
Becoming a Bike Nation

Luke Brocki | May 6, 2013

Once a resort destination pastime, bike tourism has become big business for cities too, fuelled by the growing acceptance of bikes as part of the urban fabric

A leggy blonde girl in a blue T-shirt and jean shorts waves the starting flag and two 20-something guys in full-face helmets and body armour throw themselves down the steep slope on bikes worth more than any car I've ever owned. A blink later they're flying down the mountain, sometimes pedalling to go even faster, other times bouncing off wooden walls or launching off jumps and hanging suspended in mid-air in fancy manoeuvres that send the announcer into paroxysms of excitement. Several more rapid breaths and one rider cruises to victory, the other losing control and crashing in a spectacular cloud of brown dust. He emerges with a big grin and a bloody forearm. The throng around me erupts into adrenaline-fuelled yells of appreciation. This is day two of the 2012 Crankworx Whistler Freeride Mountain Bike Festival, a 10-day celebration of extreme bike riding held each August.

A film crew materializes at the Skiers' Plaza in Whistler Village and swoops in to talk with the contenders. A big screen at the base of the bike park carries the interview live. It's been flickering all day, streaming races live and filling gaps with replays of big-air moments dating back several decades. An on-site audiovisual tent and fibre-optic network—the latter an Olympic legacy—handle timekeeping and live webcasting. Energy drink giant Red Bull is a major sponsor, as are Jeep and Bud Light, whose massive inflatable can now sits awkwardly at the ranger station abandoned by original beer partner Kokanee. A number of bike manufacturers peddle full-suspension machines made of carbon fibre and priced just shy of \$10,000. That's also the top prize of the tournament: \$10,000 for the winner of the Jeep Canadian Open DH, described by event organizers as the world's biggest purse in downhill mountain biking.

Just the same, the cyclists I spot this weekend aren't all Red Bull-guzzling adrenaline junkies. Not even close. Walking around the village, I also find plenty of baby boomers battling their mid-life crises with shiny road bikes instead of sports cars. Then, loitering around some bike racks, I spy a good variety of hipsters parking indeterminate two-wheelers—less flashy sports equipment, more personal transportation devices. Down the road, a few visiting couples meander by on rented cruiser bikes with fat tires and cushy saddles. In all, the resort is an interesting microcosm of all types of bicycling, from the realm of sport—the traditional stronghold of North American bicycle culture—to the world of utility cycling, whose proponents include policy-makers, planners, economists and healthy living advocates all plugging bicycles as tools to make smart cities richer and their citizens fitter and happier.

To find out more about the sports side of the equation, I meet Crankworx general manager Darren Kinnaird at a bar at the foot of the bike park. A seasoned downhill mountain biker right down to handlebar calluses on his hands and pedal wounds on his legs, the lean, middle-aged Kinnaird says Crankworx is a crucial financial property for the resort. He says it costs more than a million dollars a year to put the festival on and organizers are keen to repeat it every year even though it barely breaks even.

“We are a business and it is a Whistler Blackcomb property. We've always felt that events are a great way to tell a story of the experiences and products we have to offer,” he says. “It's been a really good long-term business builder for us. It's marketing, but for this 10-day period we also drive a pile of people up here. They're staying in hotels, they're eating in restaurants, they're going to bars, they're buying stuff.”

The spinoffs have been significant enough for the festival to expand into Europe last summer as Crankworx Les 2 Alpes, a week-long prequel to the domestic competition and a chance to push the brand in France and beyond: Kinnaird expects the partnership with Red Bull Media House to deliver more than a million views of this year's live webcasts and video downloads around the world.

A bride and groom arrive at the bar with their wedding party in tow, many wearing their protective gear and still sweaty from a ceremony in the bike park. Kinnaird laughs as I use the microphone to shoo away friendly arrivals gravitating to the leather couches we're monopolizing in the corner of the noisy patio. It's no use. Soon it's too loud to hear anything over celebratory clinking and conversing. "This will be the busiest 10 days of the summer in Whistler for sure," Kinnaird says with a grin as we leave the bar and part ways.



Crankworx, a biker event held annually in Whistler.

For years Crankworx has been commissioning economic impact studies to assess the ROI of the festival as a marketing push. The 2012 study estimated the event drew some 146,000 visitors over 10 days, nearly 43,000 of those from outside the country, and 32 per cent of attendees had annual household incomes of \$100,000 a year or more. The 2010 study estimated the event's total province-wide economic spinoffs—including spending, job creation and tax revenues—at \$44.9 million.

Similar impact studies have been commissioned for RBC GranFondo Whistler, a much younger and very different cycling event that has brought an Italian-inspired bike tour to Whistler every September since 2010. Last year's event saw approximately 5,000 participants from 14 countries sign up to race the 122 kilometres from downtown Vancouver to Whistler along the Sea-to-Sky Highway. Tourism Whistler says the event turned one of Whistler's slowest weekends (the Saturday after

Labour Day) into one of the busiest periods of the year.

