June, \$429 July 1-September 15, \$499 September 16-November 2. Add 8% New Hampshire room and meals tax, 15% package gratuity and bike rental fee (\$75 for a Trek all-terrain Alpha Aluminum with upright handlebars and gel seat).

A clearer price comparison reveals similar rates for both tours: Four days and three nights on the Bike the Whites tour in the fall (bike rental included) would cost \$689. Four days and three nights on Bike Vermont's Lilac Inn tour in the fall with bike rental would cost \$790.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Bike Vermont: bikevermont.com; 800/257-2226.
 Bike the Whites: bikethewhites.com; 800/421-1785.

AUTUMN LEAVES
 New Hampshire
 Technicolor.
 Above: Golden
 days in Vermont.

