

It's Not a Skirt!

Biking on Grand Manan Island is no joke. It only looks that way.

by MARGIE GOLDSMITH

➔ I PEER DOWN A 600-FOOT HILL from one of the gnarliest bike trails in the world. It's an obstacle course of roots, rocks and wayward branches, much of it with roller-coaster drops like this one. Seven other people signed up for the ride on Grand Manan Island off New Brunswick. But they never showed up. It's just me and my guide, Kurt. In a way that's good because, well, I'm wearing a kilt. Kurt's wearing one too.

"Why do I have to do this ride in a skirt?" I asked while Kurt was fitting me for the bike yesterday.

"No, no, these are kilts," he corrected me. He handed me a red and green tartan kilt, the same as the one he was wearing in the shop, only smaller. "And if you have to ask, you don't get it."

I don't get it. Maybe the kilts are good for marketing. Or they could have a practical purpose, like reducing chafe? Either way, the name of Kurt's bike tour company is cute: Off Kilter Bikes.

"The kilts are great mud fenders," Kurt said. I wasn't sure if he was serious. Then he just said, "See you tomorrow."

The embarrassment really escalated this morning when I boarded the first ferry to Grand Manan. My fellow passengers didn't sneak looks or muffle laughs. They stared. They laughed in my face. It was like a stress dream, where you wake up naked in the office.

The plan was to drive from the ferry landing to the trail head, unload the bikes, then hit the trail that winds around the 21-mile-long island, which has no cars. The full ride would take

I see are roots and rocks, and if I fall, I'll roll straight down the abyss. What good is a kilt on this terrain? I should be wearing a suit of armor.

"It doesn't look like anyone's been here recently, or ever," I say.

"I saw a hiker here five years ago," Kurt says over his shoulder, "and a cyclist two years ago, but that's about it."



Few people are seen on the hills and flats of Grand Manan, making it easier to wear the required attire.

eight hours and we'd have to finish in time to catch the last ferry back to the mainland at 6 p.m. or be forced spend the night on the island. There was no turning back on the bike route except for one bailout point three hours in.

"Complete this ride," Kurt said at the trail head, "and you've earned the ultimate bragging rights." I looked again at my kilt. Bragging rights?

So here I am, looking down our first big hill. The trail has disappeared. All

As I start the treacherous descent, my palms squeeze the brakes so hard that they practically become one. I pray that my kilt won't catch on a branch along the narrow trail. Every now and then I have to dismount the bike and yank the handlebars free from the thick overgrowth alongside the trail.

At one point I feel something crawling on my thigh. A spider? Nope, it's a thread dangling from the kilt.

Kurt told me earlier that Grand Manan is one of the most beautiful islands in the world, a place where you spot whales and dolphins and pedal through magical forests. Two hours into the ride I'm still looking for the gorgeous scenery. But I can't see it through the woods. And how will I complete another 17 miles before the last ferry leaves?

MAD PIX/OFF KILTEN

We ride over rocks as big as grapefruits, through mud puddles that reach my shoes, and come to a hill so steep that Kurt has to carry his bike. He offers to carry mine as well. No way. I'm not a wimp. But shortly after riding down the opposite side of the hill, my tire slips out. I land with a thud. My first response after falling is to check the kilt for rips.

"You OK?" Kurt asks. I nod, though my knee is swelling. "Its time for lunch anyway. There's a really nice view nearby."

We sit above the Atlantic Ocean eating sandwiches and looking for whales. I finally work up the nerve to ask, "So why are we really riding in kilts?"

"For one thing, my company's based in St. Andrews-by-the-Sea, so there's the immediate Scottish connection," Kurt says. "And my Dad's a tailor."

According to my watch, we've now

been on the trail for more than three hours and we haven't even completed one quarter of the full route.

"How long do we have left?" I ask.

"At least six hours of riding time," Kurt says. He looks at my knee. "The bail-out place is just up here." I don't need bragging rights, and I don't need to spend the night in these woods.

On the ferry, people stare at us. Mostly they look at our mud-splattered kilts. By now, I don't care what anyone thinks. Kurt puts his hand on my shoulder. "Hey," he says. "Everyone bails where you did, and a lot of people quit before they start. Only one guest has ever done the full ride."

I'm thinking it must have been Wonder Woman. And I wonder if she had to wear one of these kilts too.

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Moving Views

GOING DOWNHILL IN NEW ZEALAND

I spin like a boulder down a hill in Rotorua, New Zealand, sloshing from side to side. This is what it's like inside an 11-foot-high inflatable ball (called a Zorb Globe) partially filled with water. This might also be what it's like inside the womb when a mother is on a galloping horse.

GOING UPHILL IN ST. LUCIA

The first half of the 2,619-foot Gros Piton climb is a cinch. But the second half is so steep I have to use tree branches to pull myself along. The view from the summit isn't that great. So the guide takes a spur trail that we use with the help of rickety ladders. We arrive where few feet will stand, with an amazing view of Petit Piton.

STANDING UP IN TURKS AND CAICOS

Ten of us work our way on stand-up paddle boards along the mangroves of the Providenciales. Our guide kneels down on his board and pulls a conch shell from the water, coaxing the wriggling critter to show itself. Just then, a lemon shark followed by a nurse shark swim beneath me. Balance, do not fail me. — MG