
Taking the Scenic Route: NJ to Mass on a Bike & 8 Ferry Boats

Continued

By Steve Friedlander

Editor's Note: The following is the Day to Day portion of the author's 9 day May 15-23, 2007 trip.

Day 1: Getting to the First Ferry

Hamilton, NJ to Atlantic Highlands, NJ – 39.1 travel miles + 4.3 local miles

The nine day itinerary had been planned around the various ferry routes and schedules. The objective of the first day's ride was to get to a motel located near the several ferry terminals in the Atlantic Highlands area in order to take the next morning's ferry to Manhattan. The weather that day was warm, dry, and sunny, but otherwise an easy day for cycling – flat to gradually rolling hills, with the wind mainly at my back. With only 39 miles to the motel, it was a good day for a warm-up ride, getting accustomed to traveling with loaded panniers on the bike.

By the time I got started late on a Tuesday afternoon, traffic was already building up on Edinburg Rd. (Rt. 535) heading toward Cranbury. I passed through the quaint village of Cranbury, with its stately old white houses lining its shady main street, then headed east through the "active adult" mecca of Monroe township, with development after development of generic look-alike cottages, followed by huge sprawling warehouses interspersed among the farms along Half Acre Road adjacent to the NJ turnpike. Encroaching suburban development has resulted in moderately heavy rush hour traffic as I continued northeast along Old Texas Road.

After two hours of riding. I rolled into the nondescript town of Matawan, where an Italian restaurant beckoned me with an inviting bar facing out on the main street. Because of the hot dry weather, I can't resist ordering a cold draft beer with a pasta dinner. "Only ten more easy miles to go" I tell myself. Passing through Matawan, I found the Henry Hudson trail, an old railway bed that's been converted into a path for biking and hiking. It goes across northern Monmouth County from Matawan to Atlantic Highlands, with plans to add another segment from Matawan south to Freehold.

Even though the pavement is a bit bumpy in spots and there are frequent stops at street crossings, the trail is perfect for a leisurely after dinner cruise, as the leafy pathway makes its way for eight relaxing miles through residential neighborhoods, past ball fields filled with little leaguers and parents, and occasional woodlands – vistas of small town suburbia on a warm late spring evening. The trail leads past a small motel on the adjacent highway, about two miles west of Atlantic Highlands, where I checked in for the night. Since there's still some daylight left in the day, I rode over to Atlantic Highlands to

check out the waterfront, where numerous sport fishing boats are docked, as well as one of the ferries to Manhattan.

When traveling around the state on my recumbent, stopping at diners and occasionally staying at cheap motels, it's easy to get the impression that I'm the only person in the world doing crazy stuff like that. I was thus a bit surprised when the attendant at the motel told me about two other guys, both of them on Social Security, who ride recumbent bikes like mine and regularly stay at the motel during their travels around the Jersey shore. It was to be the first of several interesting stories I heard about people touring on bikes.

Day 2: Welcome to the Pink Motel

Atlantic Highlands to Lindenhurst, LI, NY – 57.1 miles

There are several high speed commuter ferries from the bayshore area of New Jersey to lower Manhattan that depart from four landings located along the strip from Belford to Sandy Hook. After checking out of the motel and grabbing a quick breakfast at a neighboring deli, I figured the next ferry was one leaving from Highlands at eight o'clock. It's a 5.5 mile ride, including three scenic but hilly miles along Ocean Blvd. to the terminal, where hordes of commuters are boarding the ferry that will speed them to their jobs in the Wall Street area. It turns out that I'm not the only one traveling by bike, as one of the commuters takes a folding bike aboard.

The 35 minute cruise into New York harbor past the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island is the high point of the day, an uplifting experience that everyone who lives in the area should enjoy at least once. After getting off the ferry, the next objective is to get across the Brooklyn bridge. I headed north along the eastside bikeway that appears to be heading toward the bridge. But things are never that simple in the Big Apple, as the entrance to the bridge is about six blocks away from the river and all the streets that lead there are one-way in the wrong direction. This results in an unplanned tour of lower Manhattan as I made my way through a maze of sidewalks and cobble stone streets, stopping several times to ask directions until I found the walkway that crosses the bridge.