An interesting nugget of information offers a link between these stories of athletic endurance and everyday transportation. A 2011 survey done by Whistler's tourism officials found that biking is the third-most popular summer activity in Whistler, behind sightseeing and hiking, and of the different types of biking, riding the paved Valley Trail was the most popular, ahead of downhill and cross-country biking. The Valley Trail is a 40-kilometre stretch of bike and pedestrian pathway separated from car traffic and weaving through the municipality's communities and natural attractions.

Intrigued, I set out down the Valley Trail on foot, which leads me to Whistler Tourism board chair Roger Soane at a posh barbecue, which I stumble across uninvited. Soane, also the general manager of Nita Lake Lodge, one of Whistler's newest boutique hotels, is a burly, good-natured man with a young wife, three young kids and a British drawl I confuse for Australian—an honest mistake, he says, given the latter's emergence as the dominant accent in Whistler.

I start by giving him a hard time about the grains of salt with which I'll swallow all the economic impact numbers he provides me, but he laughs and insists bikes are big money. He says the extreme biking festivities at the top of the mountain and the long-distance races such as the GranFondo series are just one side of the biking story.

"Whistler is a great place to bring a bike and it's a great place to rent a bike even if you haven't been on one in 20 years," he says. "We have complimentary bikes at the hotel and we feel it's a service our guests enjoy. We give them a helmet, we give them a lock, they can take them anywhere. And they're out 16 hours a day."

Soane is looking to double the lodge's fleet of bikes next season and add children's bikes to open up the experience to entire families.

While Whistler sets the pace for a new bike culture in B.C., Vancouver isn't far behind. A number of area hotels—including the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver, the Opus Hotel and the Burrard—also offer bikes to their guests. Last summer, liquor stores carried a Tour de Victoria Summer Ale, whose label featured Ryder Hesjedal, the 2012 Giro d'Italia winner-turned-B.C.'s newest cycling hero. An alley off Burrard and Davie streets is home to Musette Caffe, the city's first bicycle-themed coffee bar, its interior a shrine to European road racing. The Wedgewood boutique hotel on Hornby Street goes a step further with its own road-racing club, which is less surprising after I learn of all the local



Cycle City Tours.

slapping at the concrete in a noisy mechanical dance. A nearby tent serves fruit and baked goods to racers and volunteers. Every time a wobbly head appears around the corner, the finish line erupts in cowbell dings and hoarse yells of encouragement. Most of these come courtesy of an excited middle-aged man in pink spandex and flip flops who dreamed up this whole affair to help fund the Vancouver Biennale, the bi-annual public art exhibition he launched back in 2002. I yell repeatedly to get his attention and Barrie Mowatt eventually runs over to chat.

“I want this to become a revenue-generating source for the Biennale,” he tells me plainly when I push him for some numbers. “We don’t do a lot of door-knocking; we depend on auctions and private sales to spread the word. We wanted to prove to the community and to these corporations that we’re an entity and that we have a lot to offer.”

Mowatt, a long-time art dealer, is best known for his love of outdoor sculptures, but he tells me his excitement around bikes began in 1989 after he survived a bout of colon cancer and vowed to live a more active life. “Once you’ve done six or seven cancer rides around the world, you want to ride for something other than an illness; you want to ride for something that’s joyful,” he says.

Three years ago he got the idea to use the world’s growing interest in bikes to help fund future Biennales. Last year’s 225 registration fees brought in some \$40,000. Inspired by larger regional events that draw thousands of riders, Mowatt hopes future rides will top 4,000 riders, a good portion of those from outside Canada. “The objective is that by 2014 we’re putting into our bank account \$250,000 or more in profit.”

It certainly seems possible, especially if B.C. adopts European approaches to the bicycle. A 2009 study by the European Parliament’s Committee on Transport and Tourism offers some intriguing financial numbers on bicycles as business drivers. The study aimed to assess the potential benefits of long-distance European cycling routes for tourism purposes. Among other things, it estimated the value and volume of cycle tourism in Europe at nearly 2.8 billion separate trips worth about \$86 billion a year.

France and Austria were the most important destinations for tour operators, a fringe benefit of “continuous, safe, pleasant routes with good signage.” While such routes are far more prolific in and around European capitals than they are in North America, I do find one Vancouver bicycle tour operator who’s growing an already-profitable business even as local advocates lament the city’s lack of cycling infrastructure.

I’m sitting under one of the gargantuan sparrow sculptures that menace the former Olympic Village in Southeast False Creek when Josh Bloomfield arrives riding a Brodie touring bike. Wearing black canvas All-Stars with colourful socks, the Winnipeg native wears his brown hair and beard on the scruffy side. He tells me he discovered a passion for cycling while travelling around Asia to get away from the corporate world after taking a degree in marketing and finance. He

summer races, many of them rife with corporate sponsors: July brings B.C. Superweek, which includes a number of multi-day races such as the Tour de Delta, Tour de White Rock and a 50-lap race formerly known as Tour de Gastown, but renamed the Global Relay Gastown Grand Prix after a local technology company helped resurrect the event.

