

BIKING IN THE ‘BURG

Shenandoah Valley’s “Sweet Spot”

by **BRENDA RUBY** *bruby@verizon.net*

Where can you bike in the Shenandoah Valley with hills being optional?

Biking in and around Harrisonburg, Virginia you quickly realize why they call this the “sweet spot” of the Valley.



WHILE THE THOUGHT OF BIKING in Shenandoah may strike fear in the hill-averse, rest assured that you can get the views without the pain.

“East or west, it’s breathtaking. In other portions of

the Valley you don’t get the view, but here you have these long, beautiful vistas with the Alleghenies to the west and Massanutten to the east,” touts Tourism Coordinator Zenaida Hall. My recent weekend there proved just this.



Armed with a few cue sheets gleaned from the Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition’s (SVBC) website, my first stop in town was the Visitor’s Center located in the Hardesty-Higgins House in the center of Harrisonburg’s quaint downtown area. A good call since A) there’s a lovely tea room for a delicious snack after the 2-hour drive from DC and B) pretty much anything you need to find out, you can do it from here, including picking up a cue sheet for their 25-mile “Harrisonburg Cruise” or any of their other resources which they keep handy for bikers who wander in. Open 9-5 every day of the week, even a spontaneous visit can leave you with plenty to do.

While the Visitor’s Center provides you with hospitality and a dose of Harrisonburg history through its Valley Turnpike Museum (US Route 11 runs through town and was known as the Avenue of Invasion during the Civil War), any bike-related needs or concerns can be easily answered by the crew at the Shenandoah Bicycle Company. Conveniently located just across the street from the Visitor’s Center, you can pick up a last-minute supply, rent a bike, or simply ask for route advice. Owner Tom Jenkins mentions that they keep a few road and mountain biking cue sheets on hand, but they’ll also print out resources from online if needed.

Whether starting your ride from downtown or your accommodations, Jenkins notes that it’s “pretty easy to escape town” mentioning the good accessibility to country roads. Very true as using a map from the Visitor’s Center, I easily modified an SVBC cue to start from our lodging and within a few turns was on route and on my way.

North to Zenda



Opting for the “North to Zenda” route the scenery quickly turned from shops and homes to rolling farmland. Also very quickly, I realized I should have printed out from the website not just the cue sheet, but also the turn-by-turn maps they have available as well. Not having done this it was hard to stay on cue as route numbers were often referred to by their street names on the road, or vice versa. Others can very easily avoid this challenge by asking about alternate names or going over the cue against the map in advance—neither of which I had done.

A few wrong turns and you'd think I'd be worried, but I discovered another happy reality of biking in Harrisonburg—I'm not sure you can actually get too lost, or have a bad ride. Granted, I knew the general direction I wanted to go, but I'm no orienteering whiz so deciding to just bike "that way" as my friend pointed was a new experience for both of us and we were pleasantly surprised. Hills are obviously in the eyes (or legs) of the beholder, but when I think of biking in Shenandoah, visions of Skyline Drive and merciless climbs dance through my head; we encountered nothing of the sort.

Sure there were a few hills, but moderately rolling with some really sweet stretches of easy riding were what we discovered, along with calm roads, beautiful, quiet farms, and church steeples dotting the crests of hills. Somehow being off cue made it seem even better, but truth is, I'm not sure if we were off cue or just didn't know the name of the road we were on—no matter, we were having a blast on the gorgeous roads and absolutely giddy at the missing intense climbs we had come expecting.

We encountered a few gravel roads and amended our route to avoid them, but Jenkins advised, "Don't be scared to get off the pavement. There are a number of designated gravel roads which road bikes can handle." Not knowing this at the time and not following the cue precisely, we detoured but clearly didn't need to.

Also of note were the friendly drivers. We didn't encounter many cars, but Jenkins mentions that drivers are used to sharing the roads with large farm equipment and horse and buggies. Another query to possibly make about any given route or area is about refreshments—while a town may be listed or on the map, it may just consist of three houses and a church so bring a snack or two and plenty to drink.

While Harrisonburg has a blossoming tech industry (it's been home to Rosetta Stone since its inception and houses several IT companies downtown), in addition to the government and education, agricultural businesses continue as a major industry and our return route took us through one of these areas on the outskirts of town, offering a different view of the area but still the same pleasant and calm roads.

