

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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A taste of Niagara



DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The thundering beauty of Niagara Falls.

NIAGARA PENINSULA, Ontario — It's hard to compete with Niagara Falls for inspiring awe and wonder. But as the Niagara wine industry has flourished, this compact peninsula on the southwest corner of Lake Ontario has quietly grown into a top foodie destination.

Our mid-May plan was to eat and sip our way through the region, but once we crossed into Canada at Niagara Falls, we couldn't just drive by the thundering natural wonder. We considered booking a sightseeing boat to cruise through the mists, and even toyed with the idea of sliding down a zipline from the high embankment to the river. Ultimately, we settled for walking from American to Horseshoe Falls and cycling the bucolic path that continues downriver

This peninsula on the southwest corner of Lake Ontario has become a hot spot to wine and dine

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to Lake Ontario.

By evening, we were back on our food and wine track as we settled at a window table in Elements on the Falls, a restaurant so close to Horseshoe Falls that spray spatters the glass. Because Niagara has some of Canada's richest farmland, chef Elbert Wiersema told us, he buys most of his provisions from within a 60-mile radius. He made his point by pouring a Niagara pinot noir to complement the Ontario lamb steaks sizzling on hot, flat Niagara River stones.

Apart from the cities of Niagara Falls and St. Catharines, the peninsula is largely farm country, with the main wine-growing district stretching about 30 miles along the south coast of Lake Ontario. Wine aficionados speak of 10 different sub-appellations, but one blurs into the next. It's easy to bike or drive the flat, straight roads, following blue signs with bunches of grapes to find many of the peninsula's

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Learning to roll with June in Quebec

By Sue Hertz
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When we roll into the Mont-Laurier parking lot, Patty from Vermont slips on the gloves she bought 2½ hours ago in Saint-Jerome. "I didn't think I'd need these in June," she mumbles. In her early 70s, she has biked all over the world, sometimes with her husband, sometimes with her sister, but she is not eager to hop on her light blue Trek today. She slides her wire-framed glasses up her nose and stares out the window at the gray sky, the evergreens bent sideways in the wind.

I, too, am reluctant to leave the shelter of the shuttle bus that carried 16 cyclists and our bikes over 125 miles to this empty train station deep in Quebec's Laurentian mountains. Patty turns her broad face toward me and smiles weakly. Rain splatters the windows. It is 46 degrees Fahrenheit.

"What were we thinking?" she says.

I can't speak for Patty, but for Bill, my husband, and me, the idea of pedaling the 202-kilometer Le P'tit Train du Nord rail trail through

pristine Canadian woods and lake-dotted valleys before the summer tourist tsunami arrives sounded ideal. And while during our vacation deliberations last winter we recognized that the trail's promotional photos of cyclists in bare legs and T-shirts were shot in August, we figured that June is a great month. Warm but not too warm. Lakes cool but not cold. Mosquitoes small and sparse. June is the month of peonies and roses. The Longest Day.

"I hope the snow is off the trail by then," the Saint-Jerome concierge said when we called. A Canadian joke, we thought.

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Part — perhaps a lot — of the fun of travel in general and bike holidays specifically is the anticipation, the expectation. Prowling bed and breakfast websites, checking out restaurant reviews, flipping through gear catalogs. Envisioning only warm days and cold wine. Feet never blister. Thighs never chafe. Wallets stay plump. The reality, of course, is that something, perhaps a lot of somethings, will go wrong, especially when you

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Black gold fever in Oil Springs



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By Claudia Capos
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

OIL SPRINGS, Ontario — We spot the first wooden "walking-beam" pumpjacks nodding up and down in a farm field as we drive down southwestern Ontario's Oil Heritage Road toward Oil Springs.

In the heyday of Canada's black gold rush, pumpjacks, spring-pole drills, and Canadian pole drilling rigs spread like a swarm of locusts across the gumbeds around Black Creek in Lambton County. Horses hauled wooden tank wagons loaded with "black gold" along a plank road from Oil Springs to the railroad in Wyoming. Later, a railroad spur was built to transport the crude oil to refineries in Petrolia.

