

Riding a bicycle for fun and profit

KENT — The economy might be suffering on a national level, but entrepreneurs in the Northwest Corner have managed to find ways to make their businesses, and their dreams, thrive.

One example: Sal R. Lilienthal, owner and director of The Bicycle Tour Company at 9 Bridge St., adjacent to Backcountry Outfitters and Belgique.

Now in his 11th year in Kent (and his seventh at this location), Lilienthal is busy (and making a living) doing something he'd be doing anyway, for the sheer fun of it: planning, guiding and taking part in cycling outings for all levels of riders and all kinds of groups, from large camp and corporate tours to individual bike renters who just want to enjoy a day trip in the Kent area.

"We've done tours in three countries and 10 states," Lilienthal said in a recent interview, taking time out to talk on a busy Sunday. "We've taken more than 10,000 people on trips since 1997."

He employs eight to 10 people, depending on the trips he's arranging, with a few key seasonal staff, he said. Just the day before, he and two staff members had led a tour around Lake Waramaug in New Preston for 40 high-school students and four counselors from the Explorations Senior Summer Program at Yale University in New Haven. Their day in the country ended with a hike up a mountainside. Trips can include not only bike tours, but also kayaking, canoeing, hiking — "The more you can do, the more you do," Lilienthal said.

When asked what abilities riders should have, he said, "Less is more. We want to give a workout, but still be able to have a wine-tasting and dinner afterward if that's what clients want to do."

Lilienthal caught the bike-riding bug as a 15-year-old on a high-school summer trip to France.

"It was the trip of a lifetime, everything about it was fun," he said.

The next summer, he took a job with the same tour company, doing whatever tasks needed to be done, just for the opportunity to be there.

Community Snapshot

By Janet Manko

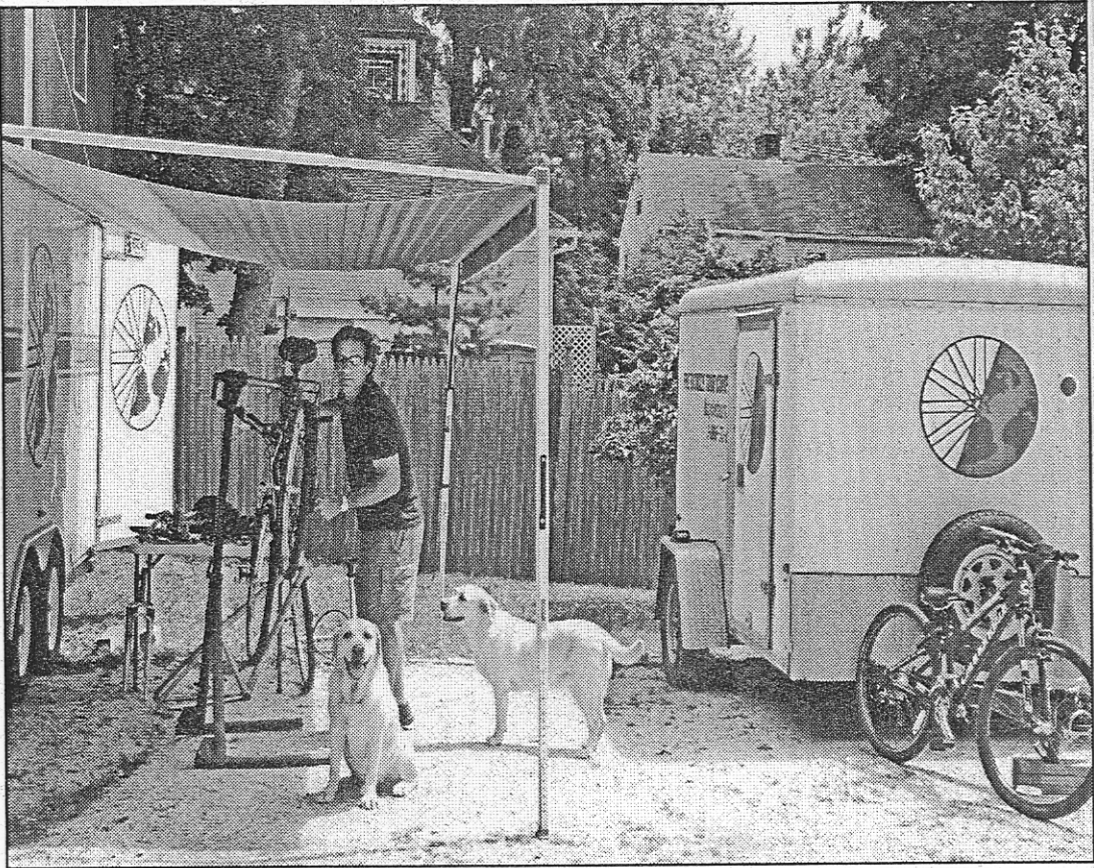


PHOTO BY JANET MANKO

Sal Lilienthal, owner and director of The Bicycle Tour Company, shares a moment of reflection with his golden Labs, Ripley and C.B., and one of his bicycles. His bikes are Cannondale Bikes, whose world headquarters are in Bethel.

During his college years at Hobart in upstate New York, he led tours during the summers, from the Canadian Rockies to the Maine coast and throughout Europe.

He went to Sri Lanka for a year of independent study on economic development, helping to create an irrigation system, and after graduation wound up in Burlington, Vt., skiing and working at

a bike shop.

"I didn't really want to do the corporate thing," he said.

He studied bicycle mechanics with several respected professionals across the country, and became licensed as a mechanic, traveling with the U.S. Olympic team in 1992, and with professional teams, such as those sponsored by Motorola (where he worked with Lance Armstrong) and Saturn. In professional racing, he said, there are "only a couple of weeks in November" that are down-time

for the teams. He traveled all over Europe during this time, working as a mechanic on a wide range of races, including the Tour de France and the Tour d'Espagne.

The team sponsorships came to an end, and Lilienthal returned to Connecticut.

A native of Greenwich, he found Kent to be just close enough to his family, with hills and general terrain not dissimilar to that of Vermont.

"I'd come up to Kent with the Scouts as a kid, canoeing on the Housatonic River, and I remembered the area," he said.

So, on Nov. 1, 1997, he began The Bicycle Tour Company.

The company is housed in a compact white clapboard building set back from the road, where Lilienthal also has his residence.

Visitors are greeted not only by Lilienthal, but also by the two "directors of marketing," father and daughter golden Labs, Ripley and C.B.

Though the atmosphere is relaxed,

Lilienthal springs instantly into action when bikers are in need of service, as happened several times on the Sunday this reporter visited. He fixed a flat for a couple from Metuchen, N.J., saving their Sunday ride; sent a couple up from New York City for the weekend off on a tour he had mapped out in the Kent environs; and met with a client from a camp in Wingdale, N.Y., planning 80-mile rides for campers in the Taconic State Park area.

Lilienthal is also involved in the wider Kent community, and is now one of the sponsors of a group of teachers from Kent School who are riding cross-country, hoping to raise \$50,000 for the benefit of an orphanage in Africa. The group took off from Kent about May 30, and had just arrived in San Francisco the day before this interview, Saturday, Aug. 2.

To find out more about that ride and to donate to the cause, or for more information on bicycle tours, go to bicycletours.com, or call Lilienthal at 860-927-1742.