







# MINNEAPOLIS FORECAST: WARM SHOWERS

Story and photos by Willie Weir

It is a constant stream of walkers and cyclists: a woman on a mountain bike with a big red milk crate strapped to her back rack; a guy in his 20s with a black T-shirt and skinny maroon pants pedaling a lime green “Nice Ride” bike; a young man in a long-sleeved shirt and sunglasses walking his perpetually happy lab, complete with neon orange ball in its mouth; a mom in a wheelchair with her young daughter, a symphony in pink, riding in her lap; a young woman in blue denim pedaling on a singlespeed upright is passed by an older couple on a bright red tandem decked out in perfectly matched red shirts and helmets; a guy in a green army hat and black backpack balancing a blue Cannondale with no hands; two young women (probably headed for the nearby Guthrie Theatre), dressed in stylish black skirts and black boots. The stream of humanity continues to roll on by: white, Hispanic, Asian, black, young, old, athletic, soft-in-the-middle America. It is a sunny Sunday afternoon in Minneapolis, and we all have one thing in common — smiles on our faces.

I’m sitting on the ground next to my bike on the Stone Arch Bridge in downtown Minneapolis, soaking it all in. What a great place to live! What a

great place to ride a bike! Wow, things have changed!

The last time I sat next to my bike in Minneapolis was 1981 on my first bike trip across America. Now I realize that my impression was based on one day when I was 19 years old. But all I remember is lots of traffic and exhaust. I’m sure there were bike trails somewhere, but we didn’t find them as we negotiated our way across the city. Back then, on a bike trip, cities were places to endure. Get in, through, and out the other side as fast as possible.

33 years later, Minneapolis wasn’t a quick pass-through on my bike trip — it was my bike trip.

My goal was not to cycle Minnesota, just Minneapolis. I already knew that this city-focused tour would be a blast because my wife and I had done a similar trip all within the city limits of Portland, Oregon, and loved it (*Adventure Cyclist* December/January 2010). In Portland, we chose to ride with full panniers and urban camped.

This time I decided to try something new, at least for me: Warmshowers ([warmshowers.org](http://warmshowers.org)). Although this community of free worldwide hospitality offered by fellow cycling travelers has been around since 1996, I’d never signed up. As soon as I did, I discovered



Perfect pedaling fuel at Mesa Pizza by the Slice in Dinkytown near the University of Minnesota.

there were over 200 hosts listed in Minneapolis.

Now I could have contacted one host and requested to crash for the week, but that would have been too easy and not as interesting. So I sent several requests and ended up with five different hosts around the city. I found a boon of joyous hospitality, cycling tips, and advice.

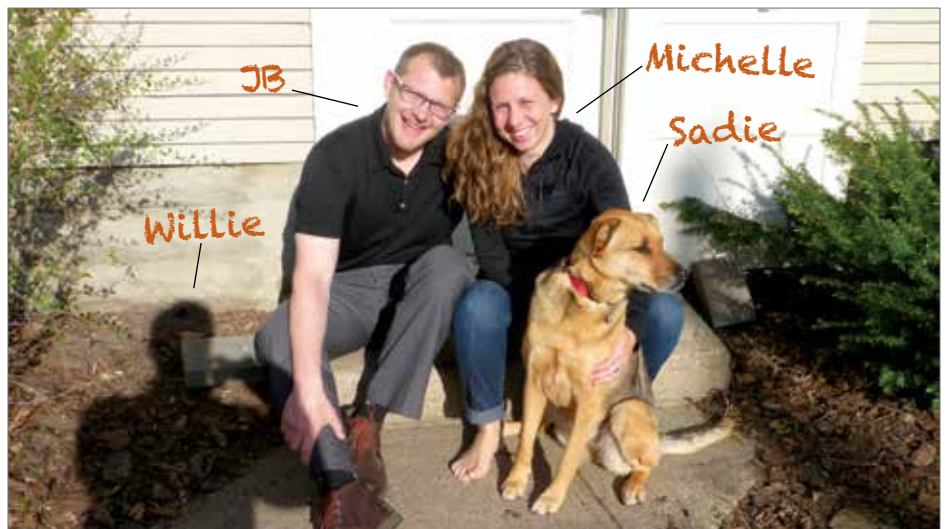
I flew into the Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport with a couple of Ortlieb panniers and a Rodriguez Six Pack travel bike in a suitcase.

Easy-to-follow signs at the airport (wish they had those in my city) directed me to the light rail, and it was a short five-minute walk from the Lake Street/Midtown station to my first host's house. Natalie shares a house with three other women. They are all cyclists, artists, and musicians. Two of them are bike mechanics and work in bike shops. They had cycled down the Mississippi together, camping and playing music along the way.

