

Canada's latest must-see destinations. Page h3

PALM SPRINGS

WITH A LONG HISTORY OF TIES to Hollywood and a modern return to form via a “cool redux,” this desert city comes by its Mad Men ethos honestly. **Page H6**

TRAVEL

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One of the Big Island visitors, an accountant who teaches spinning classes, leaves the town of Hawi on the way to Pololu Valley. Of course, he had no problem taking on any of the trip's hills.

A MAGICAL RIDE IN Hawaii

Where there are volcanoes, there are hills. But on this cycling trip, no one is judging

ANNE SUTHERLAND
THE GAZETTE

Things I learned biking around the Big Island of Hawaii:

If an island boasts three volcanoes, there will be hills.

The terrain will vary from the arid and strangely beautiful moonscape of lava fields to lush and almost fecund greenery in the rainforest, in the same day.

Temperatures will range from lows of 50 F in the mountains to 80 F at sea level, in mere hours.

The staff of Backroads, who have been

leading bikes trips since 1979, are exceptional in every way possible.

There's something delicious about escaping winter to go south, or in this case west, to the island of Hawaii, close to the equator.

The temperatures are not too hot, not too cold, the ocean is spectacular and if you like to ride a bike, Berkley, Calif.-based Backroads can set you up with a trip that shows off the entire island.

I had been to Big Island before, but the opportunity to see it from two wheels was tempting, so I signed on.

The price of the trip included a super light 27-speed bike, helmet, the services of three trip leaders, all hotels and all

meals save one lunch and one dinner.

These were premium hotels, where the normal room rate ranges from \$400 to \$1,000 a night, and we could order whatever we wanted off the menu at meals. Alcohol was not included, but all gratuities were.

I cannot say enough about our trip leaders and support staff. All three women — Emily, Kate and Sarah — were experienced mechanics, unfailingly cheerful, willing to bike along in the sometimes pouring rain, and full of so much knowledge and enthusiasm that they really added to the experience.

Please see BIG ISLAND, Page H2



MINDY SAM

Author Anne Sutherland travels the road from Waimea to Kohala Coast, which offers an exceptional view of Mauna Kea, a dormant volcano that towers 13,803 feet above sea level.

BIG ISLAND Small cycling group conquers hills and valleys of Hawaii

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The first day, we met at the Sheraton Kona and were shuttled up some of those steep hills to Higahihara Park, where our bikes were fitted and our marching orders given.

Each guest had sent height, pedal and handlebar preferences far in advance, and I had a sweet little titanium bike, a helmet, two water bottles and all the snacks I could cram into Ziploc bags.

Our group was small, four women and three men. Some of the guests had done Backroads trips before and one was an accountant who taught spinning on the weekends.

I gauged that his rock-hard thighs would conquer all roads and hills. They did.

And we were off, along a gently rolling road that took us through coffee farms, macadamia-nut plantations and then 2,000 feet down the most stupendous switchbacks to sea level.

I noticed a new friend, a venture capitalist from N.Y.C., with a death grip on her handlebars and a terrified look on her face. Her spinning classes had not prepared her for braking or cars.

The staff had a lunch of sushi, salads and amaz-

ing desserts set up for us on Pu'u'honona o Honaunau Beach — stunningly beautiful.

The afternoon was some more ups and downs and then back to the Sheraton Kona for Mai Tais and delicious hors oeuvres while two of our number snorkelled with the manta rays just beyond the restaurant.

Each day there were three options for distance and level of difficulty, with many variations. Don't like climbing hills? Hop in the van. No one judges.

Day 2, we headed south toward Manaku State Park and the most southern tip of Hawaii at Punalu'u, Black Sand beach and our final destination in the town of Volcano, home of the ... you guessed it.

This was on the west side, or drier side, of the island, but the skies weren't listening, and the rain came down. The packing list provided by the Backroads people prior to the trip is essential; they called for rain gear, and we needed it that morning.

Lunch was at a cosy bake shop and then a wonderful ride along deserted roads all the way to the coast where the sand really is black, because it's chewed-up lava.

Our home for the next two nights was the Kilauea Lodge,

complete with fireplaces in each room. These came in handy for drying out sodden bike clothing.

On Day 3, we had our own private geologist/guide for a hike through the nature park at the Kilauea Calder. The first sight of the huge depression left after the eruption of 1959 took my breath away, and it was pretty trippy to be walking on what was previously a lake of molten lava.

After a yummy lunch, we had a tremendous ride, downhill, 2,000 feet almost to the sea. Big fun, lots of singing. Oh, yes, as my mates learned, belting out show tunes is how I ride. They got used to it.

The first night in Volcano, we ate a scrumptious meal at the lodge.

Second night, Thai food. I watched in awe as my N.Y. friend ordered her dinner at a fire-breathing level NINE. Yikes.

Day 4, we headed to Hilo, on the east side of Hawaii. It is the rainiest city in the U.S.A., where they measure rainfall in feet.

As luck would have it, we had no rain. We rode down 4,000 feet into Hilo under sunny skies.

Some of us (me) took the van ride 3,000 feet up to Waiamea in the centre of the island and rode downhill an-

other 3,000 feet to the Kohala Coast with an exceptional view of Mauna Kea, a dormant volcano that towers 13,803 feet above sea level.

Day 4 was also one of the days where there was an option of riding a "century," which is how cyclists describe a 100-mile-ride. The spinning/accountant rode 112 miles. I did 70.

Our home for the next two nights was the Fairmount Orchid, an extremely luxurious resort.

We were on our own for dinner that night, and managed to choke down some delicious sushi and sake in one of the premium restaurants at the resort.

Day 5 dawned sunny again, and we all chose to ride in the van 25 miles to the town of Hawi, where we unloaded the bikes and took a spin to the Pololu Valley, an astonishing fjord where you can climb down the steeply graded path to a spectacular beach below. Again, black sand, and we had to climb back up.

The afternoon was a leisurely, mostly flat ride back to the Fairmont for our last supper together, a sumptuous feast at Brown's Beach House, which has the reputation of being the most expensive restaurant on the island. Once again, we could order what-



ANNE SUTHERLAND/THE GAZETTE

A route passes trees covered with bouganvillea blooms.

ever we wanted, included in the trip price.

On Day 6, there was a 15-minute ride ending at Puako Beach and a walk back along the shore to the Fairmount. A farewell reception and we were off to the airport.

Backroads offers variations of this trip to families, couples and our trip, the single/solo option. Prices and dates vary, so consult the website at www.backroads.com

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