

Adventure CYCLIST

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Dark.
Cold.
Amazing.

LONG NIGHTS IN THE
WHITE MOUNTAINS 12

20 CYCLING
ISRAEL

26 ONTARIO'S
MENNONITES

42 TITANIUM
DAVE



CYCLING AMONG THE MENNONITES

Story by Colleen Friesen

Photographs by Kyle Rodriguez

It's not often you find yourself sitting in a Mennonite's horse-drawn buggy. But here I was, snuggled under a dark-green fleecy blanket beside the bonnet-wearing, buggy-driving 67-year-old Viola Brubacher. Although it was only a short distance away, my bicycle, left back on the Brubacher farm, felt like something from a different life.

The sliding side doors of the buggy had large windows. Combined with the wide windshield in front of us, we were looking at a panoramic view of Ontario's countryside. Straight roads sliced through dying cornfields, past silos and massive barns. Fat clouds hung in the blue sky. Outside the air held the crisp edge of the coming fall. But, within our sanctuary, all I felt was the soft blessing of the September sun as it bent through the glass to fall on my knees.

The unfolding scene became more surreal with the approach of another horse-drawn buggy. Unlike Viola's, it was an open wagon with two strapping young Mennonite men sitting squarely on the black bench and wearing the requisite outfit of dark pants and suspenders. Oddly, they were also wearing the kind of sunglasses that made me think of a TV-drama drug dealer. All that was missing was a shiny black Escalade.

Thrilled with my insider buggy status, I smiled and waved enthusiastically. They didn't reciprocate. Though their eyes

couldn't be seen behind the indigo sheen of their glasses, their stares felt cold. I dropped my hand and looked to Viola. "Those are Dave Martins," she paused, snapped the reins, and then continued, "they don't have any time for us. Maybe if there is only one of them, they might wave, but if there's two ... no."

We continued clip-clopping down the farming road. Officially we were in the rural township of Woolwich, which lies within the region of Kitchener-Waterloo, and, although we were only 122 kilometers (83 miles) from Toronto, it felt as if I'd been dropped through a black hole in time.

I had been mildly interested when I first heard that the Kitchener-Waterloo tourism board was looking to promote cycling in their region. I was sure there'd be quiet roads and some easy cycling in the rural farmland. But because of my own Mennonite background, I really got hooked when I found out about the numbers of Old Order Mennonites in the area.

Of the over 200,000 Mennonites in Canada, there are an estimated 20,000 in the 1,369-square-kilometer Kitchener-Waterloo region. But beyond the common crucially held belief in adult baptism, there are many variations on the Mennonite theme. There are over 20 different groups affiliated with the Mennonite Central Committee. Among those numbers are approximately 7,000 to 8,000 Old Order Mennonites like Viola and her husband Harvey. Due to their similar lifestyles and dress, Old Order Mennonites are often confused with the Amish. And, of course, there are the David Martins, one

of the most recent breakaway sects, now consisting of 2,500 to 3,000 members.

There is a well-circulated joke in the Mennonite community that might help explain the aforementioned variations in this 500-year-old Anabaptist religion:

A ship's captain comes upon a remote tropical isle. Coming ashore, he finds a lone man who has survived there for many years. There are three rather substantial buildings made from shipwrecked material. The survivor identifies himself as Mennonite and asks if he can show the captain around. "This," he says proudly, pointing at the first dwelling, "is my house. And that," he says, pointing up a slight hill, "is my church." The captain nods and then points to another building. "What is that?" he asks. "Oh," the Mennonite waves his hand dismissively at the structure, "that's the church I used to go to."

My Mennonite experience wasn't nearly as austere as Viola's conservative world of barns and buggies. I grew up on the west coast of Canada and didn't have to wear long dark skirts, long-sleeved blouses, aprons, or bonnets. We didn't have a farm or live within a communal setting, and although it was a big deal when we finally got a television, we had most of the modern conveniences.

But I now believe that my parents clung even harder to the rigid fundamentals of our back-to-the-Bible religion precisely because we were surrounded by a secular sea. My dad was an elder of the church as far back as I can remember. He also spent 14 years on Mission City's school board, trying to get evolution removed from the curriculum. Dancing, drinking, playing



Top row, from left: A Woolwich Township farm and surrounding countryside; a typically quiet country road; shopping at the St. Jacobs Farmers' Market. Main: The author, center, shares the road with a Mennonite buggy.

cards, and pretty much anything that resembled fun was strictly *verboten*.

It was hard to imagine a world more structured than the one I'd grown up in, but I was convinced that I'd find the conservative origins of my religion on this trip.

