

Welland Canal by bike - no ribbons of death, please

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 06 August 2019 07:40



I finally took my plan of a bike trip along the Welland Canal seriously, preparing my map, checking google map for the route from the train station to the canal (quite a ways, requiring navigating one of the ribbons of death that cut through St Catharines, typical of most North American cities. I would have more than my share of negotiating/ avoiding them.

The first obstacle was highway 406, a kind of 21st century Welland Canal, a midget at 23 km, begun in



1965 and only turned into a 4-lane beast in 2009. There are even a few seconds of beauty -- for motorists only.

Almost 3/4 of all 'goods' are transported by truck in Canada, about 25% by rail, which is four times more fuel efficient. Though PM Trudeau is determined to add another pipeline, upgrading rail transport is once again a 'growth industry', with \$20b being spent on the Quebec City–Windsor Corridor. A mere 5% is passenger traffic, and it has long been impossible to travel coast-to-coast, so rail has a long way to go.

Oil has its pipelines, a kind of highway network carrying 97% of oil across the country, the other

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ribbon of death running through our collective veins. St Catharines has two pipelines running between Detroit and Toronto, but they weren't a travel hazard for me. Out of sight, but not out of mind.

Enough lectures. I found the canal down below! But how to get down there? I asked the sole pedestrian, a quiet, lost soul with a massive mastiff, larger than either of us, who was really eager to maul me, lunging provocatively at his heavy-duty chain. His 'owner' pointed and I took the hint and went counterintuitively north (I wanted to go south along the canal), finding an unmarked, well hidden entrance to the trail below. Ahh, on my way.

The canal made a nice travel companion, cheerily sparkling in the morning light. Out of nowhere appeared St Catharine's Museum, right by lock three, with a quaint interactive display of the 3 different canals, with a map oddly S-N, emphasizing the counterintuitive topography, where north (Lake Ontario) is at low altitude and south (Lake Erie) higher. St Kitts crazy layout is because it is smack on the (here, west-east) Niagara escarpment, with a drop of 100m. Biking here is a geography lesson.

All that canal building, from 1824, 1839, 1887 to the last version, opened in 1932. A fifth version was planned to by-pass most of the existing canal and to cross the Niagara Escarpment in one large 'superlock' but has since been shelved. The present Welland Ship Canal was originally designed to only last until 2030, but with improvements, its lifetime is more or less for ever.



So that explains the upward path! 100m up as I head south. As usual, the nice trail abruptly ended with no proper signage, so I ended up in downtown Thorold and onto a highway that seemed far away from the canal. I stopped for one of my many puzzled consultations with my cyclists' map (thick lines showing the routes, which obliterated the road numbers/ street names).

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Bad design!), when a flock of 12 bright red, white and blue serious cyclists whizzed by, the leader shouting 'Right turn!'.

Hey, what do they know that I don't? Fortunately for me, one of their flock had plunged ahead so they had to slow until he felt their collective stare from behind. I decided to follow them as this road was clearly a mistake, and after 5 minutes, a late member of their troop flew past me with a friendly greeting. Then another, prompting me to call out, 'Where are we headed?' 'Niagara Falls.'

Should i join them? Make up my itinerary? My cycling is sort of like Gorbachev's perestroika. Soviet novelist Bondarev famously quipped during the chaotic period, "Mikhail Sergeevitch is like the pilot who took off without knowing where he is going.'

I turned the corner (nice empty roads, even if they are essentially leading me nowhere), to see the bizarre



Bridge 11, a through-truss vertical-lift bridge over the canal, built for the third canal in 1930, leading to Niagara Falls.

The bridge was in up mode, awaiting a large, lumbering boat that silently appeared and moved through. A local cyclist Cheryl and I quizzed the pack leader as he waited camera-ready for the lift to drop. Jeff was from Oregon and the group was cycling across the US-Canada, onward to Boston. They were a hi-tech crowd, mostly 30s--40s, with little gear on a usabiketours.com trip. I suspect they had someone driving a van to accompany them. This is deluxe cycling, with a 50 day trip starting at \$12,900. Not my style -- too big, too fast, not a whole lot better than driving.

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I changed my itinerary yet again, having no interest in visiting the Falls. On the advice of Cheryl, I headed up the path I had missed back to Thorold, veering off to look for Lake Gibson and Decew Park. That involved descending that 100m escarpment and ascending it again. This straight line up-down-up is fine for car drivers, but a curse for cyclists. It was hot and already 1:30pm, and my bottle of water seems to have evaporated.

I stopped to puzzle over the map, and a helpful driver pulled over to come to my aid. We figured out where we were and he told me to follow him till I saw the Dairy Queen (?). However, I did end up somewhere in the centre of St Kitts. I found a nice row of pine trees on the highway-street at an unused entrance to some anonymous storage facility, with a magnificent, but unappreciated cottonwood tree 50m away. It wasn't even 3pm and I was beat, and decided to snack and snooze. My stops require some shadow, a view of something, and no one snooping if I lie back with my head cradled inside my helmet. Though hardly scenic, this fit the bill.

A half hour later, I had my second wind and realized I hadn't seen the harbour on Lake Ontario, so I headed



north and climbed over the highway 406 and then the QEW (451, mother of 406), snazzily christened the Garden City Skyway in 1960 as it soars over the Welland Canal, high enough to let the tallest ships sail under it unimpeded, unlike Bridge 11.

