

# SHOW ME THE MONEY

by John Swart

## ONTARIO CYCLE TOURISM CONFERENCE 2016

Not all bicycle champions are banging bars in a velodrome or screaming down rooted and rocky singletrack. Louisa Mursell and Marlaine Koehler have put in the hours and many, many miles, working as hard as current stars such as Emily Batty and Geoff Kabush or former legends such as Alison Sydor, Curt Harnett or Gord Fraser to reach the podium of their segment of Canadian cycling. For Mursell and Koehler, that quest has been to put Ontario on the list of top destinations for bicycle tourists of all types in North America and around the world.

Their efforts grew from small meetings with local clubs, B&B operators, Business Improvement Associations (BIAs) and municipalities, where they pushed hard to create enthusiasm for bicycle tourism and struggled to bend politicians' ears to get tiny amounts of funding. This led to the launching of the Bike Train from Toronto to Niagara in 2007, developing the first Great

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Waterfront Trail Adventure in 2008, to the current status quo as the message is finally being embraced. The recent Cycle Tourism Conference, where 150 attendees each paid \$200 to learn from industry leaders and to absorb best practices, generated enormous respect for Mursell and Koehler's efforts.

"Growing the cycle-tourism sector - making investments count" was the theme of the March 2016 Cycle Tourism Conference in Toronto, Ont., sponsored by Ontario By Bike and Transportation Options, and it was all about business.

Five provinces, two states, 22 towns and cities, 14 regions and counties, 21 tour operators, 14 clubs, coalitions and alliances, three BIAs and six different Regional Tourism Organizations (RTOs) in Ontario attended this conference. Some were there to share bicycle-tourism success stories, while most were there to learn the economic facts and how to help their jurisdictions or businesses win a piece of this growing market.

Tourism, in general, represents a \$28-billion income for Ontario(i) and employed 200,000 people in 2008. It is the largest employer of young people in Ontario. In 2010, two-million Canadians (including Ontarians) were bicycling tourists (a term referring to those traveling more than 40 kilometres to ride) in Ontario and spent \$391 million on those trips, a 25% increase from 2009. Toronto, Ottawa, Niagara Region and Windsor captured 26% of those visits, implying there's hundreds of millions of dollars in bicycle-tourism spending available to smaller communities throughout Ontario.

Ontario itself is the source of most bicycle tourists in the province, Quebec

is second and the U.S. is the third-largest source, while charity fundraising events are the most popular cycling events in Ontario, attracting 40,000 participants province-wide. These numbers are significant, yet they pale compared to the tallies of Germany, The Netherlands and other European countries that have targeted bicycle tourists for years, indicating there's lots of room to grow.

And that's what this conference was all about: rolling one's sleeves up, comparing one's situation with others, hearing motivational stories and questioning the winners to learn what can be achieved to adapt your business or municipality, as well as networking to share ideas and be brought up to date on this dynamic opportunity.

Core topics were "bike tourism means business," "market growth and emerging trends," "bringing product to market," "tracking key indicators," as well as "route, trail and infrastructure-enhancement innovations."

### BIKE TOURISM MEANS BUSINESS

Keynote speaker Nastassaja Pace, destination development specialist with Travel Oregon, provided a detailed chronology of the effort and vision it took to get the many small rural communities of Oregon's interior (which were economically devastated when lumbering and mining collapsed) to work together to develop and promote bicycle tourism and outdoor activities in general, making this region a premier cycling destination in the West.

Linda McKenna Boxx, director of the Allegheny Trail Alliance/Great Allegheny Passage, shared a similar story

of her 25-year journey leading the development of GAP, a world-class cycling-destination trail from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Washington, D.C. "It was my life for 25 years," she told Pedal, but her efforts to assist desolate coal towns and marginalized villages in gaining positive economic benefits from bike tourists using the trail have resulted in millions of visitors.

Ontario's examples included John G. Lohuis, general manager of The Niagara Parks Commission and the Niagara Parkway bicycle-trail system, who has helped Niagara become the third-most-popular cycling destination in Ontario; and Koehler, executive director of the Waterfront Regeneration Trust, who has led the development of Ontario's Waterfront Trail, which stretches from the Quebec border along three Great Lakes to Grand Bend, Ont.

### MARKET GROWTH AND EMERGING TRENDS

This topic could be renamed "where's the money?" and attendance at these plenary sessions was noteworthy. The conclusion: there's opportunity wherever you're willing to take a chance! This was an exciting part of the day for anyone with a small-business background, and blew away the stereotype that bicycle tourism is limited to strong, multi-day riders pedaling from town to town.

Sara Archer, co-founder of Ride Guides, spoke of how providing guides for mountain-bike excursions in Ontario has blossomed into a full-service company providing skills camps, racing clinics, road packages and anything a bike tourist can envision.

