

Fourth annual Hibiscus Festival Bicycle Tour is Saturday

By SANDRA PRICE
TEAM PUNTA GORDA

This weekend's sixth annual Punta Gorda Hibiscus Festival will feature the fourth annual Bicycle Tour. Though two years younger than the Hibiscus festival itself, this event is a popular addition to the other family-friendly festivities and is expected to be a big draw again this year.

Beginning at 8 a.m. Saturday, cyclists from across the county and state will pedal through Punta Gorda and Charlotte County on one of four planned rides of varying lengths and difficulty.

Organized by TEAM Punta Gorda, Acme Bicycle Shop and the Charlotte County Health Department, the Bicycle Tour offers rides for every level of ability, from the novice cyclist to the long-time enthusiast. All four rides begin and end on the waterfront at Gilchrist Park, headquarters for the day's activities. And all four rides require helmets; fun isn't fun if it isn't safe.

Riders have a choice of four routes. Beginners and those who want a non-strenuous tour of the city are invited to sign up for the City Manager's Ride. Tour leader Howard Kunk will make frequent stops at various locations along the route during which he will give updates on various ongoing projects in the post-Charley revitalization of Punta Gorda. This ride is our own Tour de Punta Gorda. It is being billed as "Spandex-free," bicyclist slang for the equivalent of a downhill skier's bunny slope. There will be plenty of rest time built in: If you're out of condition or just beginning as a cyclist, this is the ride for you.

The Quarter Metric Century ride covers 15 miles. The Half and Full Metric Century Rides cover 30 and 62 miles respectively for more challenging rides. In case you're wondering, the Quarter, Half, and Full Century rides for these rides derive from their

distances in kilometers. Even though the United States failed to embrace the metric system, athletes are firmly on board with the standard used around the world.

Leaders for the two longest rides of 100 kilometers and 50 kilometers are Ken Loveloy and Kerri Black of Clear Channel Radio. Join them for a thorough workout. TEAM Punta Gorda CEO Nancy Traflet is leading the 25-kilometer slower-ride, spandex-free tour. She said, "This is the ride for the fun-loving and casual rider. Bring the family or a group of friends and enjoy participating together."

She promises: no rider left behind.

Because the Bicycle Tours are such a popular event, early registration is recommended. As an incentive for early responses, there is a \$5 discount on each ride. On the day of the rides, the Century and Half Century will cost \$40. The Quarter Century and Manager's rides will cost \$20. Go to any of the three Web sites listed below to download an entry form. Phone TEAM Punta Gorda at 941-637-8326 for the answers to any questions not covered on the sites.

Included in the registration fee for all adult riders is lunch catered by the Sky View Cafe. Plus, each participant will receive a water bottle, a schwag bag and a pair of bicycling socks. In addition to all the above, participants will have the satisfaction of supporting two most worthwhile causes: TEAM Punta Gorda and their own personal health. One of the goals of TEAM's initiatives is improving quality of life. And Charlotte County Health Department's objective in promoting heart-healthy bicycling is to help prolong that life.

Bicycle Tour registration begins at 7 a.m. Saturday at Gilchrist Park. The first ride starts at 8 a.m. and others follow at 10 minute intervals. All rides end back at their starting place.

The Hibiscus Festival Bicycle tour is one part of TEAM Punta Gorda's Spokes and Trails initiative. It was inspired by the national Rails-to-Trails program, which is undertaking to turn disused railway lines into a nationwide network of biking and hiking trails. TEAM's Spokes and Trails Committee is a cooperative effort among government officials, businesses and bicycle clubs as well as individual cycling enthusiasts. And there is always room for more people interested in cycling. You can join this group or any TEAM committee by signing up on TEAM's Web site, e-mailing teampunta@gmail.com, or phoning the office at 941-637-TEAM.

These Bicycle Tours, the Spokes and Trails committee and quarterly cycling events reflect the City of Punta Gorda's efforts, in partnership with TEAM, to have the city designated a Bicycle-Friendly Community by the League of American Bicyclists. The city's very first application to the League resulted in Punta Gorda's qualifying for Honorable Mention in the listings. This is an incredible achievement for a first-time applicant.