The walkway is filled with hordes of pedestrians, as well as some bikers, most of them commuting from Brooklyn to jobs in lower Manhattan. A neatly dressed commuter is riding a Segway, and our thumbs go up in unison as we salute each other – sharing a brief moment of solidarity for having the two most outlandish vehicles on the bridge. With the temperature heating up, it's turning into a typical summer day on the streets of the city – the muggy air permeated with the fumes of trucks and busses as heat is reflected from the pavement. A loop around Prospect Park, the Central Park of Brooklyn, offers welcome relief from the heat and the traffic and is well worth the extra mile of riding.

I proceeded through Brooklyn on Ocean Avenue, a pleasant tree-lined residential street, followed by Flatbush Avenue, then along a bike path to the bridge that goes over to Rockaway Beach, part of the NYC borough of Queens. A friendly local cyclist led me to the pathway along the beach, then along residential streets parallel to the beach. Much of the beach is lined with a boardwalk, but the planks are bumpy and make for slow cycling. After thumping along the boardwalk for about a mile, I gave up and headed back to the streets, which are mostly residential and don't have much traffic.

I had originally planned to continue heading east along the beaches of Long Island's south shore, ending up for the day somewhere on Fire Island, but then found out that

bikes are not permitted along the parkway that goes past Jones beach nor on the bridge over to Fire Island. Accordingly, once I got to Long Beach, I headed back to the mainland along busy Austin Blvd, where I stopped at a Subway for lunch. More busy streets through Oceanside and Freeport were followed by a series of pleasant suburban streets that parallel the Sunrise and Montauk highways through Wantagh, Massapequa, Amityville, and into Lindenhurst, where I checked into a cheap motel on the Montauk Highway for the night.

My plan for overnight accommodations was to stay at smaller and older, traditional style motels with exterior entrances to the room, where it would be easy to park my long-wheel base recumbent inside the room next to the bed. It turned out that some of these quaint little old motels can be real dumps, as I discovered at the Lindenhurst motel, with its loud clunky air conditioning, threadbare carpet, and peeling paint. The only thing in the room that wasn't faded were the walls, which were painted a loud screaming pink. "Welcome to the pink motel" I thought as I settled in for the night. The proprietor, a middle-aged oriental man, told me about how his son had recently biked across the entire US, camping out along the way. I was tempted to reply that must have been better than staying at motels such as this one, but managed to keep quiet.

Despite its shortcomings, the motel was near a nice diner, and within walking distance to downtown Lindenhurst, where I visited the local library and checked my e-mail. Before too long, the pink walls of my room began to feel like home.

Day 3: The lure of the Hamptons

Lindenhurst, LI, NY to Southampton, LI, NY – 66.2 travel miles + 12.8 local miles

I continued heading east along a series of straight, relatively flat streets parallel to the Montauk and Sunrise highways, the two major east-west thoroughfares along the south shore of Long Island. More endless suburbia through Babylon, Bayshore, and the Islips with light to moderate traffic on mainly residential streets. It's a perfect day except for intermittent headwinds. The landscape becomes increasingly rural as I continued east along the Montauk Highway, which has shrunk to a two lane highway with decent shoulders, and veered off the highway occasionally onto parallel roads with less traffic.

My introduction to the Hamptons occurred when I turned off the Montauk Highway and headed into the village of Westhampton, where I stopped at a café for lunch after 46 miles. Instead of continuing on the Montauk highway toward Southampton, I made a slight detour onto Dune Rd. which runs along the beach for several miles amidst sand dunes and grandiose beach houses perched on the dunes. The bridge across Shinnecock bay took me back to the mainland and back to the Montauk Highway heading into Southampton, where I checked into a small, cozy motel a few blocks from the center of town. The motel's manager told me how her husband had done a lot bicycle touring in his native Phillipines and pointed to his mountain bike parked outside the motel office.