Like me, my cousin Bruce Friesen jokingly refers to himself as a recovering

fields of dead corn.

In West Montrose, we cycled up to the Lost Acre Variety store. More correctly, we stepped into the past, back into an old-time general store with bolts of demurely printed fabric, ready-to-wear bonnets, gargantuan sacks of flour, and, my personal favorite, Harlequin-style books with cover illustrations of bonneted maidens with

After demonstrating a few strokes, our canoe guide, Dan, shouted, "Follow me!" And with that, we slid down the rippling Grand River. "Look for the smooth waters and head there," he said.

There were a few dodgy moments when I realized that my cousin, who had told Dan he was experienced at canoeing and had taken the commanding position in

Canoes stowed, we piled into the van and drove back to our start in the little village of St. Jacobs. The town is a few short blocks of funky women's clothing shops, jewelry stores, and the kinds of galleries, coffee shops, and retail outlets that suggest a lot of tourists. Included is a great little theater scene and an excellent interactive museum called The Mennonite Story. But we'd left early that morning before things had opened, and now that we'd finally returned, the town appeared once again closed for business. I still wasn't quite sure why the village looked ready for so many visitors.

The next morning, my cousin drove home while I finally discovered the explanation I'd been seeking: the market. St. Jacobs Market is massive, and it's a huge draw for locals and tourists for miles around. The piles of apples, pumpkins, pies, sausage, and stands of maple syrup went on forever. Some kiosks are under permanent cover whereas others are set up each day in the massive parking lot, many of them operated from the back of a buggy.

Which brings us to the other reason people come to St. Jacobs — those buggies full of Mennonites. Each black buggy holds a cast of characters that appear to have marched out of the pages of a book on 17th-century Holland: women and girls with long skirts, aprons, and bonnets; men and boys in plain black suits topped with felt or straw flat-brimmed hats; and all of them, all ages and all genders, sporting sensible, sturdy black shoes.

A steady parade of buggies trotted down St. Jacobs's main street. Although all of them were basic black, there were some variations. Some, like Viola's, had sparkly LED turn signals whereas others sported glossy black wheels. All of them carried the discordant accessory that was the neon orange safety triangle at the back, much like the ones used on Adventure Cycling tours.

After leaving the market, we spent another wonderful fall morning riding over an undulating landscape with just enough uphill to feel like I was actually doing something and enough whooshing downhill to feel my grin stretch my cheeks. Like Lost Acre Variety, Wallenstein's is another Mennonite-focused general store full of baking supplies, shelves of black shoes, black or dark blue suspenders for men, bonnets for women, and yet another



Left: Traffic proved almost nonexistent in the Kitchener-Waterloo region. Right: On water or road, outfitter Grand Experiences was prepared.

Mennonite. (His father, Abram, one of my dad's 13 siblings, is the last one alive. My dad, Heinrich, died two months prior to this trip.) Bruce drove from his nearby Toronto-area home to join me for the first day of cycling. Grand Experiences, a local outfitter, set us up with bikes and, joined by Minto Schneider from Tourism Kitchener-Waterloo and our guide, Dave Lubrick, we pedaled out into the chilled countryside.

Well, it wasn't actually quite as freewheeling as all that. There was also a local photographer, Kyle Rodriguez, who drove ahead and popped out of so many cornfields and from behind so many trees that we were soon playing our own version of *Where's Waldo*. But aside from Kyle's guerrilla photography tactics, there were no cycling surprises.

As I had expected, the undulating farmland terrain was easy riding. Best of all, with the exception of horse-drawn buggies, traffic was almost nonexistent. But I hadn't counted on the beauty of the landscape. We made stops for photos, grabbing crisply sour apples from nearby trees and breathing in the dry scent of autumn. Slight breezes rattled the endless

heaving, modestly covered bosoms.

Like Kyle, I desperately wanted to take photos of the Mennonite women, but we'd been advised of the discomfort that would cause. Instead I took too-long sideways glances at them going about their business of living in another era.

Thirty-five more kilometers went by quickly, though not without a few whinging moments at the odd unexpected hill. After a late lunch in a park near Elora Gorge, we traded our bicycles for canoes. We had watched the Grand River rushing through that gorge, with its 22-meter cliffs, and now we were going to paddle the tamer section below.

Two-thirds of Ontario lies on the ancient rock of the Canadian Shield, and the last icy bits of glaciation receded about 10,000 years ago. As a result, Ontario is home to 250,000 lakes containing one-third of the world's freshwater supply. The early Great Lakes started out even larger than they are now, but as they evolved and receded, the rivers that once drained them now flow through broad beautiful valleys.

