

Riding the Galloping Goose, Lochside

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It's not often that I bike purely for the enjoyment of it, but last week I went on a long-awaited and short cycling trip on Vancouver Island with my husband.

I had heard much about the famous Galloping Goose Trail between Victoria and Sooke, and its somewhat less famous cousin, the Lochside Trail between Schwartz Bay and Victoria.

Both trails are decommissioned railway tracks. It was a brilliant idea to turn these tracks into trails, used not only by cyclists, but also by pedestrians and horses.

Closer to Victoria, these trails are well used, at times to the point of becoming somewhat congested, and the trails also draw cycle touring enthusiasts from around the world.

We could only stay for two nights and - being of the slower, non-Lycra, sit-up type cyclists - couldn't possibly do everything we wanted to do, which was to cycle both the Goose and the Lochside, as well as explore Victoria.

My last trip to Vancouver Island was about 24 years ago, and I may have to wait for another quarter century before I get to go again. So we decided to do a bit of everything.

The traffic, even in early October, was much busier than I expected, and I realized that outside of its compact downtown, Victoria is actually quite a sprawling city. After arriving in our hotel in Victoria, we tried biking around downtown a bit, but the traffic was a bit too busy and we realized it was better to explore the beautiful, lively downtown on foot, if you don't know your way around and need to stop frequently to look at the map.

Since we still had a few hours of daylight left, we did a little more cycling, heading down Dallas Road, which runs all along the shoreline from downtown Victoria going east. It was all on-road cycling, but the traffic was fine and the views across the Juan de Fuca Strait were stunning.

This coastal scenic bike route continues to Saanich, but we only biked up to Oak Bay Marina, where we sat on a bench in the park for a while to refuel and soak up some more sun before we headed back.

On the way back we stopped at the Fisherman's Wharf and admired the lovely floating homes, many with interesting, colourful and artistic decorations.

The next day we decided to try the Galloping Goose towards Sooke. After some very confusing and poorly signed detours for cyclists due to construction, we found the trail and were on our way on a beautiful wide and well-used car-free trail, heading north for several kilometers to where the trail forks, with the 55-kilometre-long Galloping Goose to the west, and the 30 km Lochside Trail to the north.

We followed the Goose for about half an hour or so. It was off-road, and well away from the highway. But we realized, looking at the map, that we would be cycling along the highway for a while longer, so we went back and got on to the Lochside Trail instead.

We followed this pleasant, quiet trail through forests, across bridges and past lakes for about an hour or so and reluctantly turned back. The rest of this easy, family friendly bike trail will have to be explored next time.

We drove to our hotel in Sooke, which overlooked Sooke Harbour. It's surprising that Sooke is not exactly catering to cyclists, with such a famous cycling trail drawing many cycling tourists to this area. Our hotel did not have bike parking. Since it was pretty quiet, they allowed us to park our bikes in the bar beside the lobby.

The roads in Sooke didn't seem bike friendly and I don't remember seeing any bikes.

The next morning we drove up to the Sooke Pot Holes – a popular swimming destination in summer - and started biking the Goose from there.

We biked about 15 kms down the trail towards Victoria.

I was surprised and pleased that the trail was mostly flat, and even though it was unpaved, it was well packed and smooth. Much of the trail passes through forests, and some sections of the trail along the coast line, high up on a cliff, offer beautiful vistas of the Sooke Basin.

Even though the town of Sooke does not seem too interested in attracting cycle tourists, there are some nice bed and breakfasts along the Galloping Goose that do, which makes it easy to break up the trip in shorter sections.

High quality trails like the Galloping Goose and the Lochside are great assets for a community and for a region. Not only for daily enjoyment and practical use by local residents and to enable a healthy lifestyle, but also for cycle tourism.

Cycle tourism can bring huge revenues. Take as an example Quebec's Route Verte, ranked first among Top 10 bike routes on the planet by the National Geographic travel guide, Journeys of a Lifetime: 500 of the World's Greatest Trips.

Cyclists on Route Verte spent a total of \$134 million in 2007 alone (of which over \$38 million ended up in provincial coffers), which helps support 2,861 jobs.

The total investment in this bike route network of more than 4,000 km throughout the province was \$132 million. A quick calculation shows that payback time is 3.5 years, just from cyclists' spending alone.

Isn't that a great way to invest tax payers' dollars?

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