

Two Florida Trails, WORLDS APART

By Harry Jaffe

Cruising along the Cape Haze Pioneer Trail one spectacularly hot and humid Florida afternoon, I looked to my right and saw a bright-green lizard keeping pace with my road bike. Fair race, I figured. The little reptiles are at home in these coastal flatlands of pine trees, sand and mangrove-lined creeks. A Northerner out of my element, I had been a bicycle racer in my younger days. So we got it on for a few yards, until the lizard's legs seemed to twirl so fast they disappeared, like the Road Runner chased by Wile E. Coyote. I slowed down and let the lizard dart across the trail.

Photography by Bob Croslin/Aurora Select



I may have lost out to the lizard, but coming down to ride the rail-trails on Florida's Pirate Coast was a win. It taught me a lot about how the history and culture of trails can bring them together or keep them apart.

This is a snapshot of two very different rail-trails—Cape Haze Pioneer and Boca Grande—trying to bridge a gap over water, tradition and lifestyle.

Boca Grande Trail is a 5.5-mile path through a barrier island that's gone from funky fishing village to elite resort in the past 25 years. On the mainland, Cape Haze Pioneer Trail's 4.5 miles parallel a state highway through housing developments and retirement communities. Boca Grande

was built by a du Pont heir and completed decades ago; Cape Haze is being built with public funds and is in its infancy. Boca Grande has problems of overcrowding and controlling kids driving golf carts; sparsely used, Cape Haze is a path to nowhere, beginning by a highway and ending at a creek.

"Our intent is to make the two trails connect," says Mark Gumula, director of the Metropolitan Planning Organization for Charlotte and Punta Gorda counties. "We're going to work with Boca Grande to make that happen."

Connected to Boca Grande, Cape Haze Pioneer Trail could become one of the keystone trails in Florida, linked with pathways up the Gulf Coast to Venice and Sarasota and down to Punta Gorda.

It would trace the path of its illustrious railroad parent, the Seaboard Coast Line.

Lighthouse overlooking the south end of the Boca Grande Trail. (Inset) Not all Florida's coastal attractions are directly visible from the Cape Haze Pioneer and Boca Grande trails, but the trailside ecosystems of both pathways still teem with local wildlife, from egrets and herons to armadillos and lizards and the occasional alligator.



A Donor's Vision

The original railroad spur that cut through Charlotte County, crossed Gasparilla Sound and ran through Boca Grande was owned by the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railway. Nicknamed “the Cold, Hungry and Naked,” in 1907 the train hauled phosphate from mines in Mulberry to the deepwater port at Boca Grande. Wealthy families from the North also loaded private rail cars with luggage and servants so they could spend the summer at Boca Grande’s beaches and rich tarpon fishing grounds. “In those days the only way you could reach Boca Grande was by train or boat,” says Mark Futch, a member of one of Gasparilla Island’s original fishing families.

In winter months, local fishing clans shared the island with brand-name families. The Vanderbilts had a beachfront compound; members of Boston’s high society built the Gasparilla Inn, which hosted J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford and members of the du Pont family. In the early 1960s, du Pont heir Bayard Sharp took control of the inn and settled on the island. Local lore has it that one of Sharp’s employees was killed riding her bicycle home from the inn. “That was one of the reasons Bayard built the bike trail,” Futch tells me.

The last passenger train rumbled through Gasparilla Island in 1958, and freight trains continued until the late 1970s. When the line was abandoned by its owner, CSX, in 1982, Sharp swapped a valuable piece of island property for the right-of-way. He raised funds to make a path, paved it over and created the first rail-trail in Florida, dedicated on February 23, 1985.

In transferring the trail to a nonprofit, the Gasparilla Island Conservation and Improvement Association, Sharp mandated that golf carts could use the trail. Now, 27 years later, the sleepy fishing village has become a crowded resort center that hosts the Bush family, among others. And during winter months the Boca Grande Trail can be jammed with golf carts, cyclists, inline skaters, baby strollers and even folks on foot. Florida law says golf cart drivers must be 14, but younger kids still get behind the wheel.

“Enforcement is a nightmare,” says Misty Nabers, the association’s executive director. “We’re constantly working with the sheriff’s deputies to keep the path safe.”