Today, the sultry smell of black gold still wafts over the Oil Heritage District, located a half-hour drive southwest from the Blue Water Bridge linking Port Huron, Mich., to Point Edward and Sarnia, Ontario.

This year the Oil Museum of Canada, a national

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Fourth-generation oil producer Charlie Fairbank III had a mural depicting the beginning of Fairbank Oil in 1861 painted on his barn near Oil Springs, Ontario.

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RACING HEARTS

The Volvo Ocean Race is coming in May.

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Riding out June's chills in Canada

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sidestep convention.

To be sure, there were signs that hitting the trail pre-season was not genius. Why could we book any room we wanted in any of the inns along the trail? Wasn't it odd that the shuttle bus carrying cyclists from Saint-Jerome to Mont-Laurier ran only on weekends? And let's not forget that snippy comment about snow.

But Bill and I take pride in outsmarting the average bear, of plotting getaways that avoid peak crowds, peak prices, peak aggravation. We loved Newport in November; we had the Cliff Walk to ourselves. We faced no lines at The Breakers or at this awesome bistro that served Thai shrimp nachos. So onward we forged in preparing for our June ride on what Canadians call a linear park, selecting our lodging, debating luggage service vs. carry our own. On drizzly March nights, summoning the scent of pine in the hot sun, we perused REI's selection of panniers.

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No sooner does he remove the last bike from the shuttle trailer, than the driver climbs back behind the wheel and bolts. The wheels spew tiny rocks toward us as we paw through our bike bags, digging out headbands, gloves, fleece tops, vests, windbreakers, raincoats. A peloton of Michelin Men.

Unlike on a coordinated bike tour in which all riders stay together from start to finish, the only moments this group may share are the shuttle bus drive and our launch from the Mont-Laurier parking lot. Other than that, we are our own constellations: Patty and her husband; the party of four headed by a woman we call Ethel Merman because of her booming voice; Bill and I; assorted other couples.

I'm not sure where the rest of the crew is headed, but Bill's and my destination on this first leg of our four-day trip is a lakeside town called Nominigüe, 35 miles down this route that once ferried skiers from Montreal to the mountains. Like most bike paths built on rail beds, Le P'tit Train du Nord is relatively flat, with gentle inclines and declines. The surface starts as pavement, becomes crushed stone, and then returns to pavement just outside of the finish line at Saint-Jerome. Today we'll roll on pavement, which means, I hope, a zippy ride.

The rain has stopped but the ground is wet, the chilly dampness seeping through to my socks. "Pick up lunch fixings?" Bill asks, tilting his helmeted head toward the Mont-Laurier IGA where Patty and the rest of our shuttle mates have headed. No. The sooner we hit the trail, the warmer we'll be.

At least we have achieved one goal: The trail is empty. No Lycra-clad lean machines. No kids on tag-alongs. No seniors zigzagging side to side. The trail stretches before us, an asphalt line disappearing into the woods.

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We pedal through forest and squishy bogs and small towns with one market and a stoplight. Bill glides along smoothly, his wide shoulders upright, his head turning to take in the sites. Occasionally, he'll adjust his glasses. He is in a happy place. Warm, cold. He's content on his bike. I, however, can think of little but my frozen fingers and toes. Smoke curls from a village chimney and I take comfort; at least someone is warm. With each revolution of my feet I will this day's ride to its finale.

At kilometer 32, we stop briefly to snack on energy bars, but not at one of the refurbished rail stations that serve as cafes and bike shops and info centers. No, the station we passed was closed so we munch in a rickety wooden shelter, the three sides of which list to the left. Dried leaves crunch as I sit on the old park bench inside. Bill shoots photos of our picnic with his iPhone. A woodpecker drills a tree in the distance.

If we'd brought our road bikes, I think, we could have ridden the whole trail in one day. A long day, to be sure, but the next morning we'd be headed south to sun and 70s. On our heavier hybrids with the gnarly tires designed for rough surfaces, we have committed to a more leisurely pace. Why wouldn't we want to extend our time in the Laurentians was our thinking in March. Why wouldn't we take the time to picnic beside the Rouge River, sip a cold beer at a trailside cafe? For months I'd fantasized about lying on the dock at our Nominigüe inn, soaking up sun before plunging into the lake.

