

Blur of water and metal

Weathered bridges and
the meandering Nith River
accent a long pedal in the country

BY MATTHEW KADEY

You notice a lot of things riding a bike that you miss while sitting behind a steering wheel. There's a deeper connection between you and the place as the vulnerability opens up your senses. This is precisely why I've spent countless hours moving my legs in a circular motion while exploring the pavement, gravel and dirt in and around Waterloo Region.

When it comes to local rivers, the Grand often gets the accolades, but I've long been smitten by the Nith, named after a river in Scotland. Not by accident, many of my two-wheeled sojourns have brought me to the Nith's glorious secluded settings and its collection of fetching bridges spanning the generations. Because of this, I'd increasingly wondered how many times I could cross this river during one big ride, soaking up some of Ontario's rural heartland along the way.

It would be a full day in the saddle but, with the promise of fetching scenery and butter tarts, I cajoled my girlfriend, Tabi Ferguson, into joining me on this big Nith bear hug.

More than 200 kilometres and 46 river crossings made for a memorable bike ride for Matthew Kadey, left, and Tabi Ferguson.



We picked the perfect day for our close-to-home adventure last summer; the wind was barely noticeable and the sky was studded with puffy clouds that offered the occasional respite from the blazing yellow orb above.

Cycling jerseys stuffed with homemade energy balls and bars to power our legs, we pedal from our front door in Waterloo to the hamlet of Kingwood in Wellesley Township to officially kick off the tour de Nith.

From gravelly Chalmers-Forrest Road, where the greatest risk of a traffic jam is a convergence of Mennonite buggies, we hop over a barricade and push our bikes onto the time-worn and mysterious Wellesley Bridge No. 6, erected in this isolated spot about 1910 as a link between Waterloo Region and Perth County. To the northwest from here, the Nith peters out

into Smith Creek.

Rusted and dominated by twisted steel, the 33-metre truss bridge, which features a lattice portal bracing design, has been closed to vehicular traffic for several years.

Canadian author Jane Urquhart famously showcased the expanse in her 2001 award-winning novel “The Stone Carvers.” Blessed with an extensive vista of the Nith lazily carving its way through the absurdly beautiful verdant countryside, it’s easy to see why this was where Tilman, the boy in Urquhart’s book, escaped for swimming and fishing. Undeniably, though, it’s a land that exudes a touch of loneliness.

Despite pressure from heritage conservationists, the Township of Wellesley has balked at the lofty price tag necessary for restoration. If the concrete pier continues to crumble, the abandoned bridge might be incapable of supporting even the occasional

curious cyclist.

We have many kilometres to cover on this day, but we take our time removing ourselves from this literary landmark.

Part of the Grand River Watershed, the Nith is about 60 kilometres as the crow flies from its birthplace in a woodlot northwest of Wellesley to where it buries itself in the Grand River at Paris. But as it bends and turns its way through Perth, Brant and Oxford counties, as well as the Waterloo municipality, the Nith runs much longer.

And as it touches upon a number of small communities, it holds stories of our industrious and agricultural ways, past and present. Rivers were largely the first mode of transportation and the reason for particular patterns of settlement.

Heading southeast through Lisbon and Philipsburg, Tabi and I pedal over eight more Nith crossings before landing in New

Hamburg. Proving that the river prefers no straight path, New Hamburg offers up four additional river crossings – along with much needed sugary-baked-goods gluttony courtesy of MeMe’s Café.

Spanning the Nith on Huron Street, the steel truss Hartman Bridge was built in 1936 and is the last of its kind to be erected over the river. Retaining its original lattice railing, the bridge is an attractive centrepiece for this town and deserves its spot on the Ontario Heritage Bridge List. The New Hamburg Heritage Waterwheel is a notable downtown landmark built to pay homage to the early settlers and the first industries in the area – mills – that were powered by water gleaned from the watercourse. Take away the Nith and you likely bid adieu to these communities along route.

A couple of kilometres east of New

Hamburg, the pin-jointed steel Holland Mills Road Bridge was crafted by the Hamilton Bridge and Tool Company in the early 1900s, a time when steel bridges were frequently constructed. Now it’s the only reminder of past activities in the area, including a gristmill.

However, the bridge is undeniably showing its age, so officials with the Township of Wilmot have fenced off access, citing the safety concerns of its buckling timber deck. That’s a shame as the unpaved Holland Mills Road and its 90-degree bend on the other side offers a virtually car-free route to the sleepy community of Haysville and is an absolute blast on two wheels. Instead, we’re forced to detour back to New Hamburg to continue our Nith ramble.

