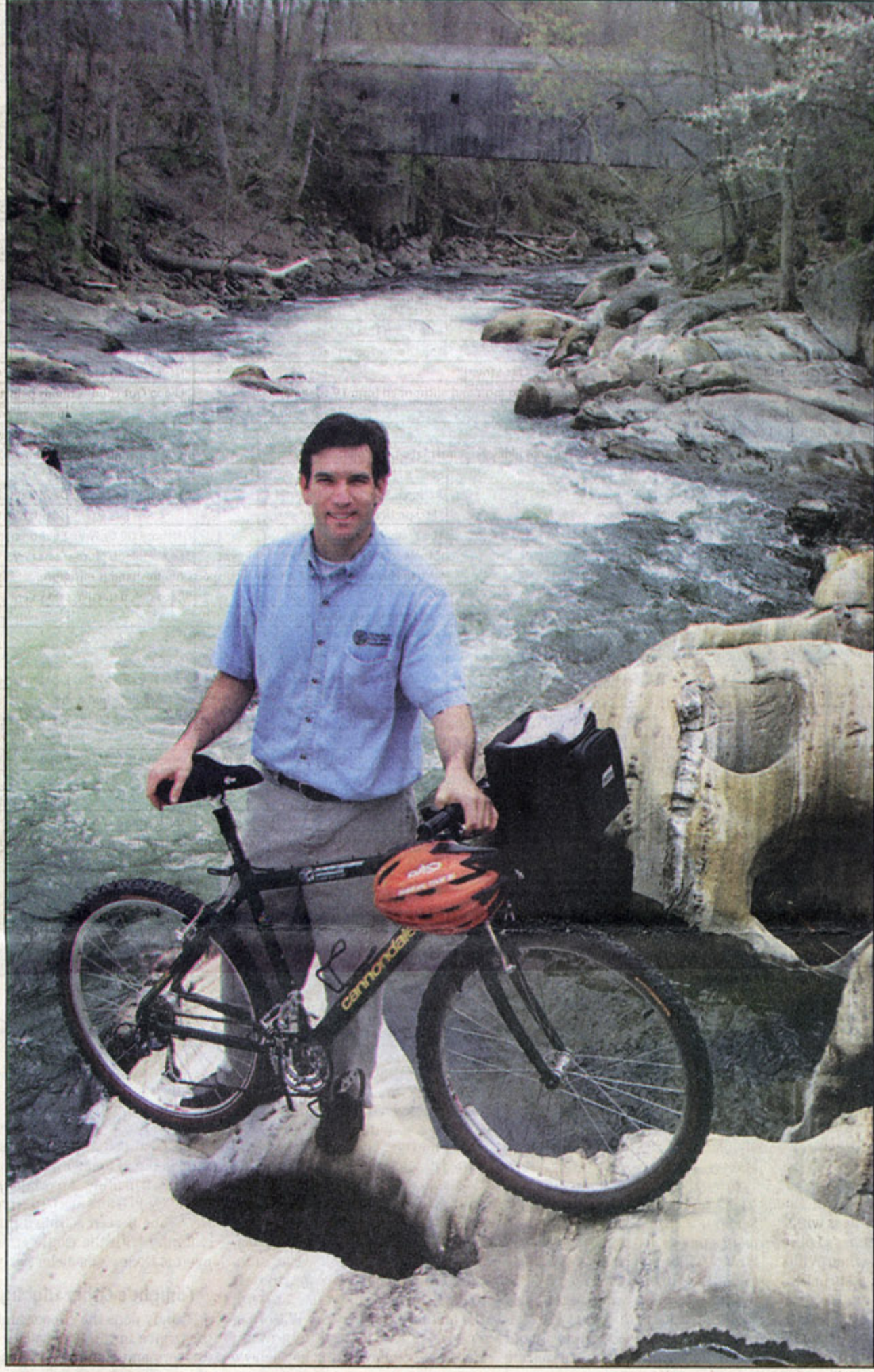


# BUSINESS

## MECHANIC FOR PROS TURNS TO BICYCLE TOURS



JOHN WOIKE / THE HARTFORD COURANT

**SAL LILIENTHAL**, owner of The Bicycle Tour Company in Kent, arranges tours that take vacationers through France and Spain, and the northeastern United States. He was once a bicycle mechanic with the elite Motorola and Saturn bicycling teams. Lilienthal is shown with a mountain bike along the Housatonic River in Kent near the Bull Bridge.

# On His Own Path

By **KEVIN CANFIELD**  
Courant Staff Writer

**K**ENT — Fresh out of Hobart College in 1988, Sal Lilienthal just wanted to find a night job tending bar so he could spend his days skiing.

So he set out for Burlington, Vt. A college town not far from the snow-covered hills of Stowe and Sugarbush, it seemed like the perfect spot for a low-pressure existence.

There was only one problem: None of the local watering holes were hiring. Undaunted, Lilienthal, who had worked for a Massachusetts bicycle touring company in his teens, wandered into a nearby bike shop looking for work. He and the owner found common ground—they had both traveled to Sri Lanka—and Lilienthal had himself a job as a bike mechanic.

