

Velo Vision Sample Article

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I hope you enjoy the read.



Peter Eland
Editor and Publisher,
Velo Vision

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VELO VISION AND VELO-VISION
We weren't first with the name. *Velo-Vision* (note the hyphen) is a progressive HPV-friendly bike shop in Körten, near Bergisch-Gladbach, Germany, who also make their own recumbents. *Velo Vision* magazine is working in friendly harmony with *Velo-Vision* in Germany.

Velo Vision is printed on paper produced from sustainable forests to Nordic Swan standards.



COVER PHOTOGRAPH: Riding the Esprit. Photo by Peter Eland.

OPPOSITE: No fare dodging for *Velo Vision*! Waiting for a train, Tikit at the ready (sorry!) at Berwick-upon-Tweed station. Photo by Peter Eland.

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BUILDING THE FUTURE

Ample proof this issue, if any were needed, that the instinct for innovation is as strong as ever in the cycling world. We have clever, novel and functional solutions in all of our test bikes and accessories, particularly perhaps the Bike Friday Tikit with its ingenious cable-actuated folding system.

Then there are the reader contributions: people who, having come up with an idea, haven't just talked the talk, they've actually gone and built bikes to put their concept into practice. And then boldly shared the

details with us, for the feedback of fellow cyclists and designers. Each stage of the process requires some determination, some get-up-and-go, some skill and a certain bravery, and for this alone they deserve our congratulations and thanks.

Whether the ideas 'catch on' or not, we're all richer for the experience. It's a privilege that so many innovative designers have chosen *Velo Vision* as the forum to share their ideas, and we'll keep on doing our best to do them justice.

Peter Eland



of Island work life since the place became a summer destination – for decades, maybe a century. There are at least a dozen of them working each summer. I never was an official porter but I filled in.

Dock porters aren't marginalized like urban bike messengers. Because they're so visible and because they haul such enormous loads, with such well-dressed panache, they are socially and financially well rewarded. Dock porters just might be the hardest-working, highest-paid bike-workers in America. And the most popular! It's a small town, but a busy one. There is even a dock porter ball at the end of each summer (where a King is crowned).

But search the web for dock porter bikes and Mackinac Island bike culture, and you'll only get a couple hits. Yet this scene is a magnificent, neglected part of work-bike culture. I hope this report helps to gain them some more awareness and respect.

CHANGING TIMES

I stopped by the Island last summer, as a rest-stop on a solo sea-kayaking tour. I spent a couple hours taking these photos.

The dock porter scene has changed in interesting ways over the years. When I was on the Island in the early '80s the porters were near a peak. Then they got carried away. They are paid mostly in tips. And the more awesomely they can transport a family's luggage the bigger tip they get. That means: get it all in one front-basket load! So bikes were



ABOVE: Dock porters aren't the only folks who ride. This fellow rides a bike that's as old as he is – both circa 1958. The front basket is pretty much the rule for Island bikes.

LEFT: Big cargo. Looking good! This is a proud load. And clearly a proud porter. He's only missing the side-hanging luggage.

souped-up and loads got bigger and bigger. There was also a lot of good-humored rivalry. Who's the toughest, who can ride the biggest load? Inevitably, there were some collisions with tourists, called 'fudgies' by the workers (the Island is also famous for its fudge). This brought on restrictions: no more handlebar-extensions, and so on. But load sizes keep creeping back up.

During the big-load heyday Lee Finkel, the Schwinn shop guy who oversaw many of the bike modifications, made two series, the 250 and the 500, based on intended load sizes. Yes, some bikes were made to carry 500-pound loads – around 220 kg for you metric types. An amazing 750 pounds (330 kg) was the record, carried only in a front basket!

At the peak of one crazy era, porters used 'launchers' – guys who held them up and gave them a push when



A classic big load. Note the luggage hanging from the basket sides.

Typical street scene. Tourists riding rental bikes, often on around-the-island tours. An array of Island bikes line the curb. Note the carpet-covered plywood base in the basket of the first bike.



