

Tailwinds by the Great Lake

Momentum is building in Southern Ontario's Lambton County, a growing cycling destination



THE SCENE
48 HOURS

by **Christina Palassio**

We started the day with a short ride from my pal Garrett's place in Camlachie along Old Lakeshore Road to the starting line at Mike Weir Park. I took my phone out to take a team selfie and my screen filled with the sun rising neon orange and pink above Lake Huron. To my right, a hungry heron waded for breakfast and then took flight—portents of a great ride ahead.

This past August, we assembled in Sarnia, Ont., about 100 km northeast of Windsor, for the Bluewater International Granfondo (BIG), along with 1,000 riders who signed up for the seventh instalment of the event. At the starting line, a few hundred cleated cyclists downed coffees. A few "hustles" were there—the Toronto Hustle and the Husky Hustle—along with a bunch of other clubs, and some junior cyclists from Uganda who had flown in to ride the event.

The fondo's 150-km route shot east from Mike Weir Park along flat roads before climbing north up to the Parkhill and Arkona farmlands—the hilliest parts of the region—and then winding back west toward the start line. (There were also 30-, 50- and 100-km options.) This area is notorious for strong headwinds, but we were hoping for friendly breezes so we could make good on the timed sections and beat the six-hour cut-off time.

BIG is Lambton County's largest and longest-running cycling event, founded by three area cyclists. "We were having coffee one day, and we thought it would be a good idea to have a ride in our area," says Ken MacAlpine, one of the founders, along with John Palumbo and Kathy Johnson. "We'd participated in different ones, both in Europe and in Canada. We thought the roads in Lambton County, through the orchards and along Lake Huron, were as good as anything else we'd seen."

The gran fondo has doubled in attendance since it started, and attracts riders from all over Ontario and beyond. It has also spawned a whole bunch of cycling events in the city, including weekly training rides, a learn-to-bike training program for youth and rides by Cycling Without Age, a program that pairs elderly residents with cyclists for ride-alongs. The BIG community also acts as a de facto cycling advocacy group, pushing for

Photo: Courtesy Bluewater Gran Fondo



LEFT
Bluewater
Gran Fondo

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more opportunities and infrastructure for riders. For MacAlpine, it's all about building a community around cycling and encouraging people to take up an active lifestyle in an automobile-forward city.

For a car-focused place, Sarnia offers some pretty good recreational cycling options. Tourism Sarnia-Lambton has mapped a 262-km itinerary through Lambton County with paved and unpaved options. "It's a very nice, peaceful environment to cycle compared with some of the more metropolitan areas in Ontario," MacAlpine says of the riding in the area. "You'll see farmers planting the fields, and a little later the corn's coming out, and a little while later they're harvesting the corn. It's nice to see the growing season and the farmers at work. It's a healthy, happy environment."

The city is bordered by Lake Huron to the north, and the St. Clair River and the U.S. to the west. To travel east-west, many cyclists use the Howard Watson Nature Trail, a 16-km rail trail that runs parallel to Lakeshore Road from Camlachie in the east to downtown Sarnia. It's a well-maintained and well-loved multi-use trail that makes getting around town—or getting in a quick ride—easy.

There's also the St. Clair Parkway route, which I picked up in Corunna, just south of Sarnia, on a ride with MacAlpine and Johnson. We rode south through Sombra to Seager Park and back, a 25-km out-and-back warm-up for the next day's 150-km event. It's a straightforward route with fairly wide shoulders and nice views of the river and Michigan on the other side. You can tack on an extra 75 km by heading south to Walpole Island, a First Nations community that's home to 2,000 Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Ottawa residents.

To get to the river route from downtown, you have to pass through Sarnia's refinery sector, home to belching smokestacks and many pickup trucks per square kilometre. Petrochemical refining has powered Sarnia's economy since its founding in the 1830s. The city was the site of North America's first commercial oil well, established after the resource was found in Oil Springs, to the southeast, in 1857. And it's still a big industry. Enbridge's Canadian Mainline System, built in 1950, runs from Edmonton to Superior, Wisc. Line 5, which connects Superior to Sarnia, transports 86 million litres of crude oil and natural gas liquids every day.

