

HOME

- > MAINEJOBS
- > REAL ESTATE
- > WHEELS
- > MARKETPLACE
- > Place an Ad

NEWS

- Local and State
- Midday/4PM Reports
- AP Wire
- Week in Photos

WEATHER

- 5-day Forecast
- On the Ocean

SPORTS

- High Schools
- Red Sox
- Sea Dogs

BUSINESS

- News
- Blogs
- Maine News Direct
- Classifieds

ENTERTAINMENT

- Calendar
- Movies
- Dining
- Music
- Theater
- Art

TRAVEL

- Maine Regions
- From Away
- Vacation Rentals
- Lodging Guide

OUTDOORS

- Hiking
- Fishing
- Trail Head
- Campground Guide

BLOGS

- Late Hits
- Kid Tracks
- A Dog's Life
- More blogs

20 BELOW

- Teen Blogs
- One-Minute Wonders
- Reindeer Rock-off

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- Search Jobs
- Post a Job
- News and Resources
- Employer Profiles



Choose an activity:

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Sunday, August 6, 2006

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## Bet on Bethel for great ride, festival fun

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[Reader Comments](#)

By Melissa Kim,

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Some of us who live on the Maine coast are so focused on the water in the summertime, that to set a westward course is simply unthinkable. But if hikers know that great and good things can happen in the western mountains in August, then it should be no surprise to cyclists.

### FREEWHEELING

IF YOU'RE interested in cycling in the Brunswick/Topsham area, join the Tour de Merrymeeting Bay on Aug. 12. Sponsored by the Rotary Clubs of Topsham and Brunswick, there are two rides to choose from (both start in Topsham): the 50-mile Tour de Merrymeeting Bay and the 25-mile Bowdoinham and Back Bicycle Ride.

FOR MORE information, visit [www.topshammaine.com/tmb](http://www.topshammaine.com/tmb) or call 725-1726, Ext. 192.

It's certainly no surprise to the folks taking part today in the Maine State Triathlon in Bethel. The 15th annual race includes a 1K swim, a 25K

[To top of story](#)

cycle and a 5K run. The bike ride starts at Songo Pond and goes mainly along Routes 5/35. This is the triathlon that's consider "do-able." Do-able next year, I keep telling myself.

The lovely town of Bethel makes an excellent starting point for rides of all types and lengths, and as an added bonus, it's host next weekend to the first Maine Performing Arts Festival. Mimes, acrobats, jugglers, dancers, musicians and others will line the village streets Aug. 9-13. Theater troupes will present plays twice a day in Gould Academy's auditorium, and headliner music groups will give late-afternoon free shows on the Bethel Common. An early morning ride followed by some entertainment and music sounds like a package too good to miss.

### CHALLENGING ROAD RIDE

If you're up for a long ride with some challenging hills, here's a favorite route. At 67 miles with a total elevation gain of 2,665 feet, this is an advanced road ride for people with stamina. It's got everything you could want, though: Grafton Notch State Park, where there are opportunities to visit four different

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waterfalls; an ice cream stand perfect for a lunch break in Andover; and a covered bridge in South Andover.

A good place to start is the parking lot of the Bethel Area Chamber of Commerce at 8 Station Place (go online to [www.bethelmaine.com](http://www.bethelmaine.com) for more information). The visitor center has restrooms, maps and cue sheets for at least a dozen other bike routes. The Bicycle Coalition of Maine held its annual Bike Rally in Bethel for three years, and details of all the rides are now available at the center.

From Station Place, make your way back to Parkway (Route 26) and turn left, then right at the light to continue on Route 26 North. I'll admit, the first six miles aren't that much fun, as cars and trucks bomb along Route 26, but there's a nice wide shoulder, and the views aren't too bad.

Turn left at Mile 6.2 to follow Route 26, and now you have 21 miles of an interesting, albeit hilly, backcountry road to follow as you enter the Mahoosuc Range. There's some nice farmland first and then the hill climbing starts in earnest, but you can always stop and rest at Steep Falls, Screw Auger Falls, Mother Walker Falls Gorge and Moose Cave Gorge. There are some ups and downs through prime moose viewing country before one last long pull.

At Mile 27, take a sharp right onto East B Hill. When I did this ride, the pavement was extremely uneven, so unless it's been resurfaced recently, you'll need to curb your urge to scream down the long steep hill. This is followed by a 1.5-mile-long uphill, but it's a lovely rural road - not exactly wilderness, but devoid of development. The pavement improves, and there's a sweet bridge crossing Stony Brook.

The West Branch of the Ellis River is your companion as you come into the center of Andover (Mile 41.5). There's a nice common with a pretty gazebo here. Turn right onto Route 5 and you'll see a few diners and the much-appreciated ice cream stand. It's then a pleasant ride out of Andover along Route 5 for 3.3 miles. It's a big road, but I saw very little traffic, nice views of the hills and a few horse farms to boot.

### MAINE'S SHORTEST COVERED BRIDGE

Turn left onto Covered Bridge Road to ride through Maine's shortest covered bridge, the Lovejoy Covered Bridge over the Ellis River (there's a small sandy shore here that folks use as a swimming spot). At Mile 45.5, turn right onto East Andover Road. This gently rolling road follows the course of Ellis River and is marked with farms, cows and views of the mountains.

In four miles (Mile 49.5), you'll turn left at a T junction onto Andover Road (the right turn takes you over the river). The feel is different here; the pavement is smoother and the character is less rural. Go 1.4 miles and look for a right turn onto Whippoorwill Road, a pretty, shady road with some uneven pavement. In about two miles you'll hit busy routes 2 and 5.

Turn left at the junction and ride with care for half a mile into Rumford Point. Turn right onto Route 232 South to go over the bridge. I found the bridge surface to be extremely uneven with some major rough spots, but again, perhaps this has improved recently. The views down the open river valley, across the wide

span of the Androscoggin, with mountains rising in the distance, are impressive.

At Mile 53.8, turn right onto East Bethel Road (marked Rumford Road in the Gazetteer). There are some gentle hills here for your tired knees to tackle. At Mile 56.9, East Bethel Road curves sharply to the left; go straight on Intervale Road. This pleasant road offers up some nice views of the river valley dotted with corn fields.

At Mile 65.9, you'll come to a T junction; turn right onto Route 26. In 0.4 mile, turn right onto Parkway and in less than half a mile turn left into the plaza to make your way back to the Chamber of Commerce parking area.

Congratulate yourself on a ride well done. Then grab a picnic or ice cream from one of the many cafes or stores in town and stretch out on the Bethel Town Common to enjoy one of the great bands playing (for free!) next weekend. My pick: the Jerks of Grass, from 4 to 5 p.m. Saturday. For more on the festival, visit [www.maineapaf.org](http://www.maineapaf.org).

As always, wear a helmet, carry plenty of water and bring a pump and patch kit or spare tube; there are some remote areas along this ride.

Melissa Kim, a freelance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides" (Foghorn Outdoors/Avalon Travel Publishing). She welcomes comments at [bikes@melissakim.com](mailto:bikes@melissakim.com).

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