



A BICYCLING ESCAPE ALONG THE HUDSON

Confronting challenges of a different kind

BY CAREY LONDON

After completing a lofty goal to bike north through New York State and go fishing, Colin Ambrose capped off this personal victory by catching a 33-inch northern pike in the Adirondacks, in the rain. It was perfect, a satisfaction that can only be achieved after meeting a serious challenge. And he would encounter many before this adventure was even an idea.

On March 12, 2020, as the pandemic grinded the world to a halt, Ambrose realized everything about his business was about to change. The owner of Estia's Little Kitchen, a popular roadside cafe on the Sag Harbor-Bridgehampton Turnpike, knew he would have to pivot immediately to adapt.

With no clear government directives yet on how to proceed, the Estia's staff quarantined at home for five days and returned to prep an edited menu for take-out only. They rolled a coffee cart out to the front for drive-through pick-up and reopened their doors.

"The weekend that followed opened our eyes to what lay ahead," said Ambrose. "The phone started ringing at 8 a.m., we opened at 10 a.m." Each member of the team played a critical role in the success of this new operation. For Ambrose, it was returning to the "front lines," answering the phone and taking orders. "We all had our place in the Covid Tsunami."

By early May, it was announced that outdoor dining would soon be allowed, and Estia's fashioned their windows for order and pick-up. They went from running four days a week to six. "I sat at the window...taking orders, one through the window from a masked guest, the next from the phone," he said. "It didn't slow down until the word came that we could bring guests back inside in February [2021]."



After months of doing the pandemic hustle, Ambrose needed to reboot. In normal times, this avid fisherman would have been able to travel around the country to fish through his side project, American Rivers Tour — created to give exposure to cuisine and culture across the country while filling his need for adventure. Not surprisingly, the pandemic muted that option last year.

Respecting COVID-19 restrictions, Ambrose began plotting: To avoid having to quarantine, his trip would take place in his home state of New York. Rivers were mandatory, since fishing was key. It would have to challenge him physically to undo almost a year of sitting taking food orders, and it would need to be completed before Estia's kicked back into high gear for the summer season.

He remembered hearing about the Empire State Trail, a connection of trails, some new and some pre-existing, designed for cyclists, runners and hikers. Proposed by Governor Andrew Cuomo and opened in December 2020, it stretches from Manhattan to the Canadian border, as well as from Buffalo to Albany.

An idea was hatched: bike from Manhattan



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to Rouses Point, near the Canadian border, with occasional stops to go fishing. He initially mapped out his route on a roll of butcher paper and decided to go once a week, starting where he left off the week prior.

Ambrose purchased a specialized Diverge gravel bike and with nearly everything in place, the aptly named Hudson River Ride was born. Just one small detail needed tending to — he had never been on a bike trip before and his riding experience was somewhat limited. This would be confirmed later on by friend and occasional Hudson River Riding partner Charlie Wittingham. “It was his first-time riding because he doesn’t know to stay in your seat when you get to big hills,” he said, laughing.

With a few practice rides to Montauk under his belt, and mostly undeterred by his novice cycling status, Mr. Ambrose set out on his own on March 2. He drove his pick-up truck from the East End of Long Island to the southern tip of Manhattan, parked and hopped on his bike.

His journey commenced with some shocks of adrenaline, as he navigated around pedestrians, joggers, harrowing city traffic and large construction projects. But safely outside of city limits, a peaceful ride set in, and a few hours later, he rolled into his first official stop, the village of Ardsley. There he enjoyed a much-needed hearty meal at a former colleague’s restaurant, *Linizio*. “It was a perfect first ride for me,” said Ambrose.

Cameraman Bill Moulton documented the Manhattan portion of the ride while on a *Citibike*, but he later picked up Ambrose by car in Ardsley, depositing him back at his truck in the city. Over the next two months, the trip would be a patchwork of these travel arrangements. Friends would join him on the trail for

several miles and then circle back to where they parked their vehicles in order to scoop him up at the next town he reached. When companions were unavailable, Ambrose would bike both directions himself, sometimes staying overnight at a hotel.

“When he called me to go on this bike ride, I said, ‘sure let’s go,’ because our friendship has been nothing but fun,” said Wittingham, an experienced cyclist who lives in Hudson. “Truthfully, the first day we rode together was really wonderful because we’ve been friends for a long, long time, but we hadn’t seen each other in years,” he added. “It was just the nicest way to reconnect with an old friend.”

“I hadn’t ridden out of my driveway on a bike in 30 years,” chuckled Michael Cinque, another long-time friend and owner of *Amagansett Wines & Spirits*. Despite his lack of experience, Cinque flew up from Palm Beach where he was vacationing to Albany, where Ambrose picked him up, bike gear in tow. “The trail is spectacular,” said Cinque. “The scenery is great. You go from one county to the other, and you certainly see the changes.”

Every Tuesday, from March 2 to April 28, Ambrose rode between 10 and 30 miles a day. He peddled over bridges and through snow patches, past farm fields and horse pastures, alongside canals and through the woods.

Dutifully marching north, he visited charming college towns and rural communities, met chefs, connected with business owners and befriended other trail visitors, including two skateboarders who joined him for a mile. He got lost (several times), fell (once) and fished (three times) — on the Putnam river for native rainbow trout, the Salmon river for brown trout, and the Little Ausable river for large-mouth bass

and northern pike.

After almost two months and an estimated 340 miles of cycling, Ambrose made it to his last destination.

Remarkably, it rained only once, in the last five minutes as he rode into Rouses Point. It poured as he embarked on a final fishing trip for northern pike, “a fish likely to be on the prowl



during a storm,” he wrote on his blog, *Americanriverstour.com*. That successful expedition completed his journey.

“If you ask me how I feel, the answer would be fulfilled,” Ambrose reflected. “I feel healthier, I’ve learned to clear my mind and find happiness moving more slowly. And ultimately, I feel ready for the next adventure.”

He hopes his experience inspires other cyclists, novice and expert alike, to explore the Empire State Trail. He is also working on a short film about the trail, which is expected to be finished in July.