We were about to put in to one of those ancient rivers.

the stern, finally confessed that he had last been in a canoe as a teen in Bible camp. Funny what a few rock-studded rapids can inspire. Luckily, the Grand River was shallow enough that we could wade out of any disaster so I decided he could be forgiven.

On bended knee, we dipped and pulled our paddles, breathing in the benediction of the waters. I was grateful that our fathers had stayed in touch so that I would come to know this cousin who had become the brother I'd never had. Grateful, too, that in spite of the serious business of keeping their kids on the straight and narrow, our dads had also believed in the power of humor. The autumn day was filled with loud snorting guffaws and easy shared silences.

We canoed 15 kilometers before ending at the West Montrose covered bridge. The red-painted crossing, originally constructed in 1881, is the last covered bridge in Ontario. Often referred to as "kissing bridges," these wooden tunnels were known as one of the few areas in which a courting couple could steal a moment of privacy.

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rack of those aforementioned Harlequin-style bodice-ripper books.

But that's where the resemblance stops, because Wallenstein Suppliers is to Lost Acres what Las Vegas is to Reno. Suffice it to say that if you only stopped at one of the stores, I would recommend Wallenstein. Their range of yesteryear's goods is incomparable. It was there, too, that I saw a few more David Martin Mennonites and where I learned how to differentiate between them and Old Order Mennonites. Although their conservative outfits look the same, the David Martins have the distinguishing features, on both men and women, of those amazing sunglasses and a propensity for cell phones.

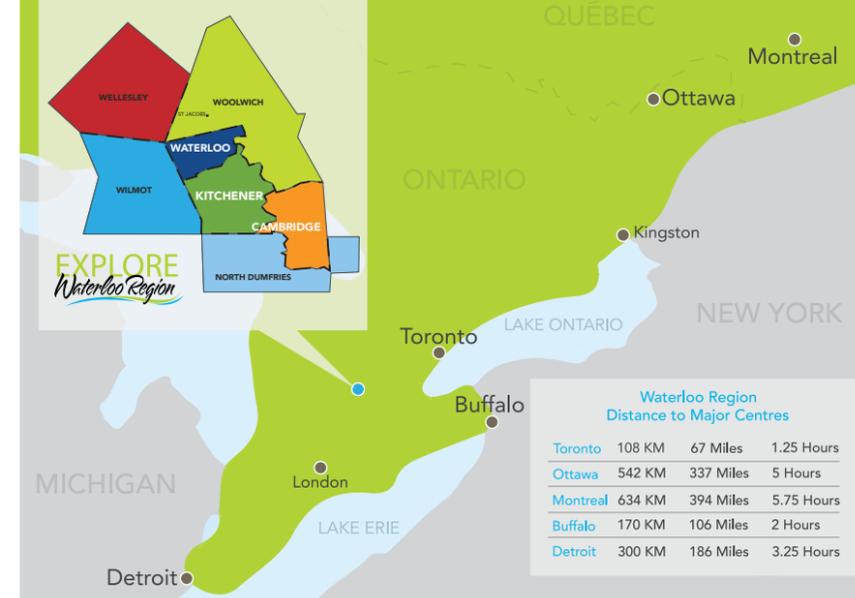
Our tour continued with some fabulous converted railbeds that are part of the soon-to-be-completed 127-kilometer Goderich-to-Guelph (G2G) Rail Trail. Work on the completion of the G2G (g2grailtrail.com) is ongoing, but there are already long, beautiful sections of flat, lazy-day-style cycling. Add an endless supply of clean air, no traffic, and an engaging encounter with an old Amish grandfather returning to his farm with his newspaper and the list of our trip's smiles grew longer by the minute.

But it was the chance to spend time with the aforementioned rein-snapping Viola Brubacher that clinched the trip.

Stepping into Viola's kitchen was like walking into my childhood. Her house could have been any one of my Mennonite relatives' kitchens from the late 1960s. Spider plants hung lushly in their macramé hangers beside La-Z-Boy recliners covered in colorful crocheted throws. The "Best Mom" knickknacks sat proudly on the glass-fronted shelves with other random china pieces. The Bible verse plaque and the star-shaped clock were hung high up on the walls of pressboard paneling. There was no television.

Two tables had been hauled into the middle of the kitchen to make one long, groaning spread of food. There were beans from the garden, carrots from the garden, and coleslaw made with cabbage from the garden. The garden theme continued with the mashed potatoes, pickled beets, and other heaping dishes, both hot and cold, of fabulous home cooking. Best of all, there was hot smoked turkey from a nearby farm that was like nothing else I'd eaten — ever.

