

Bicycle Tour Company Pedals into Kent

By T. COLLEEN MORGAN
Staff Reporter

KENT — Litchfield County residents would probably take pride in knowing a world-traveled cyclist and mechanic for teams that compete all over Europe chose his own New England backyard to base his new Bicycle Tour Company International/USA.

Greenwich native Sal Lillienthal and two friends from Texas recently decided they could guide scheduled and custom tours in the area while planning larger trips to view the European countryside.

Mr. Lillienthal spent three years living in Belgium as the team mechanic for the Motorola bike racing team. He then moved to Waukesha, Wisc., to work with the Saturn team, he said, as he lounged in his home office in Kent Hollow last week.

During his stint in Wisconsin, he met Dave Bolch, a massage therapist and trainer for the Saturn team, and Chann McCrae, a full-time racer who shared his dream of owning a bike touring company with Lillienthal soon after they met.

"Chann is still a rider — he can't work and race at the same time — and Dave still works with the Saturn team," Lillienthal said of his partners. "But I wanted to move on. I had done everything I had wanted to do. And I wanted to be closer to my family."

Having grown up in Greenwich and attended Hobart and William Smith College in New York state, Lillienthal's New England roots pulled him back home. His brother Ryan now lives in Princeton, N.J., and is a practicing attorney but his father Peter remains in Greenwich, a business consultant who helped his son jump-start the Kent-based Bicycle Tour Company last July, Lillienthal said.

"We used to go canoeing up here when I was a kid," he said.

During his college years studying the Third World, he said, he spent his summers leading bike tours in Colorado, Vermont, Maine and Canada —

before and after he spent a year in Sri Lanka — and then moved to Vermont after graduation to bike and ski before venturing into the real world.

"I thought I would get a job in a bar, but no one would hire me," he said. "Then I saw next door to this bar there was a bike shop with a 'mechanic wanted' sign. The service manager had spent three weeks in Sri Lanka during a two-year bike tour around the world, so we got along. I worked there several years and I did tours during the summer."

Once a group of tour leaders took a trip cross country that ended in Colorado and he spent a ski season in Winter Park, hitch-hiking 17 miles to and from work every day. When he and a Vermont friend attended a mechanics clinic in Colorado Springs, Lillienthal met the team mechanic for the 7-11 Cycling Team (the first American team to compete in the Tour de France) and the rest is history, he said.

"I thought it would be cool to work in Europe — to work as a mechanic on

the World Cup circuit for a national team," he said. He spent 1992 working part-time for a national team and a regional team to get the necessary experience and then, in January 1994, he set out for Belgium.

Now that he has seen the world, he wants to show others.

Lillienthal said the next Litchfield County trip will begin Friday, Aug. 21, and end the following Sunday. The group will start at The Birches inn on Lake Waramaug in New Preston, spend Saturday winding through the rolling hills to Litchfield, where a picnic on the green will relax the riders before they bike back to the lake by way of White Flower Farm and on to visit Hopkins Inn Vineyard.

The third day of the excursion will take in the roads to Kent, as well as the bakeries, art galleries and ice cream parlors, before the group makes its way to Kent Falls, Cornwall's covered bridge and then a short hike for interested riders.

Two tours in Spain — from Sept. 11

through Sept. 17 and from Oct. 5 through Oct. 11 — will lead cyclers through Andalusia at the southern tip of the peninsula. The first and second day the riders will visit Cordoba and the white-washed villages and ancient castles south of the city, while the next few days will allow the visitors to explore scenic Abeda, stay in a 16th-century Renaissance palace and ride to the once-Moorish towns of Baeza and Caneda.

The rest of the Spanish visit includes an excursion to the artist colony of Cazorla, a ride through olive groves to Jaen and the Guadalquivir River valley, and a two-day stay in Granada to see the fortress La Alhambra and the Royal Chapel, the final resting place of Ferdinand and Isabella. The trip concludes with a hiking excursion in the Sierra Nevada, Europe's second highest mountain range next to the Alps.

For more information on upcoming trips and next year's schedule, call Sal Lillienthal, director of The Bicycle Touring Company, at 860-927-1742.

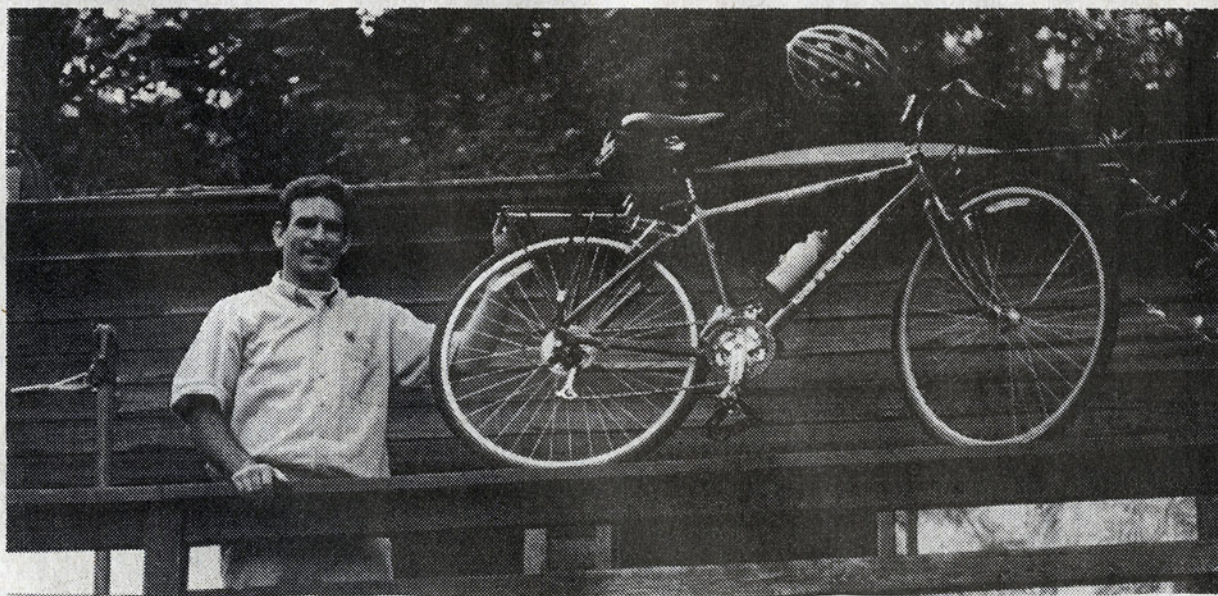


PHOTO BY T. COLLEEN MORGAN
Sal Lillienthal displays a bike that will be used for his new business, Bicycle Tour Company International/USA. The firm will guide scheduled and custom tours.