That dock? As we ride up to the inn, I spot it — lying in pieces on the grass. Lac Nominigüe roils with white caps, fog obscuring the opposite shore. Leaves float in the pool and the deck chairs are stacked. More important, the inn's front door is locked.

I knock. Bill knocks. I wander the front walkway, noting flats of impatiens, a stack of lumber, empty flowerpots, cobwebs. Behind the front door we hear a voice bellowing in French. A dog barks. Then two dogs bark. The voice hollers louder. When the door opens, a brown blob shoots out like a missile, a canine version of the Pink Panther's Cato. But rather than karate chopping Inspector Clouseau, the little beast attacks my right shin. Behind him yips a white terrier-type pup, no bigger than a rat.

"Arretez!" roars the voice, which belongs to our host, who shuffles toward us, unshaven in pajama bottoms and sweatshirt, his gray hair pulled back in a short ponytail. He swings a leg at Cato, who retreats to the other side of the walkway. Rat Dog cowers under Cato's belly. In half-French, half-English, the owner apologizes and says that they do this only on introduction. I wonder how the rest of the guests fared, until I realize that we are the only guests.

He escorts us around the lakeside chambers with picture windows and through the basement entrance to our room. We, too, have a picture window, but it faces the stairs leading to the first floor, not the lake. As our host shuts the door behind him, Bill turns to me and asks, "Why don't we have a room with a lake view?"

"They cost more," I say. Offering us a nicer room in the host's inn must not have crossed our host's mind. Neither did preparing us dinner. A 5-course meal is included in our package but he says it isn't worth his time to cook for only two. Instead, we must return to the front desk at 6 p.m. and he will drive us to a nearby restaurant.

We shower. We read. We hide under the quilts to warm up. Our wet socks and cycling tights hang over the radiator, and we wonder if they will be dry for tomorrow's ride. At the appointed time, we walk around the building, past the dock pieces, past the leaf-strewn pool, to the inn's main entrance, which is, again, locked. Bill raps on the wood door as I cower behind the hedges. Doesn't matter. Cato careens out the door, past Bill and straight for me — airborne. I dodge. He misses. Our host tosses to Bill the

keys to his van, the rear door of which is held down by a bungee cord. Easier for us to drive ourselves, he says.

With a shrug, we hop in the van and head to a meal that lingers still in our list of all-time greats. The lobster bisque is rich and chunky, its heat flowing to every digit. Bill's bison is so tender he abandons his knife. Habitual dessert-skippers, we couldn't say no to crème brûlée. We clink our glasses of sauvignon blanc, and toast our first day on the road. Yes, I was cold and cranky, but here is the reward. We laugh until we weep about Cato-the-Torpedo. Since we are only one of two couples dining, the wait staff fawns over us, bringing us extra bread, extra hummus, more water. The chef comes out to chat, so relaxed he almost pulls up a chair to explain his sauté technique.

When we arrive back at the inn, the two dogs pad around the yard with barely a yawn as we walk by.

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Day Two dawns gray and cool, but dry. The next stop is Mont-Tremblant, a ski resort in winter and outdoor playground in summer. When our kids were young and malleable, we spent one July week hiking, mountain biking, ziplining, swimming, and canoeing in the woods and rivers around this Laurentian resort town. We had a blast.

We ride out of Nominigüe, past the summer cottages with boarded windows, past the worker-bees preparing the waterfront for the tourists who will arrive in two weeks — after Quebec's national holiday. Temps rise as the pavement turns to stone dust and we pedal into dense woods. Off go the layers. By the time we reach the outskirts of Old Tremblant Village, the sun is out and I remove my tights. Yes! Shorts in June! The real vacation begins!

