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Sunday, August 20, 2006

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Wheel around town for great ice cream

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By Melissa Kim,

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The time has come to introduce the inaugural Maine Ice Cream Roundabout of Portland, soon to be known across the land as the Portland MICRO Ride.

More information

Maples Organics

796 Forest Avenue, Portland
210-6051, www.maplesorganics.com

Rosemont Market and Bakery

559 Brighton Avenue
774-8129

Fuller's Handmade Ice Cream and Chocolates

43 Wharf Street, Portland
253-8010, www.fullerschocolates.com

Beals Ice Cream

18 Veranda Street, Portland
www.bealsicecream.com

Portland Trails

www.trails.org

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I was inspired to create this loop for a number of reasons. My neighbors asked me where to find the best ice cream. My husband had the idea for a route that detailed places to stop, instead of places to ride. I realized I'd never written about cycling in my own backyard. There are lots of interesting trails in Portland, but it's not so obvious how to link them all up, so I often wind up leaving town for a ride. And so, the Portland MICRO ride was born.

This 14-mile loop around Portland includes skinny paths, dirt roads, paved as well as gravel bike paths, quiet neighborhood roads and heavily trafficked main arteries. It also gets you to four places to have great Maine-made ice cream. Are you up for it? You'll need a good map, a mountain bike and a taste for adventure.

MAPLE'S ORGANICS FIRST STOP

Start at Payson Park, just off Baxter Boulevard. Ride away from the Back Cove up the hill and turn left onto Ocean Avenue. At Mile 1.3, turn right onto Walton Street, go over the railroad tracks, and take a left at the lights onto busy Forest Avenue. At Mile 2.0, at the corner of Forest and Hartley Street, here's your

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first ice cream stop: Maple's Organics. A certified organic ice creamery and bakery, Maple's serves up rich ice cream in heady flavors like tangy Mexican chocolate, refreshing pear-lemon and smooth ginger. There are picnic tables outside, convenient if you're on two wheels.

From here, I'd recommend going on the sidewalk back along Forest Avenue to the entrance to Baxter Woods. You'll see two large stone posts and a sign marking the entrance to this little 30-acre pocket of woodland. Take the right-hand trail at the fork and you'll be on a nice wide dirt path through dense woods.

You'll soon see another fork; stay on the main path to the right. Come out at the other end of the park and go through the gate onto Stevens Avenue (Mile 2.5).

RIDE THROUGH THE CEMETERY

Take a dogleg right-left turn to enter Evergreen Cemetery (past the green gate). Beware: The roads in the cemetery can be confusing. Just through the gate, take the right fork. Bear right past the chapel. At Mile 2.75, turn left onto a potholed dirt road marked Sunset Avenue. Ride straight through until you reach a paved road (Mile 3.1). Take a right then an immediate left onto (unmarked) Shore Avenue. This will take you down a hill, and you'll soon see a series of ponds on your right. Take a moment to watch the wildlife. The ponds, well-visited by Portland's serious birders, are frequented by ducks, geese, seagulls, smaller birds, the occasional great blue heron and many more migrants.

Carry on straight and you'll see a green gate across the dirt road. Pass through here (Mile 3.3) and bear right when you come to a fork. You're in thick and lovely woods here, but it's also a bit swampy so you'll need to keep moving to outrun the mosquitoes. Follow the main trail; other small trails veer off to the right. Look for the trail outlet just left of a low stone wall. You are now at a cul-de-sac at the end of Woodvale Street.

A series of small twists and turns will get you through this quiet residential neighborhood. Ride out straight, then turn left at the stop sign onto Glenhaven Road West (Mile 3.94). Take an immediate right onto Warwick Street, then the next left onto Starlight Road. At the stop sign (Mile 4.66) turn left onto Candlewick Road, then bear right onto Candlewyck Road. At the stop sign, turn right onto unmarked Ludlow Street (Mile 4.86).

Cruise along for less than half a mile and look for Wayside Road on the right (Mile 5.2). Turn right onto Wayside and follow it along (bearing left at an oddly placed stop sign) until you reach busy Brighton Avenue.

Turn left onto Brighton Avenue and ride 0.4 miles to reach Rosemont Market (on the left just past the Cumberland Farms). At this wonderful market, you'll find pints of Smiling Hill Farm ice cream in the cooler. This might be a challenge if you're riding solo, but otherwise grab spoons and sit on the bench outside to share some ladybug or mocha chip or peppermint ice cream from this Westbrook institution.