Biking literally gives you a bird's eye view of all these massive sculptures-in-cement. Cement and gooey tarmac. They have a perverse beauty, so unashamed of their true, lethal place in nature. The material cost, not to mention the cost to nature and our humanity leaves birds and me unimpressed, except for their threat to our lives as winged creatures. Birds love the clunky bridge 11s, as the hawks hover around above, playing with/ attacking pigeons and gulls.

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Cyclists are like birds: no real purpose, just silent, graceful motion using only our muscles, our legs and bikes like wings. Even in the city, there are almost no pedestrians. Just us cyclists against the (human) elements. We have much more in common with our feathered travellers, who often swoop down and say hello and accompany us, as we fly along at a leisurely pace.

Trying to reach Lake Ontario seemed like it was taking forever. There's the sun well into the west. What time is it? The train is at 7:45pm. Was it already 6? A good excuse to communicate with locals. There was a handsome young guy standing with a girl and older guy outside a Rotary hall. He gave me a V sign as I pulled over. 4:24. Wonderful. 3 hrs ahead. So much nicer than sweating over a google map.

When you cycle, time slows down. Those uphill demarches take forever, requiring some hiking up really steep bits, always in the glaring sun. Cars have a/c so the drivers could just as easily be at home on a couch, not interacting with real nature. Boring. And the long, open stretches stretch on and on. Okay, boring, but there's always something to look at, ponder. Or just ponder. Anything to keep your mind off the pain in the neck.

I ended up in Port Dalhousie, west of St Kitts, once a canal hub, now a yachting and picnicking spot. No signs on the streets (as usual) but tempting thick dashes on the map showing lakeside trails. Not true! But I followed two cyclists and found a yacht club, where I found a quiet, shady bench looking out on the harbour. It fit all my criteria for a stop.

Why was no one there? Then I looked more closely. There was an ugly chain link fence planted in a lumpy concrete platform that was mostly covered in a mushy layer of sludge. The inevitable carelessly discarded butts and other detritus. Hideous. But, hey, it was an oasis of quiet and cool.

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I smoked a joint and watched a killdeer delicately skirt the edge of the sludge, feasting. It was soon joined by a flock of black ducks, who submerged their heads in the muck, shovelling something, included some wriggling tadpoles, into their bills. They all casually moved on, oblivious to the strange human watching them. It hit me -- the hidden beauty in the squalor. The birds seeing what we see, but completely differently. The sacred in the profane.



Bits of path, but private property made any hope of a path hugging the shoreline impossible. Which defeats the whole purpose of a 'path'. I stopped to read a plaque 'Howes Park Port Dalhousie Harbour Walkway', honouring a friendly fatherly captain of industry, Stewart and his son David Howes. Howes converted a tire factory into a textile mill, Lincoln Fabrics, in 1955.

Both Howes were believers in the ethos of a small family business where long term employees were treated as family. David Howes got a doctorate to add more high tech, but NAFTA caught up with the quaint 'good capitalist' tradition. Lincoln Fabrics was sued under NAFTA in 2009, the claim being the textile firm knowingly sold bullet-proof vests, vital to US military, made of Zylon which supposedly have a short shelf-life. When David died in 2015, Lincoln was swallowed up by the US Monterey Group of Companies and moved to Grimsby. Presumably they have found something better than Zylon to keep NATO troops happy. Now a Toronto developer is converting the historic building into luxury apartments.

A high point: yet another street light, though only connecting houses and apartments to a park. An old man with a little white dog must have press the button to stop the traffic. Exhausted, I circled around him, not stopping. I was a bit embarrassed. In the past, pedestrians have cursed me for perceived rudeness. Before I had a chance to apologize/ thank him, he shouted triumphantly, 'We made them stop for a change.' I laughed. He had made crossing the street a collective action against capitalism, restraining the killer machines.

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More directions needed, but where is everybody? Virtually no pedestrians in the frantic rushing cars, or at best a zombie lost in earphones on another planet. I hailed one fellow with extra large ear phones. They looked very uncool, so I figured he might be uncool enough to help. He yanked off his industrial size earphones, whipped out his iPhone and google-mapped us, pointing in the other direction (why was my instinct to always go the opposite direction? and why is everyone helpless without an iPhone?) to Lake St.

Which I found, and which should have led me to the train station, though I had only a hazy notion, as the station has no street address, buried in a dead end lane, with no sign indicating its presence, and my cyclist map had thick tracings showing bike routes but few actual street names. This was a big problem, as no one seemed to know that there even is a train station in St Catharines, normal train service a thing of the past.

So my 7 hours of cycling adventure, which in my own mind lasted at least 3 times longer, was over. Only an hour under a tree remained, watching the robins and a starling feasting on the field behind the station. When we hustled to get our bikes on board, I found the baggage car already full, with some bikes stationed thoughtlessly in the centre, making the few available slots unavailable. No time to change cars, so I squeezed my bike into an unslot that was reasonably stable and climbed to the upper deck.

Only a few seats, all staked out with belongings and their owners already lost in headphones. Not a friendly atmosphere. This is the low point of a day trip. I walked to the end, started to descend, then turned to see the last 4-person set of seats with only one passenger, took my chances asking to sit. An Indian fellow, 'of course, you are welcome.' Wow. After dozens of interactions on the streets and this stuffy gathering of returning cyclists, I was exhausted physically and emotionally, and figured the 2 hours of train would be a pain.

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