

COLUMN

MDI's a great place to pedal

MELISSA KIM / BIKING

Just back from the annual pilgrimage to Mount Desert Island, once again feeling blessed to be a bicyclist in the state of Maine. Really, is there any better place to bike? If there is, please, let me know!

As usual, we had to make a tough choice: which bikes to bring. Mountain bikes are best for the broken-stone surface of the carriage roads in Acadia National Park as well as on some trails on the "quiet side" of the island. But road bikes are best for the fabulous Loop Road and the challenge of riding up Cadillac Mountain. This year, road bikes won the day, so I thought I'd share two road rides to fit both ends of the spectrum: details of a 10-mile loop and an invitation to join a 100-mile extravaganza.

LOOP LIGHT

If you don't have the time or the stamina to ride the entire Park Loop Road, which is a hilly 20-mile-plus ride, here's a shorter loop that takes you to some of the best spots on the island with very little work on your part. I call it Loop Light.

Loop Light is a perfect ride if you are based in Bar Harbor, or if you rent a bike from one of the bike shops in town and want to ride right from the shop. It's suitable for advanced beginners, families with kids on a trail-a-bike, or folks with only an hour to spare.

Starting from the Village Green, ride south out of Bar Harbor on Main Street (Route 3) for just over a mile. Take a left, just in front of the Ocean Drive Dairy Bar, onto Schooner Head Road. This road always amazes me; just a mile from the souvenir shops and cruise ship throngs in Bar Harbor lies this peaceful road where you can hear the birds and smell the salt air.

Ride up the one brief hill on this road, and at about 3.7 miles you'll come to a four-way intersection. Left takes you onto a lollipop road with a parking area and scenic overlook with lovely views of Frenchman Bay. A right turn takes you onto an access road; turn left and you'll come to the Entrance Station into the National Park where you purchase your \$5 bike pass. That's \$5 for a whole week, which has got to be the best deal around. This puts you on the one-way Park Loop Road.

Your first attraction is Sand Beach, just ahead on your left, so if you're in the mood, turn down the beach access road and enjoy the crashing surf. Finely crushed shells masquerade as sand on this short but sweet pocket beach shouldered by rocky slopes.

Continue on the Loop Road for another mile. This is the stretch of road that I consider the most



[enlarge](#)

Cyclists ride along Sargent Drive on Mount Desert Island during the 2008 Cadillac Century Challenge. This year's Challenge is scheduled for Oct. 4. Courtesy of Tony Mourkas



[enlarge](#)

A cyclist appreciates the view from the top of Cadillac Mountain during last year's Cadillac Century Challenge. Courtesy of Tony Mourkas

scenic biking road in New England. However, the price to pay for the scenery is the traffic. Cars are allowed to park in the right-hand lane, so you may have to negotiate your way around them. By late September, however, traffic should have thinned out considerably.

You'll ride by Thunder Hole, named for the sound the waves make when they enter a skinny inlet carved out of granite. In about a quarter of a mile, Otter Cliff Road peels off to the right. There's a gradual uphill climb ahead, but it's not too steep and you'll be looking at the south side of Cadillac Mountain for distraction.

At about Mile 7.5, you'll come to the end of the road; turn right onto Route 3. Cars speed along here, but there's a broad shoulder. At Mile 9.3 you can turn left to visit the Nature Center, the Sieur de Monts Spring, and the Wild Gardens of Acadia. If you're pressed for time, keep riding. It's only about two miles back into Bar Harbor.

CENTURY CHALLENGE

And now for the 100-mile ride: the Cadillac Century Challenge has been taking place annually on Mount Desert Island for 17 years, usually on the first Sunday in October. This year's ride is scheduled for Oct. 4.

Last year, about 250 people took the challenge to ride the spectacular route, which includes a ride to the top of Cadillac Mountain and its 6,950 feet of climbing. This is a grand tour of Mount Desert, as it rides on virtually all the roads on the island.

Ride director Tony Mourkas says the Challenge began as an alternative to century rides with entry fees and fundraising requirements. The Challenge is a free ride, with no fee and no pledges needed (though you will have to purchase the \$5 National Park bike pass). "The beauty of the ride," he says, "is in the riding experience. It's just about people getting together to ride, to enjoy the beautiful scenery and each other's company."

The basic route begins at the Hulls Cove Visitor Center on Route 3 and travels on some interior roads that most visitors don't see. It then goes around the perimeter of the western side of the island, through Southwest Harbor, and over onto the eastern side through Northeast Harbor and Seal Harbor up to Bar Harbor. Then there's the fabulous Loop Road. Oh, and finally the climb up Cadillac. After that, it's all downhill back to the Visitors Center.

Highlights? "There's no bad part of the ride. Every part is different, every part is beautiful," says Mourkas. "My favorite parts are along the Loop Road, and Sargent Drive into Northeast Harbor is fabulous. I also like the rest stop on top of Cadillac Mountain. It's at the end of the ride, everybody has completed all the climbing, it's a beautiful view and there's just 7.5 miles downhill left. I always enjoy that. Sometimes when you start the ride, it's early morning, there might still be a mist and the park is quiet, and that's kind of magical too."

To enjoy the magic, however, cyclists will need to be adequately prepared for the climbing and the mileage. Mount Desert is a hilly island. As Mourkas says, "there aren't too many long climbs, but lots of little ones. You're either going up or down."

There's a shorter 72-mile option (just a bit longer than a metric century) and Mourkas says typically about two-thirds of the cyclists do 100 miles and the remaining do the shorter route. "We don't really care how much you do," he says. The organizers provide detailed route maps and cue sheets; sag wagons in case of emergencies; and three food stops. Since the route takes you through all the villages on Mount Desert, you can always find rest rooms, water and food along the way. Riders should still be prepared to make their own decisions, carry their own food and water, and be able to read a map and cue sheet.

It's not a race, and Mourkas says different levels of cyclists take part. Type A speed racers might complete the course in 5 hours, while bird watchers may finish in 8 hours. The officially supported ride ends around 5 p.m. when it's starting to get dark.

Preregistration is not required, but Mourkas asks for RSVPs in advance (the sooner the better). On the day, registration begins at 7 a.m., the rider's meeting is at 8 a.m., and riders start shortly afterward. The Visitors Center is not open until 8 a.m. so have your needs met before you arrive. There's also a donation can at registration, and Mourkas says that, to date, people have been generous enough so that all expenses (food stops, gas for sag wagons) have been met. If anything is left over, it goes to the Bicycle Coalition of Maine. The Challenge will take place rain or shine. "I've done it on a wet day, and I've done it on a dry day, and had fun both times," says Mourkas.

For full details check <http://web.mac.com/zorbathegeek/iWeb/Cadillac/Home.html>.

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