Backtrack 0.4 miles on Brighton and turn left onto Lucas Street (Mile 6.08). Look for a narrow trail and sign for Capisic Brook Park on your left. This small park is one of the gems in the

A vertical advertisement for the Maine Powerball lottery. At the top, it says "Million Estimated Annuitized Megabucks Jackpot" in white text on a blue background. Below that is a large image of a lottery ticket with the text "Dream a Lot!" in blue. Underneath the ticket image is the "MAINE POWERBALL" logo. In the center, a white box displays "\$51 Million Estimated Annuitized Powerball Jackpot" in blue and black text. At the bottom, it says "Please play responsibly" in blue text on a dark background.

Portland Trails crown. The skinny dirt trail leads you in through some shrubbery to reveal fields of grasses and wildflowers surrounding a large pond. There's a small bridge that you can hop or walk over. The trail forks; bear right. There's then a larger bridge, a few scattered benches and birds singing from all directions. A wild jumble of purple clovers, white crowns of yarrow and yellow spikes of goldenrod line the path. Exit through a small gate and turn right onto a dirt road. Capisic Street is a stone's throw away.

Here's a busy and potentially unpleasant section of the loop. Turn left onto Capisic (Mile 6.6), ride to the end and turn right at the light (Mile 7.0) onto Stevens Avenue. Ride to the end and turn left at the lights onto Congress Street. At Mile 7.65, turn right onto Sewall Street.

Here's a major but extremely interesting tangent worth knowing about: If you turn right on Congress Street, look for a left turn (after the railroad tracks) onto Hobart Street. From Hobart Street, there are two entrance points into another Portland Trails project, the Fore River Trail. This trail was created with restoration funds from the spill of an oil tanker in Portland Harbor in 1996. The trail opened about five years ago and is still partly under construction. There are narrow trails in woods and fields as well as long wooden boardwalks over marshland.

According to Nan Cumming, director of Portland Trails, the Fore River Trail will eventually go all the way around Thompson's Point and join up with the Portland Connector (more on that in a minute). For the moment, however, it's an out-and-back trail that shows you an interesting part of Portland that's very easy to overlook.

Whether you take this detour or not, you'll have to continue down Congress Street to Sewall Street. Turn right on Sewall Street and ride to the end. Slide past the gate and turn left in front of the bus and train station. Just before you reach the traffic lights, look for a paved path on the right. This is the new Portland Connector trail, which opened last November.

Now you're riding on a dedicated bicycle/pedestrian path, with a highway entrance ramp on your left and the Fore River on your right. Stay on the main path, and at Mile 8.8 follow the Connector across the road. You're soon right smack in the midst of the busy Veterans Bridge intersection, where you'll need to cross at the lights to head down West Commercial Street (for a map of the path, visit www.portlandconnector.com). At Mile 9.15, the paved path ends in the parking lot of Benny's, a restaurant with outdoor seating but alas, no ice cream.

It's not much fun to cross West Commercial and even less fun to ride along this bumpy busy street with old railroad tracks, potholes, merging traffic and seagulls to distract you. At Mile 10.5, you'll be happy to turn left onto Union Street and take your first right onto a cobblestone pedestrian street called Wharf Street.

On the left you'll find ice cream stop No. 3: Fuller's Handmade Ice Cream and Chocolates. The ice cream is rich and smooth and worth every penny. There are a few small tables outside where you and your bike can enjoy the experience.

After you've recovered, head back out and turn left onto

Commercial Street. Ride all the way to the end to pick up the Eastern Promenade Trail. At the moment, there is a construction detour; just follow the signs. This showcase path takes you right along the waterfront with brilliant views of the islands and all the craft that ply the shoreline.

Round the shore and come to East End Beach (Mile 11.9). There are public restrooms, water and picnic tables if you need a break. From there the trail crosses the narrow gauge railway tracks then goes up a short steep hill. You'll have nice views but also the smell from the wastewater treatment plant. Then it's downhill to a sharp right (Mile 12.7) to continue onto the Back Cove Trail. You'll go underneath Tukey's Bridge and up a steep hill to meet up with the trail. Take a sharp left to head over the bridge.

Continue straight, and you'll be able to make your way to the intersection of Washington Avenue and Veranda Street, via the parking lot of a small shopping plaza. Cross Washington on Veranda and you'll see the Beal's ice cream stand up ahead on your left - ice cream stop No. 4. Choose from dozens of flavors and sit at the picnic tables to enjoy the last cool treat on the Portland MICRO ride.

From here, it's back on Veranda across Washington to turn right onto Baxter Boulevard. Then it's just 0.3 miles to return to Payson Park, where your epic journey began.

One note: I know, and mountain bikers know, that there are other trails and ways to get around various parts of Portland. But some of these trails are on private property or on paths where bikes are not allowed. Check first; otherwise bikers might get a bad name, and it will make life harder for groups such as Portland Trails, which is working to create this wonderful network of paths. And if you have ideas for other MICRO rides, let me know!

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.

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