At midnight, I stood with Natalie, Leah, and Ana huddled around a Minneapolis bike map as they pointed out trails, sights, murals, and restaurants I should experience. I already needed an extra week.

Everyone headed off to bed, and I quietly assembled my bike in the living room before falling asleep on the couch, surrounded by a guitar, a banjo, a cello, and lots of books.

Deciding to stay with a series of Warmshowers hosts was one of the best travel decisions I've ever made. My evenings were filled with laughter and conversations about bicycle travel, and my days were spent following the amazing routes, tips, and suggestions



#### WARMSHOWERS

I'd heard about Warmshowers but had never signed up or even looked at the site ([warmshowers.org](http://warmshowers.org)). I'm not sure why I hadn't, except that as human beings we tend toward the familiar. Since I began touring in 1981 and Warmshowers wasn't established until 1996, it wasn't on my radar.

On a tour, at the end of a day, I'd knock on a door and ask a local's permission to camp on their property.

That is easy in a small town anywhere, but in big cities making those connections is harder. The more I've become interested in exploring cities (instead of fleeing them) by bicycle, the

more sense Warmshowers makes.

Sign-up is simple, and the site is easy to navigate. You aren't obligated to host, but it's assumed that you would one day want to return the favor.

There is no charge or fee, so why not give it a try?

from fellow travelers who lived in, and loved, Minneapolis.

#### Chain of Lakes

I spent a full day pedaling the paths around and between the Chain of Lakes southwest of downtown. This is one of the seven park districts that make up the Grand Rounds Scenic Byway that embraces the city in a big green hug. No wonder locals are so proud of their parks. Few cities in America can boast this much green space for their citizens.

It was an overcast and chilly day as I made my way around the lakes. Few people were out, and it seemed unnecessary to have separated bike and pedestrian paths. Cycling around Lake Calhoun, I was mesmerized by its beauty and lost in my own thoughts. It wasn't until I saw a delicatessen and wine shop and wondered why they looked strangely familiar that I realized I had pedaled around it twice.

I arrived at my host's house and met Michelle, JB, and their wonder dog, Sadie. Michelle had the best Warmshowers profile I'd read:

"For the most part, I like biking better



than driving. I like red wine better than white ... but bourbon better than both. I like dark chocolate more than milk and tents more than hotels.”

I joined them (Sadie stayed home ... she prefers to kayak) and some friends for an evening ride around the lakes I'd just finished pedaling by. It was a perfect repeat because this time around I got to experience the people of Minneapolis enjoying their parks. The need for separate paths was now apparent. The earlier empty trails were now full of hundreds, no, thousands of cyclists and walkers. It was a parade of humanity in motion, laughing, chatting, and soaking up the sun.

In the morning, Michele recommended that I drop by a popular local bakery not far from their house. When I walked into A Baker's Wife's Pastry Shop, I was the only customer. Was I in the right place? Within 90 seconds, I had my answer as the shop filled up with a line out the door. One woman walked out with three grocery bags full of baked goods. I showed some self-restraint and ordered a chocolate croissant, two cake donuts, and two chocolate chip cookies. When I finished them all later that morning, I seriously considered pedaling back to restock.

Instead, I popped into another establishment recommended by every cyclist I'd met, Victor's 1959 Café (revolutionary Cuban cooking). It was another chilly, overcast day, providing a contrasted to the explosion of colors and aromas that hit me as soon as I walked into the door. The place was packed, but I found a seat at the counter and lingered over coffee and the Ranchero Cubano (corn tortillas



Minneapolis has 85 miles of off-street bikeways and 92 miles of on-street bikeways.

topped with eggs, cheese, and a Creole sauce, served with black beans).

#### Midtown Greenway

Some folks call it the “bicycle freeway.” If you cycle Minneapolis, you end up riding the Midtown Greenway, a former rail corridor that runs in a trench below the city streets, which allows for a

quick, unimpeded commute or a leisurely weekend ride. The Midtown Greenway connects to several bike trails that head out of the city and beyond. It also has one of the best and friendliest bike shops — the Freewheel Midtown Bike Center — I've encountered anywhere.

I followed the Midtown Greenway west and connected to the Kenilworth



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Trail, then the North Cedar Lake Regional Trail, and on to Hopkins where I stopped for coffee at the Depot Coffee House. This cozy former train depot is the unofficial meeting place for cyclists heading out for regional rides. It was planned and is run by local students. Solar panels provide much of the power, and local musicians often play inside or out on the spacious patio.

Back in town, I was checking my map to see how to get to my next host's house when a young man pedaled up to me.

"Where are you going?"