PEDAL PORTERS

Jeff Potter revisits childhood haunts as he encounters the load-lugging dock porter bikes and car-free cycling culture of Mackinac Island, Michigan, USA.

TOP: Lee Finkel is 'The Man'. Nowadays he manages the hardware store. He used to run the local Schwinn bicycle shop and organise the end-of-summer dock porter bike relay race. He's seen here modelling with a stellar example of the dock porter bike. Back in the day Lee crafted '250' and '500' series bikes for, you guessed it, 250 and 500 pound loads (110 or 220 kg!). Think about riding with that load on the front of these bikes. Handlebars were extended, cross-braced and filled with rebar. This vintage Schwinn has a two-speed kickback hub gear.

One of the major influences on my life was when, as a teenager, I worked a summer on Mackinac Island, Michigan. It's a historic site, featuring a restored fort and plenty of on-going archaeology. It's also a tourist destination for everyday folk and Victorian cottage (mansion) owners.

It's 8.3 miles around and located in the middle of the Straits of Mackinac, near the nexus of three of North America's five Great Lakes, a major trading location since pre-history. Cars aren't allowed. So bikes rule. And horses.

And by the way, the island, bridge and straits are spelled Mackinac but the onshore city is spelled Mackinaw. They're all pronounced "-aw".

DOCK PORTERS

It was in 1981 that I first discovered the kings of the Island – the bicycle dock porters. They haul luggage from the ferries to the hotels, often carrying hundreds of pounds at a time, all in the huge baskets of their one-speed Schwinns. Right down the center of Main Street. All day long. For huge tips.

The bicycle dock porter has been a significant fixture



Big trailers are frequently used in addition to the front basket. What a fine load!

A street-sweeper's trike.



their load was ready. Some riders couldn't see beyond their loads. 'Front-runners' cleared the road ahead for porters who felt they didn't have enough good karma.

For decades, the porters had an end-of-summer relay race around the Island between teams from the various hotels and other businesses. Regular racing bikes were used. I joined the Schwinn shop team for my first ever bike race. Most of the porters in my day did a few feisty laps of the Island on race bikes each night in the dark after work. But the bike race is now extinct. There was always some amount of conflict with town officials. I do hope that at least some 'alley cat' informal racing survives.

The Schwinn 'Heavy Duty' was the usual basis for a dock porter bike. Local mechanics added handlebar cross-braces and extensions, with rebar (the metal rod used in reinforced concrete) added for strength. The baskets are huge, with plywood and outdoor carpet added to the bottom, and with heavy duty support struts. Bungie cords do the strapping.

Luggage is hung down from all sides of the baskets, then stacked in the basket and against the tall handlebars. Heavy-duty trailers are now often used in addition to baskets.

Dock Porter – the film!

One of the other references to the dock porter bike which I unearthed on the internet is worth mentioning. I was surprised to find that Dave McVeigh, an old dock porter, is now a Hollywood filmmaker. The production company he runs with his brother has a script and a trailer for (drum roll) 'The Dock Porter'!

It's to be a coming-of-age romance movie in the spirit of 'Breaking Away'. The Island and its bikes will make charming supporting actors. They plan to shoot next summer. McVeigh is an insider in terms of both Hollywood and bike culture, so let's keep our fingers crossed for a great new bike movie!

Check it out at wardance.biz/dock_porter.html

BELOW: OK, now here we're getting to a bigger load...



In general a very high seat position is employed. Mountain bike bar-ends are sometimes added to give an extra hand position. One pedals on tippy-toes to get maximum power on these short but intense journeys. A delivery is a mile at most.

CYCLE CULTURE

Island bike culture isn't just about the porters. Every local there has an 'Island bike' – this is any stout bike with a big front basket, usually a single-speed. You see hundreds of Island bikes each day. Every other kind of bike is to be seen as well: folders, recumbents, you name it.

There aren't any helmet or light laws. Locals back in my day never used lights when riding at night. They said (really!) that they trusted the Island to guide them: what you did was look up and watch the tree-line against the pitch-black night sky. It's a very quiet place at night, especially on the densely-wooded interior roads. You could hear other riders or horses coming. I still saw hardly any lights on bikes on this last visit.

