

THE BRIDGES OF NEW YORK: A PANORAMIC DAY TRIP

For New York bicyclists, the city's bridges are crucial links to routes outside our borders. The East River bridges take us to the Rockaways and Long Island; the George Washington Bridge leads us to Piermont and beyond. Most days, we take them pretty much for granted.

In 2003, I began wondering what it would be like to ride many of these crossings in a single day. Armed with an NYC Department of Transportation cycling map, a Hagstrom NYC atlas, books on NYC bridges, and the Transportation Alternatives and Structurae Websites, I began researching bike-accessible bridges. Crafting a route required five solo field trips, by bike and foot, to get point-to-point mileage, plus deli/rest stops and bailout points for tired cyclists.

My inaugural ride was held in July 2003, starting from Manhattan's Chelsea Piers at 7am. As leader, I was assisted by five co-leaders from across the city, including a former US Marine from New Jersey. We had road, mountain, recumbent, and hybrid cyclists, ranging in age from their 20s to 50s.

We crossed 17 bridges in procession that day, beginning with the Brooklyn, Manhattan, Williamsburg, Pulaski, and Queensborough Bridges; the 63rd and Ward's Island Pedestrian Bridges; then the Tri-Borough, Willis Ave., Third Ave., Madison Ave., and 145th St. Bridges. These were followed by the Macombs Dam, University Ave., Washington, George Washington, and Bayonne Bridges.

The 60-mile route was no bed of roses. We flanked around broken bottles, potholes, and garbage. Some bridges were rusting and not so pretty. Some bridge paths were so narrow we had to ride single file, watching for oncoming pedestrians. The Williamsburg Bridge bike path was dotted with hazardous metal bumps (a design flaw since corrected). We rode intrepidly along stretches busy with traffic; ducked under the boom of a huge crane near NY Hospital; and assured the Bayonne police, who may have confused us with reckless riders, that we weren't exceeding some New Jersey vehicular speed limit.

Despite the obstacles, there were pleasures. We noticed the elegant designs of the Brooklyn, Manhattan, and George Washington Bridges—one rarely stops to look at them. The recently opened Harlem River Greenway, which catered to late 19th century high society as the Harlem River Speedway racetrack, was beautiful to ride on. We took in the majestic NYC skyline and neighborhoods such as Chinatown, Harlem, Riverdale, University Heights, Long Island City, Greenpoint, Williamsburgh, and St. George. Residents who asked what we were doing would applaud when we told them.

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We raised our own cheers as well, clinched by riding on the breathtaking Bayonne Bridge—my favorite, built by Othmar Ammann. We took the 6pm Staten Island ferry back to Manhattan. All of us were tired but happy.

Each year, I have added more bridges to my ride, which now includes—four Brooklyn Gowanus Canal Crossings (Union, Carroll, Third, and Ninth Streets); Roosevelt Island; an unexpected wooden span bridge on Ward's Island; the Broadway Bridge; the Inwood Field pedestrian crossing, and the Henry Hudson Bridge.

Riding across all of these bridges in a day was immensely satisfying, as we shared a new experience not found in any guidebook—yet. Biking is a unique way to take in our glorious town. NYC government should be aware that bicycles are a great means to tour the city for residents and tourists alike. And it must open more bridges, like the Verrazano Bridge, to cyclists.

Alfredo Garcia, a native New Yorker, is a cyclist, writer, and ride leader for various NYC bike clubs. He will reprise his Bridges of New York ride on Sat., May 26, 2007. (Email: cyclistxxiii@yahoo.com.) This essay is dedicated to the memory of Julie Lobbia.