When I told him the address, his eyes got wide.

"Dude. That's my 'hood. Forget the map. I'm taking you there."

So I got a personal bike escort from Smilin' Joe.

He was in his early 20s and dreamed of taking a long bike tour one day. He was jonesing for a cigarette and asked several people we encountered along our way if they could spare one.

"I've always ridden my bike. It's just the way I get around. Isn't my city great?"

As we pedaled through the back-

#### KNOTS ON A STRING

You can hear excerpts from an interview with Natalie and Leah about their bike trip and a song from their band Knots on a String at [adventurecycling.org/knotsonastring](http://adventurecycling.org/knotsonastring)

streets, every time he saw a kid on a bike, he yelled out, "Happy Bike Week." I reminded him that Minneapolis Bike Week had been the week before.

"Don't matter," he said. "Bike Week should be two weeks."

I agreed.

#### Nice Ride

I almost didn't stay with my Saturday host, Amit. He said it probably wouldn't be a good night because he had to work late.

"What do you do?" I inquired.

"I work for Nice Ride, the Minneapolis bike-share program."

And that's how I got a glimpse of just how much work it is to keep a bike-share program running smoothly. We drove around the city in a truck with a trailer specially designed to fit sev-

eral Nice Ride bikes. Amit constantly monitored a laptop with a program that showed how many bikes were at each of the over 170 stations. He coordinated with two other workers with vehicles and trailers who were shuttling the fleet of over 1,500 bikes between stations. The goal was to keep everything in balance, picking up bikes from stations that were full and shuttling them to stations that were running low.

I had seen these bikes and stations everywhere I'd pedaled throughout the city. I thought, "You wouldn't even need to bring a bike to do a bike trip in Minneapolis." That gave me an idea for another city-centered trip.

Amit had recently returned to Minneapolis and landed a job with Nice Ride. He and his girlfriend had moved out to California, but they had soon discovered that they had to drive everywhere. Completely disenchanted with the car-dependent lifestyle, they returned to Minneapolis.

I had the good fortune of helping Amit on the busiest night of the year. It was Art-a-Whirl, a huge event put on by the Northeast Minneapolis Arts Association at multiple venues — lots of art, lots of music, lots of beer. It was the perfect event to travel to on a Nice Ride bike.

Every bright green Nice Ride bike in Minneapolis was headed in the direction of Art-a-Whirl. No sooner would we fill a station with bikes than they'd be gone. We'd drive near the wonderful chaos of Art-a-Whirl, fill the trailer with bikes, and head to an empty station. By the end of the evening, my arms ached from lifting bikes, and I instantly fell fast asleep on the couch at Amit's place.

#### A Perfect Day

My dear friends Lisa and Todd drove in from Wisconsin and met me for a day with their recumbent bikes. We explored the bike paths on both sides of the Mississippi and wandered over to St. Paul, pedaling past the grand mansions of Summit Avenue.

The highlight had to be Minnehaha Falls, which is along the 50-mile Grand Rounds National Scenic Byway. Heavy spring rains had the 53-foot falls roaring in all their glory. But the true highlight (as only a cyclist would under-

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stand) was the food.

Without the guidance and wisdom of locals, we'd have missed out. There is a restaurant in the park next to the falls, but its cutesy name, Sea Salt, had me suspicious. From my experience, the worst food on the planet is often found in touristy restaurants next to grand views. We had already decided to give it a pass when a local cyclist said, "Don't miss the fish tacos. You'll be sorry."

The restaurant didn't open for another 20 minutes, but we didn't want to be sorry — and we were really hungry.

Oh my God! Fish tacos to die for. Fresh, fresh fish, filleted before our eyes, battered and lightly fried. And to top it off, a counter filled with bottles of hot sauce — over 25 varieties to choose from.

Blue skies, wandering bike trails, lush scenery, good friends, and bellies full of fish tacos. A perfect day.

#### Full Circle

After spending the week pedaling over 250 miles in and around Minneapolis — and one last visit to my favorite spot on the Stone Arch



Over 1,500 Nice Ride (bike share) bikes are located in stations throughout Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Bridge — I arrived back at Natalie's place where I spent the night before catching light rail back to the airport.

I'd return to Minneapolis in a heartbeat. There are so many more trails to pedal and neighborhoods to explore — so many more cafés, pubs, and bakeries to indulge in.

Thank you to all my Warmshowers

hosts (Natalie, Brian and Amy, Michelle and JB, John and family, Amit and Marisa). You showed me why Minneapolis deserves its reputation as one of the most bike-friendly cities in America.

Willie Weir is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist magazine and has been since the Seattle Mariners beat the Yankees in the playoffs. That was a long time ago.

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