

Cycling from Tour de France to Litchfield County

By John McKenna
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World-class bicycle mechanic plans local tour business

LITCHFIELD — Sal Lilienthal has traveled the globe during his career as a mechanic for international cycling teams, with Europe, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand and Canada among the places he has visited.

But Lilienthal, a Kent resident, didn't live the life of a tourist during his travels.

Most of his time was spent changing bicycle tires, adjusting bike saddles, fine-tuning gears and doing other tasks that usually get hands covered with grease. He was one of the many people in the background at events like the Tour de France, the Tour of Spain and other races on the world cup circuit.

"I've had a chance to go everywhere, but yet I haven't really seen anything," Lilienthal, 31, said. "When you're with a cycling team, you go place to place and don't have time to visit the sights."

Lilienthal plans to change that with the launching of a business venture featuring cycling tours for cyclists of all levels of ability. The Bicycle Tour Co., based in Kent, is the product of Lilienthal's desire to put down his mechanic's wrench, hop on his bicycle and see the sights while guiding tours.

The first tours will be held this summer in the scenic Litchfield Hills. Four three-day trips will feature rides around Lake Waramaug, along the Housatonic River, through Litchfield's historic center and, on the final day, to Kent.

Tours will be held July 10-12 and 24-26, and Aug. 7-9 and 21-23. Participants will be lodged at the Boulders Inn on Lake Waramaug in New Preston during the first and third tours, and at the Birches Inn, also on Lake Waramaug, for the second and fourth tours. The cost is \$550 per person.

"It's going to be cycling at a relaxed pace," said Lilienthal, who will lead the tours. "The most important goal for us is giving people a chance to enjoy the countryside, because this will be a like a vacation for them."

At the end of each day, cyclists will be able to take advantage of massage therapy provided by tour caretakers, or soigneurs as they're known in the business. The soigneurs are directed by Dave Bolch, the 1996 U.S. Olympics team massage therapist

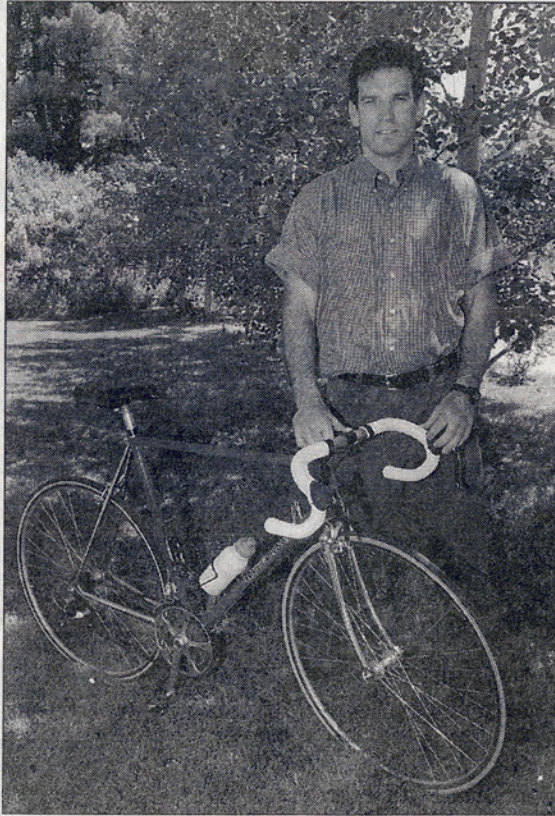
who befriended Lilienthal while they were working for the Saturn cycling team in Europe last year.

In the fall, two seven-day trips will be offered in Spain. They will take participants to the historic cities of Cordoba, Ubeda, Jaen and Grenada. The cost is \$2,150 per person.

The Bicycle Tour Co. is marketing its trips with help from the Litchfield Hills Travel Council in Litchfield, an organization promoting the attractions of Litchfield County. According to the council's director, Janet Serra, Lilienthal's enterprise is a welcome addition to the local tourist trade.

"The area lends itself to cycling with its scenery and we have had an increasing number of people calling us about cycling routes," Serra said. "To have a tour guide of (Lilienthal's) stature is an asset for individuals interested in the activity."

Lilienthal said his company is one of 10 to 15 of its kind in the world. Most companies, however, offer trips that start in one place and end days later in another, giving their participants little time to take in the sights. In Spain, Lilienthal will lead day trips



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Sal Lilienthal of Kent is launching of a business venture featuring cycling tours for cyclists of all levels of ability.

from each location, moving on only after all of the important sights have been visited.

Future trips are in the planning stage, according to Lilienthal, who mentioned a winter trip to the Caribbean and summer excursions to the Berkshires in Massachusetts and to France and Spain.

Lilienthal's interest in cycling was stoked during the summers of the mid-1980s, when he led tours for teenagers.

After graduating from Hobart College in 1988, he worked in several bicycle shops in Vermont, where he learned the mechanic's craft.

He later went on to become a licensed mechanic with the U.S. Cycling Federation, and in 1992 worked with the U.S. national team

that was training in Europe for the 1992 Summer Olympics.

In 1994, Lilienthal joined the Motorola cycling team and spent three years in Belgium working with world-class racers at the Tour de France and Tour of Spain. Last year he served as the team mechanic for Saturn.

Lilienthal said he enjoyed his work as a mechanic, particularly the thrill of seeing the bikes he worked on being ridden in some of the most important races in the world. But the idea of starting a tour company had become intriguing.

"I'd travel to Spain 10 or 15 times a year and see very little of the country because of the job," he said. "This is a way I can finally take advantage of the cultural aspects of the places I go."

For information on the tours, Lilienthal can be reached at (860) 927-1742.

The Bicycle Tour Company
bicycletours.com
1-888-711-KENT