

Seattle P-I, 10/2/08

## Riding Seattle's essential bike trails

**Pedal these routes to truly appreciate the city's diversity**

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P-I REPORTER



Brad Vest / P-I

Bill and Susie Thorness of Seattle look out over the I-90 floating bridge. Bill Thorness is the author of "Biking Puget Sound: 50 Rides From Olympia to the San Juans." Pedaling across the bridge is "something everyone should do," Thorness says.

A steady stream of cyclists flowed across Lake Washington one recent sunny Sunday, prompting a trickle of questions as I drove along the Interstate 90 floating bridge before zooming into the Mount Baker Tunnel.

Bicycling a trail on a floating bridge along a busy interstate -- is that not an essentially Seattle thing to do? Is there anywhere else in the world where a person can bicycle on a path on a major freeway bridge? Furthermore, are there other bicycle rides in this hilly, water-oriented city that could be said to spin in a particularly Seattle way?

After riding that very I-90 Trail across Lake Washington and consulting friends and acquaintances with vastly more Seattle cycling experience, we can report the answers are, essentially, yes, yes and yes.

"One thing about riding I-90 is that it's a unique thing to do," says Bill Thorness, author of "Biking Puget Sound: 50 Rides From Olympia to the San Juans" (Mountaineers, 256 pages, \$16.95). "The bridge is an amazing man-made structure, and to be able to ride out your front door and use it that way -- it's something everyone should do. It can be spectacular as far as the scenery goes,

being so close to the water with all the sailboats out there, and Mount Rainier when the weather is clear."

Furthermore, a consensus emerged that bicycling the paths and streets of Seattle is a marvelous method of experiencing this municipality, surrounded by water and sandwiched between impressive mountain ranges as it is. A bicycle is slow and open enough that a rider can really see the sights, smell the smells and hear the sounds of Seattle, but fast enough to cover ground and sample the city's diversity in a few hours.

Plus, if you wear a helmet as required, follow the rules and ride with caution and alertness, it's a pretty darned healthy thing to do.

"Seattle is always going to have topographical obstacles, (and) we are always going to have cold and damp winters," says David Hiller, advocacy director for the Cascade Bicycle Club. "But can you ask for anything better than just the vistas we've got -- the Cascades, the Olympics and the water? I don't think you can.

"I took some people on a little ride when they were here for a bike conference. We came down the hill, I think it was on Roanoke, down to Eastlake in the evening, and we're looking down on the Space Needle, Lake Union, the lights of Queen Anne. People just stopped and took a deep breath, then whipped out cameras."

The I-90 Trail is about 10 miles long and crosses the lake on the north side of the Homer M. Hadley Memorial Bridge (which carries the westbound vehicular lanes), but technically only its western end is in Seattle. And it's not, we discovered, the only bike path on a bridge along a busy freeway.

Portland, that other megacycling city to the south, has bike lanes in the *middle* of busy I-205 as it crosses the mighty Columbia River.

And Paula Reeves, in charge of the bicycle program for the Washington Department of Transportation, which manages the I-90 Trail, says many other states and cities around the nation have found ways to build pedestrian/bicycle paths on bridges.

However, she says the agency is not aware of any other bicycle/pedestrian paths on floating bridges, of which there are very few around the country.



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Riders pump up the I-90 Trail westward across Lake Washington toward the Mount Baker Tunnel.

So that bike lane might very well be unique in the country. Even if not, we still found it an essential ride in its own right, especially when coupled with pretty Lake Washington Boulevard on the Seattle side, long one of my favorite city spins.

Here is the route, and two other fine ones we deemed essential Seattle rides.

## Ride A: I-90 Trail

The novelty of riding the floating bridge draws riders to this route, and it's a brilliant path for bike commuters who live on one side of the lake and work on the other. But the coolest things about this ride are the water and the string of parks along the way -- very much the "string of pearls" envisioned by the Olmsted brothers, the famous architects of Seattle's park system.

We began at the gem of Coleman Park along Lake Washington Boulevard in Seattle just south of I-90, then crossed the bridge and rode to Mercer Slough Park in Bellevue. After our return across the bridge, we rounded out the ride by adding several miles south down to and around Seward Park and about a mile loop to the north for a lunch stop in Leschi.

This resulted in a circuit of about 16 miles with a few hills but no major climbs. Strong riders can add the popular loop around Mercer Island on West and East Mercer ways, adding another 14 miles.

Riding the bridge is a little disconcerting at first -- traffic is zooming along at 60 mph on one side, a concrete drop to the lake on the other. I've heard from other riders that when a big truck comes along in the far right lane, it can kick up and throw road grit into your face. Railings on both sides of the path protect riders, but it still requires some concentration.

It was cloudy on the day we rode but, of course, when the weather is clear the white cone of Mount Rainier pokes the sky to the southeast.

To find the west entrance to the bridge, climb from Coleman Park's waterfront parking area up the wonderfully wooded and winding Lake Washington Boulevard to the top of the park, going over I-90 and taking a quick right on South Irving Street. Very shortly, find a viewing area on the right and the trail entrance. From here the trail is well signed.