Maria Rasouli, owner of Escape Bicycle Tours in Ottawa, Ont., sees the bicy-

cle as nothing more than a slow-paced, active way to view the sights of Ottawa. Her successful tours are cultural, architectural and historic, and provide a model that Terrance Eta, owner of Toronto Bicycle Tours in Toronto, Ont., shares. He "relishes the opportunity to welcome people to Toronto and help them connect with the city." These start-ups mirror the boom in companies offering short tours in cities around the U.S.

Self-guided tours are growing in popularity, as North American tour companies follow the lead of European operators that have offered self-guided tours as popular and less expensive options for many years, with cycle-tourism-related non-profits such as Velo Quebec, IMBA (International Mountain Bike Association) and Adventure Cycling Association all growing significantly due to a surge in bike-related tourism.(ii) "It's hard to see what we have in our own area. Make your backyard exotic," was the message from Jonathan Lansdell, director of the Americas for Butterfield and Robinson.

### BRINGING PRODUCT TO MARKET

Mursell, and Ontario By Bike, assembled a powerhouse of talent with proven track records at staging events, creating unique cycling tours and leading communities to develop a bicycle-tourism strategy. Mike Brcic, founder and chief happiness officer of Canadian tour company Sacred Rides Mountain Bike Company; Louis Carpentier, director of development, Velo Quebec; Fiona Dawson, director of tourism, Peterborough and the Kawarthas Tourism; Michael Merrall, president and CEO, High Performance Marketing; and Susan Murray, vice-president of communications and operations of Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation are just a few of the speakers who shared their marketing expertise and diverse approaches to bringing product to market.

### TRACKING KEY INDICATORS

The old saw is that you can't manage what you can't measure, and this is one area where bicycle tourism has always struggled in Ontario. It has been difficult to prove empirically to those who should be interested (government's tourism and economic-development personnel and local BIAs) or those who are interested (business start-ups, municipalities and scores of user groups who understand a booming bike-tourism business will have more cycling infrastructure built for them) that there is solid economic data associated with bicycle tourism.

The conference introduced attendees to private firms such as EPG, a strategy, feasibility and impact research firm, and RMCG Inc., which specializes in measuring, collating and tracking key indicators in cycle tourism in dollars and participants. Robert Wong, principal of RMCG, shared his 2015 study of Simcoe and Grey Counties cycle tourism, and some of the insights were significant. How about the fact that the Blue Mountain Centurion brought in \$1.4 million in economic activity from this one event! Or how about the Tour de Norfolk, based in sleepy Norfolk County along the north shore of Lake Erie, which generated \$174,000 from its strictly volunteer ride. As Wong says, "Economic impact research is very expensive, but [cycle]-tourism-impact measurements are achievable."

### ROUTE, TRAIL AND INFRASTRUCTURE ENHANCEMENTS

Choose your cliché here: "Build it and they will come," or "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" Either way, attracting bicycle tourists is about safe facilities, from urban bike lanes and a network of paths to secure parking and public washrooms at trailheads, and this discussion wasn't left out of the conference mix.

This is where we all, racers, MTBers, commuters and recreational cyclists, benefit from efforts to increase cycle tourism in Ontario or any other jurisdiction in Canada. Mayor Steve Parish of the Town of Ajax spoke of the connection between his community's 120 kilometres of bike lanes and trails and facilities and the recent Pan Am Games. Jennifer Hyland, project manager of

www.pedalmag.com



PHOTOS: DAVID HEDGH



(from top) Louisa Mursell executive director, Ontario By Bike/Transportation Options and Marlaine Koehler, project coordinator, Ontario By Bike/Transportation Options, who put the event on; Mike Brcic, chief happiness officer, Sacred Rides Mountain Bike Adventures; Maria Rasouli, owner, Escape Bicycle Tours; Michael Merrall, president and CEO, High Performance Marketing who produces the PwC Epic Tour Halton/Kelso MTB Fondo

Cycling Infrastructure and Programs for the City of Toronto, enjoys taking new visitors to discover the city by trail, and her work has added 40 new kilometres of trail that we can all use.

By focusing on the economic benefits of cycle tourism at this conference, Ontario By Bike and Transportation Options has done every cyclist in Ontario a service by promoting more and safer cycling alternatives and increasing public acceptance of cycling throughout Ontario. For more information, visit [www.transportationoptions.org](http://www.transportationoptions.org).

Note: [www.ontariobybike/etc16-program](http://www.ontariobybike/etc16-program) links to speakers and their presentations

(i) Welcome Cyclists June 2013 Network Participant Tool Kit.

(ii) Adventure Cycling Association: 10 Indicators that Bicycle Travel and Tourism are Booming - and Changing, November 2014.