"Discover Downtown" Walking Tours



Visitor's Center

Once back in town, we made a beeline for The Smoking Pig, located a few blocks past the Visitor's Center. Hearty BBQ from this take-out shack is the perfect finish to a ride and so filling the soft-serve ice cream from the adjacent Kline's Dairy had to wait. Both are outdoor eating establishments and clearly local favorites.

Pleasantly ride-weary and satiated, a perfect way to unwind is by discovering the gems of historic downtown Harrisonburg, which happens to be Virginia's first designated Arts & Cultural District. In a 10-block walk you'll encounter locally-owned shops and galleries, as well as the Virginia Quilt Museum—offering a gallery of Civil War era quilts and stories of the women who made them, the Harrisonburg Children's Museum, the Downtown Harrisonburg Farmers Market, and a number of historic sites. Since the

farmers market's weekend hours are Saturdays 7 a.m. to 1 p.m., you'll likely need to peruse the fresh produce and local offerings (including baked goods!) before you ride.

The ideal way to garner an insider's view is through one of the "Discover Downtown" walking tours offered from the Visitor's Center. Tours run Thursdays, Friday, and Saturdays at 3 and 5 p.m. and cost \$10. Be aware that while the Visitor's Center is open Sundays, most of the museums through downtown are not.

If you're able to arrive early for your weekend, try to coincide with one of Harrisonburg's First Fridays. Run the first Friday of every month through October you'll enjoy the festive atmosphere and be treated to food and entertainment and be able to shop and stroll through town as museums and galleries keep their doors open a bit later.

It "is" a College Town



JMU Campus

After a ride and exploration of town you may be ready for a quiet evening, but you'd be missing out on a lively weekend scene. Being a college-town Harrisonburg has a certain energy. As tourism spokeswoman Hall says, "There's an eclectic mix of cultures which comes in part from the universities." Both James Madison University and East Mennonite call Harrisonburg home with Bridgewater College not too far away and give Harrisonburg access to "incredible music, performing arts, and student culture."

Parking our bikes at the Stonewall Jackson Inn, a scant five-minute walk from the downtown area, we took some time to enjoy the expansive 10-bedroom cottage and our accommodations before heading out. Staying at the Stonewall Jackson Inn is like a history lesson itself with each room named after a Civil War figure. Owner and our host Wayne Engel, a Professor Emeritus at JMU, revels in talking to his guests about their plans and is a great source of local information, both on what's happening around town now and Harrisonburg's Civil War history.

Heading into downtown for the evening, I am reminded a little of my college days—there are some places that are clear favorites of the college crowd, but if that's not your scene (and it hasn't been mine for a while), there are many lively options. Drinks, a light bite, and a pretty rocking band at Clementine's rounded out our day; hard to believe, but our evening didn't end until almost midnight in this "sleepy" Valley town.

The next day over our leisurely "Breakfast to Remember" on the porch of the Stonewall Jackson, Engel proved his hospitality even further by discussing our route plans and even offering his cell phone for rescue if needed as skies were threatening. It's easy to see why he's known as a favorite for bike groups and he's received awards as the Best B&B for Outdoor Enthusiasts and Best B&B in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

Opting for a southern route out of town, and simply using the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Chamber of Commerce map picked up from the Visitor's Center to map our route, we headed towards the town of

Dayton, which offers its own historic sites, stores, and farmers market at the edge of town (open Thursdays-Saturdays). Continuing south, we visit the college town of Bridgewater before crossing east over I-81. Though our roads up to that point have been busier than the day before, it's to be expected and not unpleasant riding.

Crossing onto Friedens Church Road we're reintroduced to rolling farmlands and quiet scenery. From Bridgewater we continue over to Mt. Crawford, site of the famous Green Valley Book Fair, a huge book outlet with wholesale-to-everyone prices. The only catch is that it's only open in two-week periods during certain times of the year, and unfortunately we weren't lucky enough to pass through when it was. Next summer times it's open will be July 3-18 and August 21-Sept. 6.