The Boca Grande Trail seemed safe and calm the morning I rode its length, from the causeway over Lemon Bay on the north end into the village of Boca Grande and down to the southern point, where a state

Boca Grande has grown from isolated fishing village to elite resort over the last 25 years, and fans of its trail now run the gamut from traditional bicyclists to cutting-edge skateboarders. (Above) Members of the Coastal Cruisers, a local bicycling club in North Port, Fla., glide through downtown Boca Grande on the rail-trail.



park and a lighthouse jut into the Gulf of Mexico. (No 12-year-old hot-rodders tried to run me over with a golf cart, but I was riding in the low season. From January to April, the season is high, and trail traffic is heavy.) The trail parallels a running path and the two-lane road through the island. You see the backs of homes that face Gasparilla Sound; you might see egrets or



(Clockwise from top) Watch your step—Mexican spiny-tailed iguanas have flourished around the Boca Grande Trail; the Coastal Cruisers hit destinations all over southern Florida, and they always require helmets; golf carts are permitted on the Boca Grande and used for transportation purposes.

ibises or herons overhead; you are likely to dodge the skittering little iguanas that have overrun the island.

Setting Sites on the Cape Haze

In the center of Boca Grande, you might want to hitch your bike to the rack by the Loose Caboose for a great fish sandwich and a cold beer or soda. Ann Mercer, the driving force behind the Cape Haze Pioneer Trail, met me at the Loose Caboose one day, and I heard quite a different tale about building a rail-trail.

Ann and her husband, Robert, moved to Charlotte County in 1993. It was as if the

couple had been preparing to create a rail-trail their entire lives. “We became aware of the rail-trail concept early on,” Ann tells me. Turns out Langdon and Barbara Burwell were lifelong friends of the Mercers. Bob Mercer and Lang Burwell met doctoring the wounded in World War II. Barbara Burwell would later establish a storied bike trail on Cape Cod, where the two families vacationed together. The Burwells’ son, David, became one of the founders of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.

The Mercers were bikers from the days they met at the University of Michigan. Ann’s father gave her a bike her junior year.

“We did not own a car for the first eight years of our marriage in Ann Arbor,” she says. She bought a three-speed, Raleigh Robin Hood in 1975 and just gave it up a few years ago. The Mercers raised a family in Cleveland, where Bob was a doctor and Ann a remedial reading teacher. When they retired to Florida, they were ready for a crusade.

In 1994, a year after they arrived, Charlotte County announced that it owned the railroad corridor. “Bob and I saw rail-trails as an environmental issue,” she says. “When we saw this section belonged to the county, we knew we had a great opportunity.” They incorporated Friends of Cape Haze Pioneer Trail in 1995, held rallies, applied for grants and organized. “From day one, we had a positive response from citizens,” she says. “Things went swimmingly.”

Construction began in 1999 and progressed in three phases, which were completed in 2005, a year after Bob Mercer passed away.



A view of Charlotte Harbor from Boca Grande. (Inset, clockwise from left) Dropping a quick line into Coral Creek where the Cape Haze Pioneer Trail dead-ends; a red-tailed hawk near Boca Grande; a mother and daughter hunt for shark teeth; ocean treasure on the beach off the Boca Grande Trail.



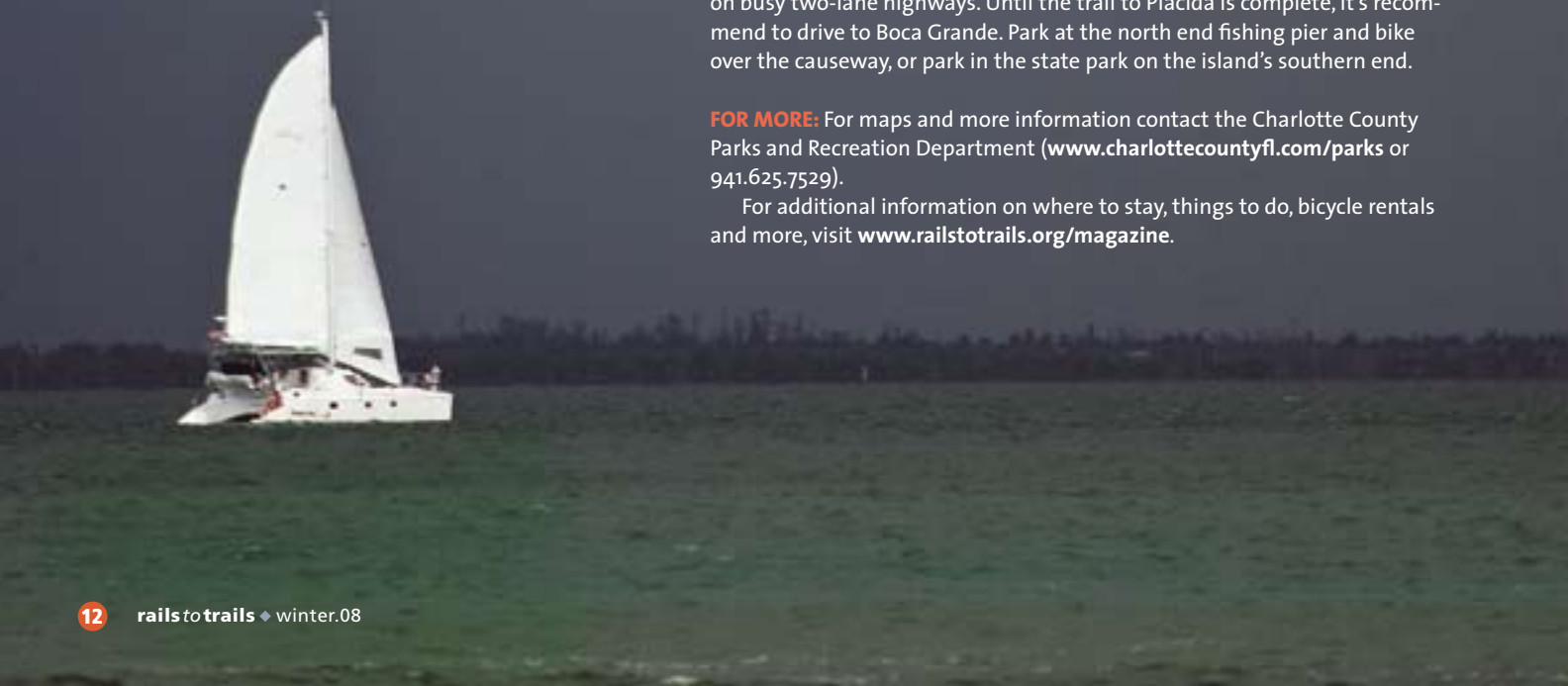
TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE: The airport at Ft. Myers is not far from Boca Grande. You also can fly to Tampa or Sarasota and drive south. Eventually you have to get a car, hop on I-75 and take Florida 776 to Englewood. The Cape Haze Pioneer trailhead is at the intersection of Route 776 and 771 in the town of McCall.