Car culture and the growing cycling community in Sarnia don't always get along. Both MacAlpine and my pal Garrett warned me of aggressive drivers with a cars-rule mindset. It's an approach that the nuSarnia Foundation is trying to change. The new non-profit is a proponent of the 8 80 Cities philosophy—that is, prioritizing health, safe streets and public spaces—and is trying to create support for active transportation across the city. "We identified that there's a large segment of our population that's curious or eager to be able to cycle, but is not quite there yet because of the lack of safe infrastructure," says executive director Tristan Bassett, who rode BIG's 30-km route option on a fixie with her mom.

The nuSarnia's founding coincided with the city's work on an Active Transportation Master Plan (ATMP). Sarnia hired Montreal/U.K.-based Momentum Transport Consultancy to develop the plan, and brought in consultants from the Dutch Cycling Embassy to provide an international best-practices lens.

"We have a Great Lake canvas that can become a cycling city. It's relatively flat, and it's a relatively small city. I think we have the potential to put ourselves on the map as a leader in active transportation," says Bassett of her big vision for Sarnia. She hopes the ATMP will start by prioritizing filling network gaps to make existing infrastructure more accessible. "There should be way more people riding their bikes to get to and from places as opposed to their F-150s."

A nice ride with not too much traffic starts in Camlachie and runs west along Old Lakeshore Road to Point Edward and the Blue Water Bridge. On Michigan Avenue, you pass the Great Lakes Bicycle Company, a roomy shop with a minimalist vibe co-owned by Andrew Colborne. Colborne is a longtime cyclist from Saskatoon by way of Oakville, Ont. He and his business partner opened the shop at the start of the pandemic during the height of the bike



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shortages. "We looked at each other and went, 'Did we make a terrible mistake?'"

The shop made it and has become a new hub for the Sarnia cycling community. "The store is meant to start a conversation. It allows us to engage with the people who come in. I think they really appreciate that because often you come into a bike shop and it's a big dude-bro convention. People get turned off by that, including me. We take great pains to keep it super chill and talk to everybody and be cool with everybody," Colborne says.

His take on cycling in Sarnia goes like this: "If you're a road cyclist and you like to go fast in a straight line, it's great. There's a lot of out-and-backs. The roads are more or less really good. And there are lots of places to ride. It's really easy to get into road cycling and even gravel as well. There's so many farm country roads."

Colborne's favourite out-and-back starts in Camlachie and heads north along Lakeshore Road for 50 or so kilometres to Grand Bend and a coffee stop. "It's a super fun ride because the road's really nice, there's a nice paved shoulder, and you basically just kinda skirt along the lake the whole way up. It's one of the best ones out there," he says.

The BIG 150-km route we tackled knitted together a few of the area's greatest hits into a really fun half-day adventure. We burned off the starting line trying to keep up with the front peloton, but fell off about 20 km in when the headwinds picked up. We battled past wind turbines, fruit orchards, farm fields, rows and rows of gladioli and a few hamlets. In Arkona, we started to hit rollers, but nothing topping seven per cent. We fuelled at the turnaround point and then sailed all the way back to the finish pushed by a sweet tailwind. We arrived at the beer stand just before the rain started coming down, and then ended the day with a post-ride dip in Lake Huron and a barbecue—one of those days when you feel like life is treating you pretty well.

Details

When to go

Summer and fall are the best times weather-wise. BIG (bigf.ca) time (early August) is the best time if you want to get a sense of what the cycling community is all about.

How to get there

Easiest access is by car. Sarnia is a three-hour drive from Toronto. The train is also an option, though the schedule is limited. Frustratingly, Via Rail is not currently allowing bikes on trains in the Quebec City–Windsor corridor.

Where to stay

Sarnia has all the usual options for chain hotels and AirBnb offerings. Hotels are mostly located downtown and in Point Edward.

Where to eat and drink

The locals swear by Giresi's pizza (giresispizza.com). We ate a lot of it, some of it at Maud's Variety (maudsvariety.ca), a bar and music venue in Mitton Village with a large selection of craft beers and a big parking-lot patio. Refined Fool Brewing Co. (refinedfool.com) gives you beer and burgers at two locations. Blackwater Coffee (blackwatercoffee.ca) serves up caffeine and nice baked goods downtown. Other food and drink options include Los Puntos Cantina (lospuntoscantina.com), Greens Organic Café (greenscafe.ca) and Alternate Grounds Dockside (agdockside.ca).

What to do off the bike

Want to walk? There's Waterfront Park or, a bit farther out, Highland Glen Park or the Pinery Provincial Park. Want to swim? There's Canatara Beach. For art, there's the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery and the Lawrence House Centre for the Arts. Or you can try your luck at the Starlight Casino. 🍀