Sandwiched between Haysville and Drumbo are nine more Nith road-crossing opportunities that include a number of

rusty steel-truss bridges of yore. Each adds ambience to anyone venturing to these Nith locations to cast a line.

From Plattsville’s River Road to Township Road 12, the peaceful country paths are great examples of why so-called “gravel grinding” has become a cycling passion for an increasing number of riders. Regardless of a few eyeball-rattling washboard sections, we certainly revel in the opportunity to try to outrace darting goldfinches instead of weekday traffic.

A hit of caffeine in Drumbo helps spin our legs toward Canning, once home to the nation’s most famous hockey dad, Walter Gretzky. Now past the 100-kilometre mark, we’re increasingly feeling each pedal stroke in our sun-soaked quads.

Southeast of Canning, the gravel Township Road 2 that is only open to non-vehicular traffic brings us to what is certainly one of

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Paris offers this bridge in a peaceful setting, as well as rewarding scoops of ice cream for cyclists who still have more than 50 kilometres of riding ahead of them before calling it a day.

the most buzz-worthy Nith River bridges – once we get there.

I was a bit too gung-ho to reach it, pushed the pace and ended up kissing the dirt. Luckily, a few minor scrapes didn't derail our Nith-centric ambitions for the day.

The Waterloo Heritage Bridge Inventory suggests this 30-metre rivet-connected truss bridge, surrounded by dense bush, dates back to the wee hours of the 20th century.

It is so narrow we can only cross it in single file. Its facade has been wizened by years of battle with the weather whims of the seasons, and it's easy to get swept up by the torn-from-a-postcard good looks of the Nith as it continues its journey toward the Grand.

Peer to the southwest and you may spot a stream of thundering train cars on tracks owned by the Canadian National Railway. The heritage spot is the ideal place to pull some more date balls and other edible-fuel from our jersey pockets to “gas up” for the

push to Paris.

After 145 kilometres of saddle time, Paris offers one of cycling's most enticing rewards – heaping scoops of ice cream to take the edge off the heat of the day. The prodigious number of calories will come in handy as we head back toward Waterloo.

Of course, before departing town, Tabi and I would be remiss if we didn't roll over to the Nith River Bridge – a concrete solid-spandrel arch-style bridge built in 1932 – to witness the spot where the Nith empties into the Grand River and where its waters will eventually find a home in Lake Erie.

I'm feeling utterly elated as dopamine plays its greatest hits in my head.

OK, I also admit that inclines are now extra taxing as my legs cry foul. I gear down and squeeze the bars and strain to pull my bike and body up and over any slope. Tabi excels and whizzes along the gravel – between periods of fighting with her bike.

The air is pregnant with late-summer humidity so we're sweating more than onions in a sauté pan. But there is little time for moaning as we still have to keep up the pace to nail several more Nith flyovers as

the day begins to ebb way from us.

A tidy sum of pedal strokes to the west deposits us on the aptly named Nith Road. It's an unpaved affair but not too jarring, which frees up plenty of mental space to be captivated by the sylvan setting interspersed with unpretentious farmland. There is a simple joy in riding in the countryside under bluebird skies with no pressing obligations other than developing a deeper connection with the river that guides our journey.

For those who know where to look behind a dense cover of foliage, the Nithvale Bridge in Ayr is redolent of years gone by. Closed to motorized traffic since 1967 and now reclaimed by Mother Nature, the pin-connected steel bridge welcomes us with its creaky wood deck that is penetrated by a plantation of weeds.

We pause to take in the river's gentle sounds and the tunes of song birds, completely oblivious to the fact a flour mill once dominated this area. Constructed around 1873 in the settlement of Nithvale – now part of the village of Ayr – this is among the oldest steel truss bridges in Ontario and you'd be hard-pressed to find one with a more cozy setting. One only hopes that this landmark can withstand a number more years of indifference.

Township Road 12 is blessed with three steel truss bridges hovering over the Nith, among the 12 still standing in Waterloo Region. We check off the middle and east ones before making the final 25-kilometre push for home. The landscape is gleaming in the waning light as we wend our way back to the commotion of Waterloo.

This microadventure has been a blur of water and metal. The number we're most stoked about is not the 202 kilometres of cycling on the day, instead it's the 46 Nith River crossings that will endure in our memories of a ride well done. ●



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