

Is Canada missing the boat on cycling tourists?

Only Quebec has world-class cycling network that crosses the province

Amber Hildebrandt · CBC News · Posted: Jul 27, 2014 5:00 AM ET | Last Updated: July 28, 2014



Numerous countries are looking into the economic benefits of cycle tourism. (Shutterstock)

For Steve Langston, a Winnipegger with 30,000 kilometres of world-wide bike travel under his belt, the cycling trails in Quebec felt "like Amsterdam," and proved a rare exception to most others he'd traversed across this country.

"It was so great. ...It's just well thought out, well executed," said Langston, 30, who's written guidebooks on cycling Canada and Manitoba. Quebec, he says, has "hit a scale where you can go wherever you want."

Quebec is internationally recognized for its extensive 5,000-km cycling network, [La Route Verte](#), which criss-crosses most parts of the province, making it North America's longest bike path.

But in the two decades since the Quebec government and non-profit Vélo Québec first began work on the route, it remains an anomaly in Canada, even as other countries and regions seek to cash in on the booming trade in cycle tourism.

Ontario is in the midst of its own push to become a cycling destination and is gleaning knowledge from the 80-employee non-profit powerhouse next door in Quebec, which not only runs the cycle route, but also organizes tours, produces maps and does research on cycling in the province.

"We are catching up to Quebec, which is one of the leaders internationally," said Marlaine Koehler, executive director of the Waterfront Regeneration Trust, a charity that operates the 1,400-km Waterfront Trail stretching along Lake Erie, Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River.

Last year, Ontario's Ministry of Transportation laid out a 20-year cycling plan that included the lofty goal of becoming recognized as the "best Canadian province for cycling and ranked among the top 10 jurisdictions worldwide."

The move is part of a growing recognition around the world of the economic potential of cycle tourists, a group of travellers that can include those who spend days on the road and those who merely want to hop on a rental bike for the day.

'Popping up all over'

Little hard data on visits by cycle tourists exists, but the U.S.-based Adventure Cycling Association points to a number of signs that cycling is booming: Oregon's quadrupled its state bike routes, three states are seeking to create a Lake Michigan route, bike share programs are on the rise, and so are multi-day biking events and towns marketing themselves as cycling hubs.

In the U.S., there's also a resurgence of interest in a long-dormant plan, hatched in the 1970s, to create a nation-wide network of long-distance cycling routes.

"Things like that are just popping up all over," said Ginny Sullivan, Adventure Cycling's director of travel initiatives. "It's just showing that there is demand."

It's a demand that Europe is already well aware of. A 2012 study by European Parliament estimated that every year, cycle tourists take 2.2 billion trips to the continent, bringing about \$64 million in economic benefits.

In bicycle-friendly Europe, 14 cycling routes cover a phenomenal 45,000 kilometres as part of the EuroVelo project — by 2020, it is scheduled to encompass 70,000 kilometres.

Australia also has a national cycling strategy aimed at doubling the number of people cycling between 2011 and 2016, one that will help bring in the tourists as well as please locals.

Other countries looking at how to cash in on the cycle tourism niche include Taiwan, New Zealand, Denmark and Britain.

The financial factor

Here in Canada, though, there's no country-wide plan to create cycling routes worthy of becoming travel destinations.



Marlane Koehler, executive director of the Waterfront Regeneration Trust, shown on her bike, says Ontario is catching up to Quebec when it comes to bicycle trails. (Goh Iromoto/ Waterfront Trail)

"I think that is slowly changing, certainly in Ontario," said Koehler. "At a national level, there really isn't the same recognition for what the potential holds."

Koehler also noted that it took the charity a long time to convince Ontario's ministry of tourism that a trail could be a tourism attraction. It eventually won the government over with polls that showed Quebecers would consider a trip to Ontario based on the promise of a scenic trail.

The Waterfront Regeneration Trail is focused on creating a cycling route around the Great Lakes, and has big expansion plans and dreams for the coming years to increase significantly its mileage.

Some of the biggest deterrents for cycle tourists are poor road conditions that force cyclists into traffic and a lack of good signage.

Quebec was able to overcome obstacles and create its massive network largely because of the support of the provincial government, which created incentives to help municipalities build the necessary infrastructure like trails and other facilities.

Still, Vélo Québec's Jean-Francois Pronovost says the initial struggle was convincing people that a cycling network was financially worth the investment. Now, if you travel on the province's bike paths, businesses recognize the value and welcome the cyclists.

Pronovost, the group's vice-president of development and public affairs, says the creation of that kind of a network requires provincial government input, and he's hopeful Ontario will see that happen. But other than Ontario, he notes, "we don't see many initiatives from provincial governments in Canada."

Small towns win

Studies show visiting cyclists tend to spend more on food and services than a traveller passing through in a car. After hours of pedalling, they have raging appetites — and feel more inclined to pamper themselves.

Also, smaller towns tend to gain more from a rise in cycle tourism because these travellers are more likely to venture away from big-city attractions than those in a car, research shows.

Some smaller communities are taking the initiative to paint themselves as cyclist-friendly destinations.

A resident of Twin Bridges, a tiny town of 400 in Montana that sits at the fork of several rivers and touts itself as a fly-fishing destination, decided to welcome cyclists.

Intrigued by the stories of the Lycra-clad visitors passing through, one man convinced the town to invest \$9,000 to build a basic shelter for cyclists, and then ask for visitors' donations to maintain it.

Word of the friendly overture spread on the cycling grapevine. And now local stores, the town laundromat and restaurants are benefiting from the rise in cycling visitors.

The initiative speaks to a broader truth about cycling tourism, notes Pronovost: "If you don't have the infrastructure, you won't be in the destination guides."