

Bikes, Beer & Chocolate

Pedaling Across the East Side Bridges Offers Lots of Great Brew, Views, and Torres Treats

By Pete Millerman
Special to New York Resident

Beer and chocolate. Sound good? While this rich culinary combination might otherwise spark fantasies of a groggy afternoon, passed out on a comfortable sofa drowsing peacefully through professional golf, it might not bring to mind an energizing bike ride over two bridges and through several Brooklyn and Manhattan neighborhoods. But there's no reason why it shouldn't.

I spent a recent Saturday afternoon riding along on Bike the Big Apple's "Great Brew, View, and Chocolate Tour," an informal, informative, and downright fun expedition that started off on an overcast Upper East Side corner and ultimately brought us over the Brooklyn Bridge as the sun burst through over the Manhattan skyline.

Why not a bicycle tour to experience and explore our town? "The city at its finest as seen through its unique neighborhoods," says Joel Seidenstein,

tour leader and longtime urban biking enthusiast. "That's really what New York's all about. Plus, the speed is just right for exploring."

Seidenstein was the consummate guide, part borscht-belt emcee, part social studies teacher (which he was, by the way, for years), knowledgeable, and radiating real New York attitude and energy. Joel and his partners have



Cycling Suds: Tasteful tour spans the sweet city

been organizing various BTBA tours all over the five boroughs for more than two years, concentrating on city

neighborhoods and attractions somewhat off the path beaten by most tourists and even city residents themselves.

The hitch I signed off on was one of BTBA's newer and more popular jaunts.

Wheeling along at a leisurely pace as five hours flew by, there was not much traffic to contend with, plenty of rest stops, and, of course, the requisite brew, view, and chocolate. Other tours, which change monthly, take riders to Coney Island, Harlem, or even religious shrines and ethnic eateries in the Bronx and Queens.

Our crew of nine assembled at noon at an Upper East Side bike shop, where we were outfitted with bikes and helmets, all in fine shape. (Bikers with their own wheels get a discount on the tour.) Expertise is not an issue for most rides — if you know how to ride a bike, you're in. The spandex set was not heavily represented. A lifetime New Yorker not above acting as a de-facto guide-in-adjunct, I provided a bitter running commentary as we cut through my current digs in Williamsburg. ("There's my apartment," "There's another trendy, overpriced lounge," "There's my ex-girlfriend's car.")

After cruising through the East Village and the Lower East Side, we crossed the new Williamsburg Bridge bike path and debarked in ever-hip Williamsburg, taking in the faux-bohemian ambiance as we hit the Brooklyn Brewery. The borough's sole in-house brewery offers tours, merchandise, and, most refreshingly, cheap samples of their top-notch lagers, stouts, and ales.

After a rest, we headed for the Hasidic south side, which, although fairly subdued on a shabbos afternoon, provided a fascinating glimpse of the shtetl lifestyle for unfamiliar tourists and natives alike. Following the perimeter of the Brooklyn Navy Yard accompanied by Joel's observations, we headed into Vinegar Hill along cobblestone streets, passing the rarely glimpsed Commodore's mansion and down toward the East River.

Presently we encountered the renovated warehouses of the rather unfortunately named DUMBO district (some still know it as Empire Shores or Fulton Landing), where, amid the wafting stench of gentrification, there was a sweeter smell in the air.

We pulled up at the renowned Jacques Torres chocolate shop, where we were greeted by Torres himself, gregarious and ready to take a spin on a bike or pose for a snapshot. The snacks inside were impressive; I chose to wash down the earlier beer with a croissant and hot chocolate, but the options were tasty and numerous. Potential riders might want to bring a snack (fruit or a sandwich) if beer and chocolate aren't sufficient energy food. And don't forget a water bottle either.

Finally, we headed up and over the Brooklyn Bridge, a glorious walk or ride anytime but especially exhilarating in the late afternoon sun. ■

To find out more about Bike the Big Apple, call 201-370-6849 or log on to bikethebignapple.com. The next Great Brew and Chocolate Bike Tour (\$65) will be held on June 14.