

Bike Tours Around Town or Around The World

By EMILY M. OLSON ■ Staff Reporter

Since Sal Lilienthal was a teenager, he's been on the seat of a bicycle more than off it. Now, at the age of 32, the athletic cyclist has found a way to earn a living doing what he loves — touring with other cycling enthusiasts cross country and around the world.

Mr. Lilienthal owns and operates the Bicycle Tour Company in Kent, first out of his Upper Kent Hollow Road residence and most recently from a spacious loft above New England Traditions on Main Street. The touring company offers bike riders, from beginners to advanced touring cyclists, a "total cycling experience," from simple day trips in scenic Connecticut and Massachusetts to New York City tours and week-long sojourns around France and Spain.

"What we do is offer a cycling experience with no pressure, an easy pace and wonderful surroundings," Mr. Lilienthal said during a recent interview. "Our basic routes are mostly flat. We often begin at the top of a hill so people can get started together. Everyone has a great time."

The two-year-old operation was founded after Mr. Lilienthal spent several years working with cycling greats like Lance Armstrong, this year's winner of the Tour de France. Mr. Armstrong made a triumphant return to the cycling arena after being diagnosed with cancer, recovering from the treatment and winning the grueling event, participated in by cyclists from across the globe. Mr. Lilienthal, a Greenwich native, said he was inspired by athletes like Mr. Armstrong and was "always happier when I was on my bike."

"I started cycling when I was about 15 and worked every summer for a student youth hosting program in Conway, Mass.," he said. "We led trips for teens around New Eng-



Photograph by Sharon Fishman

land, the Rockies and Europe."

After Mr. Lilienthal graduated from Hobart College (Geneva, N.Y.) in 1988, he studied Third World cultures and economics in Sri Lanka, then returned to work in Burlington, Vt., as a bike mechanic. His attendance at a mechanical cycling clinic in Colorado brought him into a circle of mechanic experts involved in racing teams for the Tour de France and the Olympic racing team.

Eventually, the cyclist found work as a bike mechanic with national teams including the Motorola Cycling Team, the U.S. National Team and, most recently, the Saturn Cycling Team in 1997. The idea for a touring group came about in a casual way, Mr. Lilienthal remembered.

"I was talking with friends one night and a

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Take a bike tour to anywhere

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couple of guys had taken a tour in Spain," he explained. "They said, 'Hey, we should take a group to Spain, it's so beautiful there.' So that's really where the touring company started."

In addition to Spain, Mr. Lilienthal and medical technician and cyclist Dave Bloch have traveled to Burgundy, France, and hope to add Italy, Scotland and New Zealand to the roster as well as additional spots in the states including Martha's Vineyard. The company offers local tours, limited to 35 people, through New York City; Shelter Island; Princeton, N.J.; Litchfield County; and the Berkshires.

Cannondale bikes are available for rental, and day-trippers receive a T-shirt and a water bottle along with their bike for \$60 per day. A week in Spain is \$2,250, while a week in France is \$2,450 including some meals, accommodations and airfare.

Week-long tours, limited to 12 riders, travel an average of 20 to 30 miles a day, with extended options

for advanced cyclists along the way. A group will set out in the morning and have choices for the routes they take, meeting at a designated hotel at day's end for dinner. Mr. Lilienthal proudly showed a sheaf of photographs from the recent trip to Burgundy, filled with snapshots of colorful foliage, rolling fields and stunning Flemish-style architecture.

"You can be a part of the group or ride by yourself," Mr. Lilienthal explained. "For the week-long tours, we try to include museums; scenic rides and lots of interesting places to shop and visit along the way. It's a wonderful experience for everyone."

Mr. Bloch is a former member of the U.S. Cycling Team and is available for medical assistance and massage therapy, and also acts as a guide on many of the tours. Veronique Myrte, a "bilingual biker" from France, is another member of the team who accompanies the groups to France.

"We also have a team van for repairs and emergencies that follows us along on the tours. We call it the party van," Mr. Lilienthal said. "We consid-

er the tours full-service with plenty of aid and encouragement for the riders."

Mr. Lilienthal said his touring business was "exploding" this year.

"We've actually had to hold back a little on the tours, because I want to make sure we can continue to offer quality tours and not sacrifice that for a huge group of people," he said.

The touring company is also offering local residents a chance to experience the Tour de France. Mr. Lilienthal will offer a course through the Foothills Adult Education program, called "A Day in the Life of the Tour de France," beginning Nov. 15. And of course, bicycles will be available for rental through October.

"It's a wonderful and very popular time of year for cycling," Mr. Lilienthal said. "People are always discovering or re-discovering how much fun it is to just go out there and ride."

For information on local or international tours, bike rentals or course information, contact Mr. Lilienthal at the Bicycle Touring Company at 927-1742, or through e-mail at info

The Bicycle Tour Company
bicycletours.com
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