Our hotel room, white and chrome, overlooks Mercier Lake and the town park. Couldn't afford this in peak season, nor would we find as many open seats at the local pub for dinner. Things are looking up. Encouraged, we ride the next morning to the resort at the foot of the ski area, the same resort where our boys loved racing up and down the pedestrian mall lined with luxury shops, flowing through the human river that flowed day and night, the hum of voices as soothing as a symphony.

This late spring morning, however, the resort village of brightly colored chalets looks like an abandoned movie set. The hundreds of restaurants and shops are dark. Hotels are open but the revolving doors stay still, the balconies empty. It's as if we have crashed the party before it began. Where are all the hanging geraniums? Kids strumming for ice cream? Musicians yammering guitars? A maintenance guy sweeps the sidewalk. Another carries lumber. We bike side-by-side down the middle of the cobblestone street, a silent corridor of vacant windows.

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It's tempting to leave Mont-Tremblant's creepy quiet and blast through the remaining 56 miles to our car in Saint-Jerome, to hit the road tonight to enjoy Montreal's restaurants and Franco festival and designated bike lanes. But we have reservations at an inn by a waterfall in Val David, an arts community just 49 kilometers down the trail, and the weather looks promising.

Bill slathers on sunscreen and adjusts the beanie he wears under his helmet to protect his head from the elements. He hands over the sunscreen,

which I apply, but only to my face. The arms can use some Vitamin D. Off we go, our panniers bulging with layers we don't need. The sky is impossibly blue and the soaring pines a rich green. As we pedal deep into the woods, you can almost smell the musty Chaga, the medicinal mushroom that grows on the Laurentian birch trees. Delighted by our ignorance of this legendary fungus, our waiter at breakfast poured us complimentary Chaga tea and then steered us to a not complimentary copy of a book on the mushrooms at the restaurant's front desk. The tea was earthy and a tad bitter, but we bought some anyway. The book stayed on the counter.

On this Tuesday morning, we ride alongside rivers rushing with melting mountain snow, the current strong, the eddies circling. We hear only the crunch of tires on gravel. Contentment returns. And then I see them: the undulating cloud of black dots just ahead.

A child of the New Hampshire woods, I think of May as the month of tiny gnats, of my mother donning the netted helmet to plant marigolds. But in northern Quebec's chill, black flies roar out of their eggs closer to the Solstice than Mother's Day. Two days ago I begged for short sleeves and heat. Today my naked arms and neck are Target Zero. Bill is impervious to the attack; he wears long sleeves and a high collar.

A few days ago, these flies were frozen in place. Two weeks from now, they will be gone. But for now, they are mine, and I am theirs. My neck blazes with bites. I try to focus on the ride, a slow, gradual climb alongside construction sites and little urban centers. In spots, the path is deep sand, which catches the tires. I try not to scratch. We don't stop for lunch; the flies are worse at a standstill. Rolling up beside Bill, I ask, "Did we bring repellent?" He shakes his head. I dismount only when we get to the train station at Sainte-Agathe.

Advertised as a must-stop with its bay windows and peaked roofline, the renovated station is a combination information center and snack bar. In peak season, cyclists buzz inside and out of its wide doors, eating Klondike Bars and leaning against the polished counter that once housed train schedules. On this June day, we face no competition at the freezer and only Patty and her husband from our shuttle bus sit at the outside picnic tables, licking ice cream cones.

Like me, they are annoyed by the black flies. Unlike me, they do not have a pulsing red arc of bites at their hairline. Wise as my husband, they wear long sleeves and high collared jerseys. We share their table, trading stories of the trail, of quiet rides and crazy dogs. We talk about their adult children, our adult children, past bike adventures. I realize that I've missed other voices, other perspectives. Yes, I love to ride with only my thoughts as company, but the isolation of previous trips was punctuated by other riders, family, communal meals. What is travel if not meeting new people, learning about their wayward siblings and challenging jobs? While avoiding crowds was a goal, by Day Three perhaps I don't need complete solace. The trail without riders looked as bereft as an empty airport lounge. I think of the bond that began to knit between Patty and me as we exchanged glances in the Mont-Laurier parking lot, the wind howling outside the shuttle bus. She is no fool, Patty, but she, too, has found her

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rhythm on the trail after that frigid first day. She rides slowly, carefully, behind her husband. They are in no rush.