We were lucky enough though to have both the Cross Keys Vineyards and White Oak Lavender Farm open. Also in Mt. Crawford, you can stop at Cross Keys simply for the view or enjoy their tasting room and sit on their terrace to snack on some local homemade cheeses with your wine. Heading back we continue north on Cross Keys Road and not far off discover White Oak Lavender Farm, whose U-pick farm offers homemade lavender goods and another opportunity to just sit and take in the scenery.

At our ride's end, returning to Harrisonburg from the south gives us the perfect opportunity to pedal through the JMU campus and pass the campus's arboretum—though bikes aren't allowed through it's worth a stop to enjoy the gardens and trails.

At the conclusion of my first-ever cue-less (by choice!) ride, I'm again impressed by how easy it is to navigate and connect the various points of interest. As Shenandoah Bicycle's Jenkins says, "You might get a little lost, but you're going to have a good ride" and he confirms my terrain discovery adding, "it's rolling, but not overly mountainous for road riding." It's very important to note, however, that this pertains only to road riding.

Off-Road Alternatives



Harrisonburg offers fantastic mountain bike opportunities with Massanutten and the biggest mountains on the east coast at its doorstep, but Jenkins notes that mountain bikers are often surprised at just how challenging the terrain is. He says that for mountain bikers, "it takes a little more information to have a good ride. The trails can be challenging to negotiate and the trails change seasonally," which is why an accurate route is necessary.

Those wanting an introductory taste of what the area has to offer, along with the area's only beginning trails, can visit the Rocktown Trails at Hillandale Park.

Advanced mountain bikers will be lured by Massanutten, but be aware that the popular Western Slope is private property and you must have a trail pass. Owners and guests of the resort have automatic

'BURG continued on p.8

'BURG continued from p.7

access, but non-resort guests can get an annual pass by joining SVBC. Shenandoah Mountain Touring also offers other area mountain biking opportunities.

While Hall and Jenkins are referring to the terrain when speaking of Harrisonburg as being the “sweet spot” of the valley, it’s also an apt description of the area. As “a city with a small-town feel” Harrisonburg residents clearly take pride in what they have created. As Hall says, “What brings people here together is the quality of life. Different groups import different passions, but that’s one thing they agree on. It’s a laid back area, but the resources make it a special place.”

Upcoming Events:

- Valley 4th (July 3)—Celebrate independence day with a parade and fireworks display
- Shenandoah Valley Bike Festival (July 31)—ourcommunityplace.org/bikefest/
- Rockingham County Fair (August 16-21)—www.rockinghamcountyfair.com
- Shenandoah Valley Century (September 12)—www.svbcoalition.org/events/century
- International Festival (Sept. 25)—www.harrisonburg-international-festival.org

Information/Places of Interest:



- Harrisonburg Tourism/Visitor Center—www.harrisonburgtourism.com / 540-432-8935
- Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition—www.svbcoalition.org
- Bike the Valley—www.bikethevalley.org
- Shenandoah Bicycle Company—www.shenandoahbicycle.com / 540-437-9000
- Shenandoah Mountain Touring—www.mtntouring.com / 540-434-2087
- Massanutten Resort—www.massresort.com / 540-289-4957
- Rocktown Trails—www.harrisonburgva.gov/index.php?id=1105
- Virginia Quilt Museum—www.vaquiltmuseum.org / 540-433-3818
- Harrisonburg Children’s Museum—www.hcmuseum.org / 540-442-8900
- Harrisonburg Farmers Market—www.harrisonburgfarmersmarket.com
- Downtown Walking Tours—www.discoverdowntown.com / 540-908-3496
- First Fridays Downtown—www.valleyarts.org / 540-801-8779
- Dayton Farmer’s Market—www.daytonfarmersmarket.com
- Green Valley Book Fair—www.gvbookfair.com / 800-385-0099



- Cross Keys Vineyard—www.crosskeysvineyards.com / 540-234-0505
- White Oak Lavender Farm—www.whiteoaklavender.com / 540-421-6345

Places to Stay:

- By the Side of the Road—www.ByTheSideofTheRoad.com / 540-801-0430
- The Joshua Wilton House—www.joshuawilton.com / 540-434-4464
- Old Massanutten Lodge—www.OldMassanuttenLodge.com / 540-269-8800
- Grandma’s Cottage—www.GrandmasCottageBB.com / 540-249-8113



- The Stonewall Jackson Inn—www.stonewalljacksoninn.com / 540-433-8233