Speaking of title sponsors, everyone’s favourite controversial crude oil and pipeline giant Enbridge threw its support behind last year’s Ride to Conquer Cancer, whose approximately 3,000 participants raised \$11.2 million for the B.C. Cancer Foundation in June.

The money trail leads me into a parking lot at the top of Vancouver’s Queen Elizabeth Park one cloudy Sunday morning in August. Today a good portion of it is not a parking lot, but the finish line of the Tour de Biennale, the latest local road bike race and the last training ride before the GranFondo Whistler. There are pink flags everywhere. Two artsy types pedal a giant purple spider around the area, its spindly metal legs



The RBC GranFondo.

While daily public tours (\$59 to \$99 apiece) still account for about two-thirds of the company's revenue, Bloomfield—perhaps ironically given his earlier flight from big business—stumbled across an unexpected market in the corporate sector. “We’re doing stuff with conferences, we’re doing corporate events,” he says. “I got a call from an ambassador in Ottawa; they’ve got Swedish MPs coming to Vancouver and they want to take them on a bike tour.”

The interest grew fast enough for Bloomfield to hire four part-time tour operators in 2012, his second year of operation, each of whom can run two half-day tours of up to 15 people. That brings his total capacity to 120 customers a day, 150 if he skips out on the day's office duties and joins his guides on the ground. So far, the biggest tour he's led was a group of 180 business types from the Netherlands.

I learn that False Creek is an important historical stop on the tour. Bloomfield launches into tales of First World War-era industrial expansion (the inlet once ran all the way to Clark Drive but was filled in to make way for rail infrastructure) through Expo 86 (Science World, BC Place) and the 2010 Games.

“Athlete's Village: good thing? Bad thing? Controversial thing?” he asks with a grin. “We like to talk about controversy, about the different points of view. People aren't coming to hear my political speech, but I want to present what's going on locally and just bring people into what's being talked about here.”

Before we part, we share a laugh about our recent discovery of the word “mamil,” a humorous and unflattering term derived from “middle-aged men in Lycra.” It's still by far the largest cycling demographic in North America, but one that's now giving way to a new generation of utility cyclists, who, like Bloomfield, see biking not just as sport, but as another option for everyday transportation and entertainment.

“Wear whatever you wear normally,” he tells me, inviting me on one of his tours before hopping back on his bike and riding away. “You don't need to wear spandex to come on a leisurely bike ride for a few hours.”

It's this type of casual urban approach to bikes that's said to be fuelling North America's growing love affair with pedal power as a transportation option. For the moment, the car still rules the roads of the New World and the most visible bike money-makers remain big events firmly rooted in the realm of sport. Just the same, more and more North American cities (think New York, Chicago, Portland, Minneapolis) are growing government spending on bicycle infrastructure, which is in turn leading to higher ridership levels and new business opportunities. In B.C., the provincial Liberals announced a \$7.5-million investment in March for biking infrastructure in 20 communities as part of a program that shares costs between provincial and municipal governments called BikeBC.

Whether the citizens of Vancouver similarly embrace the bicycle as a transportation option remains to be seen. There's no doubt City Hall is enthusiastic about the idea, but every metre of proposed protected bike lane still breeds Nimbyism and political controversy. And while bike-sharing schemes flourish around the world, the future of the city's proposed public bike program is muddled by B.C.'s mandatory adult bicycle helmet law, which local advocates worry could keep

became an avid bicycle traveller with a simple philosophy: “This is the best way to see a city.”

He started Cycle City Tours in 2011 by partnering with Spokes Bicycle Rentals & Espresso Bar Inc., the biggest of the bike shops near the Georgia Street entrance to the seawall in Stanley Park, which, thanks to every guidebook ever written, is littered with hordes of unsteady tourists teetering on bicycles for a good five months of the year. Bloomfield says the partnership was a no-brainer, even though his tours reach far beyond the seawall: “We need bikes; they have a huge fleet,” he says. “With a huge fleet we can work with massive groups.”

That partnership ushered in a fundamental shift away from the individual tourists Bloomfield first envisioned serving in small groups.

would-be cyclists off their steeds (the challenge is to integrate the cleaning, stress-testing, collection and redistribution of used helmets into a bicycle rental transaction that's cheap, spontaneous and fun). On the other hand, while just 1.7 per cent of all commuting trips were done by bicycle in Metro Vancouver in 2006 (the most recent census data available), regional transportation authority TransLink's recent research has found a massive new target market: 41 per cent of respondents identify themselves as potential cyclists, those "interested, but concerned" about safety on the road. Those concerns are said to disappear as the number of cyclists goes up. And as cyclists are more likely to take public transit than drivers, TransLink has an interest in cycle-friendly policy and infrastructure, adding a powerful voice to the chorus of politicians and business leaders who feel it shouldn't take an oil shock to realize facilitating active modes of transportation is a good idea.

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