Because the League reaches cycling enthusiasts around the country and the world, its recognition results in increased exposure among cyclists. Punta Gorda could become a draw to hobbyists looking for new, safe, riding venues. Southwest Florida's nearly perfect weather already makes it a popular destination when other areas are suffering through winter. The seal of approval from the League helps attract even more cycling visitors to Punta Gorda.

The Bicycle Tour is only one of the many Hibiscus Festival activities at Gilchrist Park and other locations around town. The Punta Gorda National Hibiscus Festival Committee has been busy this year. What a line-up they have planned!

The regular third

Thursday Gallery Walk is an early start to the weekend. This month's theme is, of course, hibiscus. Browse the many downtown shops open late, then enjoy a delicious dinner at any number of fine restaurants. Afterwards, join the Guitar Army at Gilchrist Park for a jam session. Bring your own lawn chairs and stay late.

Then on Friday night, return to Gilchrist Park at 6 p.m. for the Al Fresco Dinner & Music Festival. Enjoy the sunset, then stay to watch the stars come out. The event continues until 11 p.m.

Starting at 9 a.m. Saturday, after the departure of the bicyclists, there will be bicycle helmet fittings by the Florida Department of Transportation. This program continues all morning at Gilchrist Park.

A variety of food and drinks will be on sale all day Saturday, including fresh-caught seafood, Big John's famous barbeque and other treats.

In addition to a farmer's market offering locally grown produce, vendors will also have a variety of plants for sale, including tropicals, flowers and herbs.

If you'd rather admire than own plants, take a tour of Punta Gorda's Secret Gardens. Tickets are on sale at Gilchrist Park. You can take the tour by Trolley, bicycle or on foot. Master Gardeners will be available at many locations to identify plants and explain their care.

Free trolley rides to historic downtown Punta Gorda, and the Streets Street History Park will be available all day Saturday. While at History Park, see the Harry Goulding Hibiscus Exhibit and visit the newly restored Price House. Also at the park are the Trabue Land Sales Office, thought to be the oldest building in Punta Gorda and now an art and gift shop, and the Cigar Cottage, which offers displays of artifacts from the days when Florida rivaled Cuba in



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY TPG

Above, riders register and listen to Earl Lang of Acme Bicycle Shop, below, before departing on last year's Bicycle Tour.



the production of fine cigars.

Or view dozens of beautiful antique cars owned by members of the Veteran Motor Car Club of America.

Or visit the Visual Arts Center for a guide to their many Art in the Park displays of works by local artists.

Or watch the Hibiscus Sailboat Regatta.

Or...?

So make sure you don't miss a minute of the festivities. The festival promises to be an exciting day filled with a multitude

of activities for all members of the family. And if you are riding in one of the four tours, don't forget your helmet. Bicycle safety is no accident.

For more information and Bicycle Tour entry forms contact one of the organizers below: www.charlottetechd.com; www.teampunta.org; www.puntagordahibiscusfestival.org

To volunteer for any of TEAM's projects or committees, phone 941-637-8326 or e-mail team@team.puntagorda.com.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY LEE ROYSTON

Veteran Motor Car Club of America antique autos like Paul Stamoulis' 1968 Plymouth GTX, left, and John Walter's 1954 Hudson Jet, right, will be on display. With the antique cars in this photo are festival board member Mike Haymans, left, Stamoulis' godson Nick Fokianos, center, and Lou Spacco, right, president of the Harry Goulding Chapter of the American Hibiscus Society.

SPONSORS

While TEAM Punta Gorda, Acme Bicycle Shop, and Charlotte County Health Department organized this year's Hibiscus Bicycle Tours, this would not have been possible without the generous contributions of a number of sponsors. You can show your support for the Bicycle Tours by signing up to ride on Saturday and by frequenting the businesses who help underwrite it.

Special thanks go to the following: Charlotte Regional Medical Center; Fair Law Firm; GSD Group at Merrill Lynch; Gulf Coast Bennett Auctions, LLC; Peace Fiber Distributing; The Punta Gorda Club; Sky View Cafe at the Charlotte County Airport; Tarpco Coast Computers; the city of Punta Gorda, which is supplying water to keep riders hydrated.