

OUTDOORS

It's All Downhill from Here:
Cycling the Mountains to Coast Ride



Take a ride along the Blue Ridge Parkway or through rural Western North Carolina and you are bound to find yourself in the company of cycling enthusiasts. Scenic routes, inviting climate, and natural elevation climbs (followed by welcome downhill descents) draw thousands of riders every year. WNC is a famed cycling mecca and is home to several events.

One of these is the popular Cycle NC Mountains to Coast ride. Being held this year September 27 to October 3, this annual event provides exactly what it has claimed for the past 17 years: a weeklong recreational tour originating in the rolling Appalachians and concluding along the salty shores of coastal North Carolina.

Sponsored by two organizations—NC Amateur Sports and Cycle NC (CNC)—Mountains to Coast has become a coveted cross-state ride with more than a thousand participants gathering each year. It is not a race to the finish, but a leisurely tour with cyclists of all skill levels participating for the pure joy of riding.

In 2014, Waynesville couple Bob and Janet Clark signed up for their first Mountains to Coast ride. CNC's training program suggested riding 65 miles per day to help prepare for the ride beginning that year in Sparta. (The route changes every year to provide a variety of scenery and challenges.)

"There were riders and bicycles of all shapes, ages and design," says Bob. "Everything from ten-thousand-dollar cycles to a fellow riding a one-gear cruiser bike, like the one New Belgium Brewing uses on its logo."

Together, Bob and Janet overcame challenges, enjoyed triumphs, and successfully completed their seven-day journey to Hatteras Village.

"To ride every mile is a physical and mental test. There are always daily rewards, whether it be a wildlife moment, a beautiful scene, a child clapping in encouragement, or a fellow rider's humorous remark," says Bob. "And, yes, there are daily spanks, whether a rain shower, an aching muscle, a 'knew I should have skipped the hot sauce and pickles on that lunch sandwich,' or the wind blowing directly into your face, as if the ride wasn't already tough enough."

Waynesville is the designated starting host town for the ride. Because the route changes annually, cyclists like

to arrive early to enjoy the welcome festivities, including local "warm up" rides. To experience each community along the route is one of the biggest highlights. "Instead of routing cyclists around the main streets, we roll right through town and offer cyclists the opportunity to stop, explore, eat, and spend time to learn about the area," says Ragan Williams, director of CNC.

HERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN EXPECT

The ride lives up to its name: mountainous terrain giving way to rolling hills and on to flatter coastal stretches. This year's highest elevation ascent takes riders to almost 4,500 feet near the Blue Ridge Parkway followed by a downhill traverse through the Pisgah National Forest.

After riding 60 miles the first day, cyclists will camp overnight in Hendersonville, the heart of apple country. Each night, a mini-campground is set up with all the

creature comforts imaginable, including indoor and outdoor campsites, showers, bike mechanics, hearty meals, entertainment, and even on-site masseuses.

Riders continue to their next overnight stop in the Shelby. Four more overnights (Concord, Southern Pines, Lumberton, and Whiteville), and cyclists will cross over the Intracoastal Waterway to Oak Island.

Participants will ride between 60-80 miles per day. Whether you're a novice or a seasoned



cyclist, CNC offers backing throughout the ride. This includes support and gear (SAG) vehicles to provide help on difficult stretches and fully stocked rest stops manned by friendly locals.

Expect to eat like you've never eaten before. Many riders claim the ride is a culinary tour for the taste buds. It is a chance to experience the sights, sounds, and tastes of North Carolina from start to finish. Local food, drink, and entertainment, paired with the camaraderie along the way, are what bring many cyclists back each year.

The route is announced each spring and registration is limited to just over 1,000 riders. You can ride the entire week; but if you're short on time, you can also participate in various segments.

For more about this and other rides throughout the year, visit cnc.ncsports.org. Anna Smathers is a Haywood County native. Besides writing, her passions include hiking, camping, and adventuring throughout the mountains of WNC with her fiancé Jonathan and their dog Patton.