Lilienthal didn't know it then, but it was

the start of a career. Within a few years, he was one of the world's top bicycle mechanics, working with cyclists such as Lance Armstrong at the Tour de France. He would spend most of the 1990s traveling to races all over the globe.

In 1997, Lilienthal, a Greenwich native, returned to his home state with the intention of starting his own business. The result is The Bicycle Tour Company on Kent's quiet North Main Street. From his office in this picturesque Litchfield County town, Lilienthal, 33, arranges tours that take vacationers through France and Spain, and the northeastern United States.

"It's something that just happened," Lilienthal said recently. "I didn't want to do the corporate thing. The idea was just to get a job at a bar."

Lilienthal's 2½-year-old company is one of just three commercial bicycle touring companies in the state, according to the

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# ticker

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QUOTE OF THE DAY

*"He did the worrying, and I just enjoyed."*

**LINDA GRANDFIELD**, an Ohio cyclist,  
on a Berkshires bike tour arranged by Sal Lilienthal.

## Mechanic For Pros Turns To Bicycle Tours

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Connecticut Bicycle Coalition Inc. "Seven years ago, we had none," said Georgette Yaindl, the organization's executive director.

Nationally, it's tough to get a handle on the number of bike touring companies, largely because the industry is not well organized, said Bill Wiles, assistant to the director of the Adventure Cycling Association, a 40,000-member organization of recreational cyclists based in Missoula, Mont.

"It's an easy field to get into," Wiles said. "You don't need a lot of money to open a bike tour company. If you've gone on a few tours and have the interest, it's fairly easy."

"My sense is that [the industry] is growing," Wiles added. "We see more companies out there all the time."

Lilienthal declined to discuss how much money it took to start the company, which he got up and running through personal savings and business loans. But he said the company's growing rapidly, and now employs about 15 people.

Last year, the company led tours for a total of about 300 people, Lilienthal said. He expects that figure to triple this year. The company began to turn a profit near the end of its second year in business, he said.

The company might not have existed at all were it not for the Virginia-to-Colorado bike trip Lilienthal and a few friends took 11 years ago. That summer, Lilienthal learned of a clinic for men and women looking to become certified bike mechanics. The weeklong session at the U.S. Olympic training center in Colorado Springs cost \$75; Lilienthal had \$90. He passed the course, but had to wait a few days before receiving his certification.

"They ask you for \$20 to get your certificate," Lilienthal said. "I didn't have any money left."

Lilienthal soon hired on with one of the top racing teams in the nation, and by 1992 he was working as a mechanic for the national bicycle race team. He helped prepare the team for the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain.

From 1994 to 1997, Lilienthal traveled the world as a mechanic with the elite Motorola and Saturn cycling teams. As one of a team of five mechanics, his duties included everything from tightening bolts on \$5,000 bikes to checking tires for air pressure to handing out water bottles on the race course.

Lilienthal saw the pinnacle of athletic achievement from a vantage point few get to enjoy. But he also saw tragedy. At the 1995 Tour de France, Fabio Casartelli, a cyclist with the Motorola team that employed Lilienthal, died in a crash in the Pyrenees Mountains.

It was late summer 1997 when Lilienthal and a few friends hatched the idea for his bike tour company over breakfast in Bend, Ore., a site on the race circuit. Lilienthal wanted to come back to Connecticut to be closer to his family. On the advice of his younger brother, Ryan, he chose Kent, a town that his family had visited for canoeing trips.

Lilienthal offers his European tours for \$75 a person. But his Europe tours aren't cheap. The six-day Spanish tour is \$2,450 a person. A six-day tour in France is \$2,750. But they are less expensive than the rates that many others in the industry charge. The company relies heavily on word of mouth, but also advertises in several tourist publications and magazines, such as Outside.

That's where Natasha Saypol, a Denver lawyer, learned about Lilienthal's company. She decided to take the Spanish trip in 1998 because, aside from the corporate outings he does occasionally, Lilienthal limits touring groups to 12 people.

"Because of Sal's background in the biking world, I think he had a lot of insight that other people might not," Saypol said.

Linda Grandfield, a teacher who lives in Dayton, Ohio, e-mailed Lilienthal after finding the company on the Internet ([www.bicycletours.com](http://www.bicycletours.com)). Grandfield said Lilienthal called her almost immediately and sent her a T-shirt from the company before she had decided to sign up for a tour through the Berkshires.

She said Lilienthal picked her up at the airport after she flew east, provided helmets and top-notch bikes, and made reservations at a nice inn.

"He did the worrying," she said, "and I just enjoyed."

Lilienthal likes to go on all of his company's tours, but as the company grows and offers more trips, that will likely become impossible soon. He hopes to add a number of new tours by 2002, including rides in Australia and Italy.

Having seen the world, Lilienthal is now helping others do the same. He's still about an hour by car from his parents, Peter and Evelyn, in Greenwich. But, he noted, "It's a lot closer than Belgium."

The Bicycle Tour Company  
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