Return the way you came, then head south from Coleman Park along the boulevard to Seward Park.



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A rider bikes east through the I-90 bike tunnel, heading for the bridge over Lake Washington.

Parks we stopped at or passed through included, from start to finish, Coleman; Park on the Lid and Luther Burbank on Mercer Island; Enetai and Mercer Slough in Bellevue; Frink, Leschi, Mount Baker, Genesee and marvelous Seward back in Seattle.

We recommend you pack a picnic year-round. In the summer bring swimwear; in winter pack binoculars for birding at Seward and Mercer Slough parks.

## **Ride B: Elliott Bay, Alki trails**

One of the most popular of the Cascade Bicycle Club's daily rides has been the Alki Coffee Run. It starts north of the U District at the park and ride at Northeast 65th Street and Roosevelt Avenue Northeast, meanders down to and across the Fremont Bridge and then along Nickerson and Dravus streets to the Elliott Bay Trail through Myrtle Edwards Park. It then follows the downtown waterfront to and across Harbor Island to the Alki Trail in West Seattle.

When it runs, "that ride consistently has 40 people showing up for it," says Hiller. "They ride to a bakery on Alki, have some nosh and turn around and come back -- a nice 32-mile jaunt."

It has been awhile since I've seen that ride listed on the club's site, but the route remains and provides a very tangible sense of the city's waterfront origin and history, as well as perhaps the premier view of downtown Seattle, from the Alki side. Furthermore, on clear and crisp days the Olympics loom large on the western horizon across Puget Sound, especially once you round the corner of Duwamish Head.

"Myrtle Edwards Park, too, on a nice day and during off-peak commute hours, has got to be one of the more enjoyable and scenic stretches in Seattle," Hiller notes.


This is a pure city route -- coffee shops, bars and restaurants abound, with plenty of comfy spots for stopping and gawking at Myrtle Edwards and Alki parks. The one bummer is connecting the two waterfronts via Alaskan Way and Spokane streets, through the gritty industrial heart of the city.

"It's kind of the penance you have to pay," Hiller says.

However, Thorness notes that there is another option: taking the Elliott Bay Water Taxi between Pier 55 and the Seacrest docks. Its \$3 one way, with no extra charge for a bike, and operates seasonally through October.

Also, you do not need to start at the park and ride north of the U District. Myrtle Edwards Park has ample parking on its north end, a suitable start for the heart of this Seattle ride.



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Bikers can take a wide, paved path from eastbound I-90 onto Mercer Island.

## Ride C: Historic Seattle route

Seattle's bicycling tradition spins back more than a century, and Thorness has traced a modern route that roughly follows the city's first bike paths, opened in 1896 along Lake Union and extended the next year to Lake Washington. The route follows the Lake Union shore to Portage Bay, climbs Capitol Hill to Roanoke Park, dips through the remarkably sylvan Interlaken area and part of the Washington Park Arboretum.

"You really feel you've sort of entered a different area," says Thorness. "Suddenly you're in the woods."

The route then drops to Lake Washington on the boulevard of the same name, and passes through Denny Blaine and Madrona parks before sharing a section with our I-90 route, from Leschi up to the I-90 Trail. Just above the entrance to the floating bridge portion of the I-90 Trail is a tunnel that leads west under the Mount Baker neighborhood to the I-90 Lid and Sam Smith parks.

In this region atop the northern shoulder of Beacon Hill, you'll get impressive looks at both sides of Seattle -- west over downtown and the sound, and east to Lake Washington and the Cascades.

Hiller rides this stretch on his commute to the CBC offices at Magnuson Park. Occasionally, he experiences an essential Seattle moment.

"Off the I-90 Trail between 23rd and MLK Way is one of the most unobstructed views of Mount Rainier. There you are, and it's your mountain for the moment," he says. "Those are the moments I look out and say, 'This place is really cool.' "

Thorness' route then heads north to one of Seattle's signature parks, Volunteer, before dropping back to Eastlake and Lake Union.

This loop is about 15 miles, with climbs totaling about 900 feet of elevation, with much of it on busy arterials. So it is short, but not necessarily suitable for inexperienced riders. The whole thing is detailed well on Thorness' site (see "If you go").

## IF YOU GO

- For online maps of bikes routes, a list of road rules and other cycling information, see the pages of the City of Seattle bicycle program at [goto.seattlepi.com/r1691](http://goto.seattlepi.com/r1691). You also can call 206-684-7583.
- For a free copy of the Seattle Bicycling Guide Map, which shows pedestrian/bike trails, arterials with bike lanes and other routes commonly used by cyclists, call the Bicycle Alliance of Washington during business hours at 206-224-9252. The alliance Web site offers lots of other maps and information at [bicyclealliance.org](http://bicyclealliance.org).
- King County's bicycle pages offer maps of regional trails and other information at [metrokc.gov/kcdot/roads/bike](http://metrokc.gov/kcdot/roads/bike).

- For a list of daily rides open to all, plus other local bicycling information, see the Cascade Bicycles Club pages at [cascade.org](http://cascade.org). See also Bill Thorness' site at [bikingpugetsound.com](http://bikingpugetsound.com).



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