So what do you do in Southampton after a long day's ride? Well, if you're on a recumbent, you get back on the bike and do some more riding. Southampton, the largest town in the Hamptons, turns out to be a great place for some early evening cruising. After my usual post-ride shower and afternoon nap, I got back on the bike to explore the shoreline, about a mile south of town, and gawk at the many stately mansions that lurk behind high, well-trimmed hedges that line the impeccably manicured streets between downtown and the shore. Together with dinner at a nearby diner and some shopping, I

added nearly 13 more miles to the day's total, making it the highest mileage day of any on the trip.

Day 4: The Inevitable Total Washout

Southampton, LI, NY to Mystic, CT – 38.1 miles

From eastern Long Island, there's an abundance of interesting possibilities for traveling to the islands and seaports of southern New England. From Montauk, at the far end of Long Island's south fork, there are high speed passenger ferries to Block Island, Martha's Vineyard, New London, Ct, and New Bedford, MA. There's a car ferry that goes from Orient Point, at the end of the north fork, to New London. From these points, one can take additional ferries to Port Judith, Newport, and Providence, all in Rhode Island, and to several locations on Cape Cod.

For ferry boat aficionados, a grand tour of the region, for example, could start with the ferry from Orient Point to New London, followed by a ferry from either New London or Port Judith, RI to Block Island, then the Block Island-Newport ferry, and the Newport-Providence ferry. From Providence, it's about a 50 mile bike ride to Boston, where you can catch a ferry to Salem, ride out to Gloucester, and take a ferry back to Boston, then hop on the ferry to Provincetown at the tip of Cape Cod, ride about 60 miles south to Hyannis, and take the ferry to Nantucket, followed by the Nantucket-Martha's Vineyard ferry, the Martha's Vineyard-New Bedford ferry, and return to Long island on the New Bedford-Montauk ferry. The tour would conclude with a ride back to Orient Point via Shelter Island, which requires two additional short ferry crossings. The possibilities for combining bicycle and ferry boat travel in this part of the world are virtually endless.

In any case, I chose to take the ferry from Orient Point to New London, but first there was the matter of rain to deal with. Any journey of a week or more, whether it be biking, hiking, or boating, is bound to have at least one day of rain, one dreary day that's a total washout. So I couldn't really complain about a little precipitation, but I wasn't too pleased with the folks at the national weather service. Sometime between Wednesday evening and Thursday evening the weather forecast for Friday had changed from late afternoon showers to a full-blown northeaster, complete with high winds and unseasonably cold temperatures.

My first instinct was to stay in bed an extra hour, as this was a three ferry day and I didn't have that far to peddle - about 33 miles I guesstimated (which actually turned out to be 38 miles). Because the three ferries run pretty much continuously throughout the day, there was no pressure on me to get to any of the ferries by a certain time. Still, the possibility of spending an extra day in Southampton, where I could visit the local museum, hang out at the public library, and check my e-mail, had a lot more appeal than spending the day out on the roads getting soaked and sprayed by passing cars. But I had been looking forward to spending Saturday in Newport, RI, where a gathering of family and friends was planned and I had a free place to stay.

Were it not for the rain and the chilly temperatures, I suppose it would have been a nice day's ride. The scenery on eastern Long Island can be described as typical east coast rural countryside, a mixture of farms and woodlands. The small seaside towns of Sag Harbor and Greenpoint reminded me of my native New England. The day's ride was divided into four segments by the three ferry crossings: The first two ferries are needed to get from the south shore to the north shore of eastern Long island, which involves

traversing Shelter Island, an island that sits in the middle of the large bay separating the north and south forks of Long Island. There are short ferry crossings at the southern and northern ends of the island.

The next segment consists of several miles along Route 25 to get to Orient Point, where the ferry to Connecticut is located. There was virtually no traffic on this road and no signs for the ferry. After a while I started to wonder if I could have taken a wrong turn somewhere, but the map showed only one road between Greenpoint and Orient Point. There was no other road I could be on, and sure enough, the ferry terminal suddenly appeared, with hundreds of cars lined up to get on board the large vessel.