Biking from the Cape Haze Pioneer Trail to Boca Grande requires riding on busy two-lane highways. Until the trail to Placida is complete, it's recommend to drive to Boca Grande. Park at the north end fishing pier and bike over the causeway, or park in the state park on the island's southern end.

FOR MORE: For maps and more information contact the Charlotte County Parks and Recreation Department (www.charlottecountyfl.com/parks or 941.625.7529).

For additional information on where to stay, things to do, bicycle rentals and more, visit www.railstotrails.org/magazine.



Progress and Promise

I found one sign at the northern trailhead, which is dedicated to Bob and Ann Mercer, a little troubling. It warns: "Caution! Alligator Habitat." It states the obvious: Don't feed the gators. In fact, no one has spied one of the large reptiles on or near the trail.



(Clockwise from left) The ocean is never far from the Boca Grande Trail, which runs along a narrow barrier island between the Gulf of Mexico and Gasparilla Sound; two teens on a boardwalk bridge to the beach at Boca Grande; a lighthouse keeps watch over the trail and its family of users.

The trail turned out to be tame, straight and flat. I did see egrets and herons and a large box turtle catching some sun beside the trail. Judging from its current terminus at Coral Creek, near the town of Placida, this is a trail with much promise, once it takes riders across the water. When I was there the creek was literally boiling with fish. I could watch blue crabs sidestepping across the flats. Ducks took shelter under the mangroves as I rode by.

A new trail section over Coral Creek all the way to Placida should be complete



by summer 2009, according to Gumula. At that point, the public Cape Haze Pioneer Trail will run right up to the three bridges that will connect it to the private Boca Grande Trail.

Next problem: The bridges are also private, under the control of the Gasparilla Island Bridge Authority. They receive no public funds or taxes and survive on toll fees. They are due for renovation over the



next 10 years, but will the owners add bike lanes? "We have planned bike lanes for the two fixed bridges," says Jim Cooper, the bridge authority's executive director.

Building a bike lane into the drawbridge across Gasparilla Sound might be more of a problem, because of cost.

Cooper asks, "Why not establish a pontoon ferry system to carry bikers from one shore to the other? An operator could charge a nominal fee, same as the \$1 toll. It's not that much of an out-of-the-ballpark concept."

Says Mark Gumula: "In the interim, we would really like to check that out, but eventually the new bridge should have bike lanes."

For the moment, once the Cape Haze Pioneer Trail arrives at the drawbridge it will be worth paying the toll, now \$1, to get over the span. There was a reason the Vanderbilts and the du Ponts and later the Bushes chose Boca Grande as a playground. It's well worth the ride.

Harry Jaffe, a national editor at *The Washingtonian* magazine, has been profiling trails for *Rails to Trails* for nearly a decade. His feature on Portland's Springwater Corridor appeared in the Summer 2006 issue.