

# Flagging rider catches a draft in Cajun country

Inspired by thought of spicy sausage  
A 70-kilometre bike tour in 31C heat

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

NEW ORLEANS, LA.—I doubt if Lance Armstrong was ever motivated to finish a cycling race by thoughts of a sausage. But in Louisiana's Cajun country, where food is inexorably inter-

twined with everything, strange things can happen.

We were nearing the end of a 70-kilometre cycling tour, and with the 31C heat, I was tempted to go the final stretch in the air-conditioned comfort of the support van.

Much like a professional cyclist, I was "drafting" — pedalling in the shelter of another cyclist who cut the headwind allowing me to increase my efficiency. But unlike Lance, I was last in formation and, instead of the Pyrenees of the Tour de France, I was on the flat plains of Louisiana's bayous, two hours outside New Orleans.

Worse, my drafter was in her mid 70s and weighed no more than 40 kilograms.

I was accompanying the Cajun Cyclists, a group of avid riders who help organize Cycle Zydeco, an annual event that traverses the backroads and bayous of Louisiana's Cajun country. Covering 325 kilometres over four days in April, it is a celebration of everything

Cajun and Creole — food, music and dance.

Restricted to a maximum of 350 cyclists, the festival sells out quickly. But maps of the route are available year-round, so the cycling club was escorting our trio of novice cyclists along a two-day portion of the festival's most scenic stretch, sampling local cuisine and dancing to live music during

our "rest stops." The tour began with a lunch of fried catf at Myron's Maison de Man in Arnaudville and then headed to Port Barre, an early French settlement. Located at the junction of Bayou Courbleau and Bayou Teche, it has been a busy steamboat port since the early 1800s when it served

► Please see **Cajun, H6**



Accordianist Lil' Nathan, top, a third-generation musician, offers an introduction to zydeco — with its characteristic accordian and washboard — Cajun and even 'swamp pop.'



A welcome rest stop, right, offers an opportunity to sample local delicacies, such as boudin, a spicy sausage, or a bountiful plate of crawfish, above, along with some Cajun joie de vivre.



## Battling headwind was 'like pedalling through molasses'

► **Cajun From H1**

as a trading centre for sugar cane and cotton destined downstream to the Gulf of Mexico.

The town's goodwill ambassador presented us with gifts of jalapeño corn bread and boudin — a sausage stuffed with rice, pork and spices — served everywhere from restaurants to gas stations.

Although the first day's stretch was only 20 kilometres, the sun was hot and humidity high. By the time we arrived in the town of Washington, I was soaked with sweat and my face was as red as a crawfish. Although our group did manage to hit Slim's Y-Ki-Ki Club to catch the musical frenzy of Step Rideau and the Zydeco Outlaws, I was asleep by midnight.

The next morning, Roy, our pacesetter, arrived with his nose covered by bandages.

"What happened?" I asked. "Oh, these?" he replied, "They're breathing strips that allow me to go faster and get more air into my system."

Our team leaders were Joan and Dick Williams, who although in their 70s, still cycled up to 200 kilometres a week. Our group of eight headed out in formation. It was an effortless ride, pedalling past old plantation homes fragrant with gardenias and down winding streets lined with fig, magnolia and pecan trees.

"How fast am I going?" I asked Kathy, a Cajun Cyclist and native Louisianan.

"Fourteen miles an hour," she said, checking her speedometer. "Piece of cake," I thought. "We'll be dancing at Fred's saloon before noon."

Settling into a rhythm, I took in the scenery. Although the area had not been directly affected by Hurricane Katrina, Rita brought damaging, storm-force

### Just the facts

■ **Cycle Zydeco:** This annual Cajun/Creole Food and Cycling Festival is a four-day event ridden at a moderate pace. Next ride dates are April 12-15, 2007. Register early. Visit [www.cyclezydeco.com/](http://www.cyclezydeco.com/)

■ **Bike Louisiana:** The Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism lists cycling events, cultural information and suggested itineraries as an aid to bicyclists. Visit: [www.bikelouisiana.com](http://www.bikelouisiana.com)

■ **Cajun Country Tourism:** A guide to Cajun towns, music, cuisine and accommodation is available at [www.cajuntravel.com](http://www.cajuntravel.com) or toll free at 1-877-948-8004

winds and the area is still dealing with many secondary effects, especially on the economy.

Yet, today, it appeared pastoral. Horses grazed in fields alongside herds of goats and pale green moss draped from the oak trees lining the road. The heritage of the area's many settlers — freed black slaves, Native American, Spanish, French and German — was evident in names on street signs and mailboxes.

But Acadians — or Cajuns — who arrived in the 1700s and established homes along the watery bayous, were the predominant influence.

Cajuns are famous for their jambalaya, gumbo and hot sauce, and improvised when crops were poor, eating everything from alligators to crawfish dug from the muddy waters of the rice fields.

"When I was little, Daddy would shoot a squirrel for dinner and we'd dry the tails and

hang them from our handlebars," said Kathy.

After a brief rest at the halfway point on L'Anse de Cavalier, our route turned. It now felt like pedalling through molasses.

"We're fighting a headwind," said Kathy, shooting by as though on a conveyor belt. A few minutes later, her husband Chris whooshed by. Then, Joan passed. I was officially in last place and struggling. And, there were still 27 kilometres to go.

Hours passed in a blur of exertion. Head down, I noticed strings of sparkling Mardi Gras beads dropped by Cycle Zydeco riders months earlier. Snake carcasses lined the bumpy asphalt. I longed for padded bike shorts.

"Climb on," said Chris, dropping back and waving me closer. Joan angled her bike between us. Like a Canada Goose headed south, I trailed closely behind to catch their draft.

"Don't give up now," shouted Joan. "One more mile and you'll have boudin."

The thought of the spicy sausage was enough to propel me to our final stop, the village of Mamou, Cajun Capital of the World.

A dozen Harley-Davidson motorcycles lined the curb in front of Fred's Lounge, the legendary Cajun saloon. Inside, although only 11 a.m., the beer was flowing freely and old-timers were gliding partners across the dance floor to a live band of fiddle, guitar and accordian. A sign read, "No dancing on the bar."

Despite my aching bones, I grabbed a cold beer and stepped onto the dance floor — glad I wasn't wearing a pair of those skin-tight bike shorts, after all.

Michele Peterson is a Toronto-based freelance writer. Her trip was subsidized by the Louisiana Office of Tourism.