After landing in New London and crossing the I-95 bridge over to Groton, the ride to Mystic on Rt. 1 was surprisingly hilly. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as I was getting cold and the uphill served to warm me up. Needless to say, I was more than glad to arrive at a Howard Johnson's motel near the I-95 exit for Mystic. With rain continuing for the rest of the day, I passed up the opportunity to explore the quaint bayside village of Mystic or visit the historic Mystic Seaport.

Day 5: Into the Hill Country

Mystic, CT to Newport, RI – 56 miles

The next challenge was getting to Newport, where a weekend gathering of family and friends had been planned. It would be my first contact with familiar faces in five days. Newport is also a fun little city, a mecca for the yachting crowd known for its lively entertainment and extravagant gilded-age mansions. If you ask a local how to get to Newport by bicycle, however, they're likely to respond "You can't get there from heah." Newport is situated on a large island that is connected to the mainland by three bridges. Bikes are not permitted on the Route 138 bridge that approaches Newport from the west.

But there happen to be two ferry boats that go to Newport during the summer season, one from Block Island and another from Providence. The most scenic alternative is to take a ferry from New London or Port Judith, RI to Block Island, spend some time exploring the island, and then catch the late afternoon ferry to Newport. Because the ferry had not started operating for the summer yet, however, I opted for the fast ferry from Providence. (The Block Island ferry starts operating during Memorial Day weekend, while the Providence ferry starts in mid May.) It is also possible to cycle from Providence to Newport, with about half of the 30 mile route consisting of the East Bay Bike Path that goes along the east side of Narragansett Bay. Finally, there's the possibility of putting your bike on the rack of one of the local busses that go from North Kingstown or Jamestown to Newport, as noted on the Rhode Island bike map.

The most direct route from Mystic to the Providence ferry terminal goes away from the shore, running parallel to I-95, and turned out to be the most hilly segment of the whole trip. The Rhode Island Department of Transportation puts out a fairly decent cycling map that I relied on for getting through state. The map has little arrows to indicate where the hills are, but didn't show any hills along the Mystic –Providence route, much of it on Route 3. Loaded down with two full panniers, however, the route definitely seemed quite hilly.

The best part of the ride consisted of about nine miles along the Washington Secondary Bike Path, an excellent rail trail leading to the edge of Providence that is part of the East Coast Greenway. After a challenging morning of intermittent showers, hilly terrain, and

some messy local streets in suburban Providence, the flat, nicely paved path felt like nirvana, an expressway for bikes with few intersections or other interruptions. Finding the path was a challenge, however, as the state bike map doesn't show the side streets that lead to the path. But the bike map did at least get me close enough to the path to ask directions. Nor did the bike map provide sufficient detail for navigating the streets of Providence at the end of the path, where it's another two miles across the south side of Providence to the ferry terminal.

After 54 miles, including a couple of extra miles for wrong turns, I reached the ferry terminal. A relaxing one hour ferry ride brought me to Newport, where I rode two more miles through the town's lively streets to the day's destination. It was a rather cloudy day, with only five other passengers on the ferry, but the streets of Newport were filled with people enjoying the weekend.

Day 6 – The Octagon House and its Gang

Newport, RI to New Bedford, MA – 44.6 miles

After spending the morning hanging out in Newport, I finally got back on the road around 12:45 PM and set out for New Bedford. Once again, the most direct route (Route 24) is one that crosses a bridge where bikes are not allowed, making it necessary to detour via the Mt. Hope bridge (Route 114) through the town of Bristol. (It is also possible to take the ferry back to Providence and proceed from there.) Heading north out of Newport, I tried to find Burma Rd., which goes along Narragansett Bay for a few miles and is classified as "most suitable" on the RI bike map. Unfortunately, the streets heading in that direction all lead into a Naval base and are closed off to the general public. After a couple of attempts to find Burma Rd., I gave up and resigned myself to highway riding along busy Route 138.