Occasionally, bike activists have had to fight off attempts to relax the motorless rule. Electric-assist bikes were a slippery slope headed toward golf carts, which might have resulted in electric vehicles hauling luggage and the end of the porter bike and an all-too-familiar kind of traffic jam on Main Street. But for now, the bikes just keep on winning.

Jeff Potter

Jeff Potter publishes *OutYourBackDoor.com*, a resource for outdoor adventure and media.

BLIND BICYCLING

Journalist Joe Charlaff goes for a ride with Tandem Israel, which brings sighted and blind or partially-sighted riders together for cycle rides around Jerusalem...

Earlier this year forty cyclists gathered in Jerusalem to embark on a three day ride over mountainous terrain near the coastal resort town of Eilat. This would not be particularly unusual – except that twenty of the cyclists are blind.

The driving force behind this event is a young woman, Orli Tal, a 45 year old computer programmer. Tal, an enthusiastic cyclist, is blind. Ten years ago she discovered the existence of an organisation called 'Etgarim' ('Challenges' in Hebrew), a non-profit organisation which encourages and assists disabled people to practice outdoor sport. This included cycling but she was dissatisfied with the pace of activity and was eager to ride more frequently.

So seven years ago she founded a Jerusalem-based cycling group, 'Tandem Israel', after breaking away from Etgarim. Tal had no difficulty in persuading other cycling members of Etgarim to join her.

"Gradually, the group came together: we were simply friends sharing the same 'bicycle fever'. Some were previously members of the other group and the rest were personal acquaintances. The small group has gradually grown as people hear about us by word of mouth," said Tal.

In the beginning Etgarim supplied the bicycles but Tal encouraged many riders to buy their own tandem bicycles, which cost 10 000 – 25000 shekels (approx £1000 to £3000). She was also instrumental in organising transport for the bicycles to the various ride venues, persuading truck owners to offer their services on a voluntary basis.

The big 40-rider event near Eilat was to celebrate ten years since the establishment of the group, who ride regularly once a month. Each blind person is paired with a sighted pilot.

One of Tandem Israel members, Inbal Dror, a graduate of the Hebrew University, is also a computer programmer and lost her eyesight in a road accident fifteen years ago. Since joining Tandem Israel she has made lots of friends and also met her husband. "These rides allow me to experience a feeling of freedom, and I can feel nature around me" said Dror.

RIGHT: Tandem Israel riders in the desert near Eilat, during an event celebrating their group's tenth anniversary.



Debbie Pulick, one of the sighted riders, said that being a front rider is strenuous and requires them to be in good physical shape, as many of the routes are not easy.

"The front rider has to be a confident and experienced rider since he or she steers the bike, and a mistake could cause the bike to crash. As well as having this responsibility for the safety of the blind partner, the pilot also functions as his or her eyes.



I describe the view, the colours of the flowers and so on. It's intense but enjoyable and rewarding work, and I feel that however much I contribute to this group, I get twice as much in return." said Debbie.

On a misty morning at 7 AM, the group meet in Jerusalem, eager to go. The riders are transported by bus, and the bikes by truck, down to Kibbutz Yotvata, located in the desert roughly forty kilometres north of Eilat. From there they cycled for two hours on rough mountain tracks down to Kibbutz Elifaz, where they would stay for the next few nights. The mood was good, with everyone chatting along the way, catching up with each other's news since their last meeting, and each evening there was a barbeque with much merriment.

Schachar Solar, 35, an environmental planner, has been riding regularly for ten years with the group as one of the seeing eyes or pilots. Solar told me that at first he was somewhat awed by the way the blind people had overcome their disability, but as time went by he got used to them, and now related to them just as to any other riders.

"It's an amazing group," he said. "They have lost their most important sense, yet are full of life and more active than many people I know. It has given me a great perspective on my own life's challenges."

Joe Charlaff

Tandem Israel: see www.tandemisrael.org