MAP: COURTESY EXPLORE WATERLOO



I was grateful for the stretch of my cycling pants and proceeded to put them to the test by eating ridiculous amounts of food, including silly piles of that delectable turkey. Viola hustled between the counter and table, ensuring that we were all well fed. With her glowing cheeks and boundless energy, she was a poster child for clean living.

"When I was younger," said Viola, "I always wanted to open a restaurant." She was explaining how that wasn't ever an option for her when the phone rang. Her cheeks glowed even brighter as she confirmed a booking for another 23 dinner guests.

I tried to find some common Mennonite ground. "Viola," I spoke to her back as she filled the coffeepot and assembled her homemade pies and ice cream, "when I was growing up, I went to church on Wednesday nights for girls club, Saturday night for choir practice, Sunday morning for Sunday school, and then Sunday morning church. And then we all returned for the Sunday evening service. Is that your experience too?"

Viola turned around. "That's crazy," she said. She caught herself, blushed, and covered her mouth in apology. "Well," I asked the woman who drove a buggy, wore a bonnet, and surely lived a much more conservative life than I had as a child, "how often do you go to church?"

"Once a week," she said. "On Sunday mornings."

I sat at her table, stunned. I had assumed that hers would have been the more demanding religion, but it occurred to me yet again that nothing is ever as it first appears. I knew my fundamentalist

upbringing had been extreme, but I'd been fooled by appearances. In spite of wearing "regular" clothes, my upbringing had been more constricting than Viola's. I needed a lifetime to mull these revelations over, but for now I decided to stick with what was in front of me.

I followed Viola out to her huge garden, where she pointed out the last of the season's crops and I once again fought the urge to take her photo. "You really seem to enjoy running your catering business," I said. Viola smiled and said in reply, "Oh my, more than anything. I don't want to be shut down. I try to fly under the radar." She picked a few late raspberries to hand to me. "I can't advertise, especially on the internet."

I struggled to understand her fear from the church that she had belonged to her entire life, but then I remembered my anxiety about burning in hell and my childhood terrors of losing my parents to the imminent rapture. "They must know what you're doing?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "I'm sure they know, but they're ignoring it because I only have a notice on a bulletin board and I'm not on the computer. Please don't use my name in your article. Only word-of-mouth recommendations are okay."

"I don't want to get you in trouble," I said, "but if I write about you for this magazine, wouldn't that be like word of mouth? I'd just be another friend who is recommending you." Viola considered this as her crisp laundry snapped on the line behind her. "Yes," she looked into my eyes, "that makes sense ... but will it be on the internet?"

WestJet provides nonstop daily service between Waterloo Region and Calgary with connections to Vancouver, Victoria, Abbotsford, Kelowna, Edmonton, Regina, and Saskatoon.

Toronto's Pearson International Airport is 60 miles east of Waterloo Region — about an hour's drive. Scheduled and charter flights provide nonstop service to over 180 destinations around the globe.

VIA Rail runs between Kitchener and Toronto, Guelph, London, and Sarnia. VIA runs three trains a day in each direction.

Amtrak offers service from New York City, Rochester, and Niagara Falls, New York, to Toronto with connections across the U.S.

Greyhound serves Waterloo Region from across Canada and the U.S.

Bicycle shops are located throughout the region and operate daily to provide repair services, including:

- McPhail's Cycle & Sports, mcphailscycle.com
- King Street Cycles, kingstreetcycles.com
- Ross' Bike Works, rossbikeworks.com

"It will be printed in a magazine, and that magazine article will eventually show up on the internet," I said. I was trying to be as clear as I could about the risks, but I was explaining the internet to someone who had clearly never turned on a computer.

"There will be a picture of the printed story on the internet so that other people can read it," I said. "It's just another way of seeing the story. The internet is how some people read magazines. But I want you to know that when I write the story about my visit, I will be recommending the readers eat at your kitchen restaurant."

"That's okay then," said Viola with finality. "You can use my full name. I love feeding people, making new friends, and hearing their stories."

This then is my sincerest recommendation: go cycling in Kitchener-Waterloo. You can cycle as much or as little as you want on roads that stretch out forever. Paddle the Grand River too. Visit St. Jacobs market, take in some live theater, and hang out at Wallenstein Suppliers.

But, whatever you do, be sure to plan a lunch and a buggy ride at Viola's. Tell her that she comes highly recommended by her wayward Mennonite friend. **AG**

Colleen Friesen wears black — a nod to her Mennonite roots and how well the color travels. She hates leaving home and loves going on a trip. Yes, she's a Gemini. When she's not staring at her laptop, hoping for inspiration, you'll probably find her at an airport gate.