After stopping in Bristol for lunch at an Irish style tavern overlooking the bay, I found my way onto the East Bay Bike path and enjoyed some more views of Narragansett bay for the next few miles before heading east on Route 103 toward Fall River, MA. From Fall River to New Bedford, the Rubel cycling map of eastern Massachusetts shows some back roads classified as "recommended" routes. But it was getting late in the afternoon, and with the possibility of more rain showers, I was eager to get to my destination and opted to stay on the main highway (Route 6), which is flat, smooth and more direct, without much traffic.

The main reason for going to New Bedford was to catch a ferry to Martha's Vineyard the next morning. But New Bedford turned out to be a rather pleasant place in its own right to stay for the night. It originally gained prominence in the 1800s as the leading whaling port on the east coast, and the major attraction in town is its whaling museum. Despite the city's population of over 90,000, it has a pleasant, small town ambiance. I checked in to Captain Haskell's Octagon House, one of the B&B's recommended in the Rubel cycling map. The distinctive octagonal-shaped house was built in 1848 for a sea captain and is located in a quiet residential neighborhood of large old homes, a few blocks from the center of town. Dinner was at a nearby tavern, with a meal that featured an avocado covered with a corn salsa as the vegetable. Good stuff.

Anyway, upon arriving at the B&B, I was led up a narrow winding staircase to a cozy attic room on the third floor. Even though schlepping my panniers up the stairs was no fun, it turned out for the better. Being on the third floor, I was beyond hearing range of a rather

animated discussion being carried on by the home's other residents - Daisie, Mick, Mosie, Vasco and Ed - who, according to the B&B's brochure, are the inn's canine and feline hosts. (The brochure also notes that pets are welcome to stay there.)

The friendly innkeeper told me stories of other cyclists who had passed through. Just the week before, he'd hosted a couple who had biked all the way from Key West, Florida on their way to cycling the entire perimeter of the U.S. and eventually getting back to Key West. The woman had recently lost a prodigious amount of weight, having once weighed in at 400 pounds, and was doing the voyage as a celebration of her weight loss and regaining control of her life.

Day 7 – Fun in the Sun

New Bedford, MA to Hyannis, MA – 26.4 miles

This was to be a fun day. The sun had finally returned after one day of heavy rain followed by two cloudy days of intermittent showers. The day's journey consisted of two scenic rides on fast passenger-only ferry boats – first from New Bedford to Martha's Vineyard and from there to Hyannis on Cape Cod. The biking would be mainly just for sightseeing.

The most relaxing way to get from New Bedford to Cape Cod on a bicycle is to take a ferry to the island of Martha's Vineyard and then get on another ferry to either Woods Hole, Falmouth, or Hyannis on the Cape, with the delightful prospect of spending time on Martha's Vineyard to explore and possibly stay for the night. My plan was to take the 9 AM ferry to Oak Bluffs on the Vineyard, do a little biking around the island, meet a friend for lunch, and then catch the afternoon ferry for Hyannis.

After the one hour boat trip to Martha's Vineyard, I got off the ferry and stopped at a little bike shop to get some chain lube, which was definitely needed after three days of damp weather. After telling the shop owner about my travels, he told me about a couple who had stopped at his shop the week before, having biked all the way from Key West, Florida. "They were riding a couple of department store bikes that were junk. I guess they didn't know much about bikes," he said with just a trace of bike snobbism. "I gave them two old bikes that hadn't been used much...real solid and well-built." He then went into a rant about how the newer lightweight bikes aren't built to last. Listening to him describe the same couple I'd just heard about the day before brought a smile to my face – one of those simple little pleasures of bicycle touring.