We spy other bikers from our van ride to Mont-Laurier, a couple and the woman we call Ethel. We are all headed to the lodging by the waterfall.

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Outside, the inn is white stucco with dark wooden shutters and a steep-pitched roof. Inside, stencils of flowers, women in dirndls, and men in lederhosen adorn the walls. Our hostess Josée greets us with an iced tea and a history of the Bavarian-themed lodging. "You are done cycling for the day," she says, directing us to the shed where we will stash our bikes. She smiles, but she is not to be countered. We obey and follow her to a ramp she has rigged in her side yard for easy bike transit. Next to the shed and stone patio, the river thunders, its fury a contrast to the gentle breeze and sunlight darting through the tree canopy above. With a nod for us to stay and enjoy the view, Josée marches back to the house. She never tires of the water, she will tell us the next day. When her home has no guests, she will camp out in the large bedroom facing the river, lulled to sleep by the waterfall's roar.

In the village, the art gallery doors are open but inventory is sparse. Still, the retailers are friendly and eager to show what they have. We dine on pasta at a restaurant lined with black-and-white photos of twenty-somethings in granny dresses and overalls, posing by barns, their children smudged with dirt. Our waitress knows nothing about the people in the photos, shot sometime in the late 1960s, and we guess that they formed the arts community that attracts legions of cyclists and tourists every summer.

Consistent in our thrift, we booked a room facing the road, but we can still hear the waterfall as we drift off to sleep. The next morning, we feast on homemade yogurt parfaits followed by eggs in a basket with sides of locally cured ham. Josée has spent her morning slicing and baking and frying and we are grateful.

Like breakfast, the weather is perfect: sunny and 70s with a light breeze. The scenery is spectacular — we ride through deep valleys, past rushing rivers, lakes. We cross bridges overlooking whitewater rapids so breathtaking that I don't complain when Bill stops — again — to shoot photos. We stop at the train station-turned-bike-shop at Sainte-Adele for help with Bill's wobbly derailleur. By the time we're back on our bikes, our shuttle compatriots are by our side. They're up for a meandering pace to Saint-Jerome. I'm not. I'm itchy. I'm hot. And I want to boogie. Bill senses my impatience and nods. He is, after all, fond of saying that his wife needs to be exercised. I'm off.

When you bike with a group, the focus is on other, on camaraderie. But when you ride solo, you are a kid pumping those pedals, flying without a care, a purpose. There are no cranky bosses. No e-mails to send. No texts to return. There is only you, the wheels, the wind, and the goal of staying upright.

At intersections, I stop just long enough to ensure the coast is clear. In between, I ride as fast as I can. The pace is so consuming that I forget the black fly mountain range on my neck. Behind me I hear wheels rolling.

"Nice riding," says a tall, lanky rider I met at breakfast as he pulls up beside me at a stop sign. Recently retired from an engineering career, he spends most of his free time on his Cannondale.

"Feels great," I say, and forge ahead. Retired Engineer and I race past lakes and across bridges, over crushed stone almost as smooth as the pavement that greets us a few miles out of Saint-Jerome. He could pass me, but he doesn't. The sun beats down. The wind is still. My legs are strong, my lungs clear. I am sad to see the parking lot where our red Rav4 waits.

If anticipation fuels the start of a trip, then accepting the lows as well as the highs marks the end. For travel, like every experience, is all about savoring what is great and learning from — and laughing about — what isn't. When Bill rolls up, we head to an outdoor table next to the railcar-turned-bike-shop at which Patty bought her gloves four days ago. Slurping slushies, we marvel at the heat, the drenched tank tops we thought we'd never wear. In a few minutes we will be on our way to Montreal's urban bustle and cycling paths alongside the St. Lawrence, but for now we rest in the moment, in the pure joy of our aching muscles. We wave to Patty and her husband as they load their bikes on their van and wander to our table, shading their eyes from the bright June sun.

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