With the chain freshly oiled, I proceeded to explore the island, heading north on East Chop Rd. along a shore hugging road lined with spacious cottages with weather-beaten gray shingles, past the East Chop light house and on to Vineyard Haven, then hurried back to Oak Bluffs to meet a friend for lunch. With over an hour's time left before the afternoon ferry to Hyannis, I resumed my explorations, riding past the ultra cute Victorian cottages that Oak Bluffs is known for and onto the bikepath along the beach heading toward Edgartown. After a few glorious miles on the bikepath, I returned to Oak Bluffs in plenty of time to catch the 2:25 PM ferry.

Hyannis has several budget motels in the downtown area. I was able to use a coupon from one of those booklets they have at highway rest areas to get a motel room on Main St. for \$45. After my usual post-ride shower and nap, I got back on the bike to explore, rode a few miles over to Hyannisport, but didn't see any houses that resembled the well-

known "Kennedy compound", and went back to Hyannis along the shore, bringing the day's mileage up to 26.3.

Day 8 – The Best Ride

Hyannis to Provincetown – 63.6 miles

With another day of perfect weather, the ride from Hyannis to Provincetown was probably the best of the entire trip. Heading east through Yarmouth and Dennis, the first part of the ride is along woodsy back roads lined with neat little houses, many of them in the distinctive one and a half story "cape" style that Cape Cod is known for. The next portion of the ride is along the excellently maintained Cape Cod rail trail, which extends for about 20 miles through the middle of the Cape from around Dennis northward to South Wellfleet. There's even a cute little traffic circle for bikes where the trail intersects another pathway. It was on the rail trail where I encountered the only other recumbent during the whole trip, a high racer Volae. The rider was training to do an ultra endurance "brevet" ride - 600 kilometers from Boston to somewhere in Vermont and back in under 40 hours. For reasons that I couldn't comprehend, the ride was to start at midnight.

Even though it was a Tuesday, I encountered many cyclists along the trail and then on the back roads around Wellfleet – far more cyclists than cars in fact. The road suddenly became void of cyclists, however, in the hilly area approaching Truro. After lunch at a Deli near Truro, I experienced the best part of the ride, taking the shore road (Route 6A) along the beach from North Truro to Provincetown. Riding along the old shore road, which used to be the main route to Provincetown before the new Route 6 was built, made me feel like I'd been transported back in time about 50 years. Much of the beach front was lined with little old roadside motels and humble cottages that left plenty of space between buildings to look out upon the ocean from the roadway. Some of the motels have been converted to condominium ownership, and I wondered how long it would be before the entire stretch would be taken over by condominiums, McMansions, and time-share resorts.

Approaching Provincetown, I turned off the main route and went a few extra miles to see the national park visitor's center, located in the midst of a broad expanse of sand dunes, and spent a relaxing hour watching a series of videos about the area. A few wrong turns during the ride brought the day's mileage up to 63.6. I spent the night at a B&B in the center of Provincetown and went out for a stroll that evening to enjoy the ambiance of downtown Provincetown, a mecca for devotees of "alternate" lifestyles. Dinner was at a lively restaurant where I indulged myself at their all-you-can-eat taco bar for only \$7.95.

Day 9 – The final day

Provincetown, MA to Weston, MA – 25 miles

After a quick spin around town and along the waterfront, I caught the 10 AM ferry to Boston, another high speed passenger-only ferry that speeds across Cape Cod and Massachusetts bays in one and a half hours. I made my way across downtown Boston, where the sidewalks were filled with office workers out for lunch on a warm, sunny day, and met my niece for lunch at an outdoor deli near the foot of Beacon Hill.

The journey's final pleasure was the ride west heading out of Boston along the Charles River. Lined with parkland and pathways on both sides, the Charles River basin may be

the best urban landscape on the east coast. The paved pathway took me past the stately red brick townhouses of Boston's Back Bay and into the heart of Boston's venerable academic community - past the MIT dome across the river, the towers of Boston University (my alma mater), and the ivy covered brick buildings of Harvard on both sides of the river. Scores of young people are out walking, jogging and biking along the river, where collegiate rowing crews are whizzing along in their long, narrow boats. After navigating a series of streets through Watertown and Waltham, the journey concluded on the leafy country lanes of Weston, lined with large stately homes.

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