



BIKING AMERICA

Pepper-spray bust leaves a bad taste

Chicago-based Jerry Soverinsky is riding coast-to-coast and documenting his trip weekly in the Herald.

By JERRY SOVERINSKY
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

I love traveling through Canada. The people are great, spelling rules are completely relaxed (litre and honour, for example), and you always leave with a hilarious story that somehow ends with the catchphrase "It was a very dumb thing to do."

I crossed into Canada last week and was asked, "Are you carrying pepper spray?"

Technically, I wasn't carrying pepper spray; I was resting safely in my front handlebar bag. I brought it on my trip — along with several refill canisters — to protect me in the event that I was chased by dogs or lonely Montanans.

I showed the agent my pepper spray device, and he explained that its possession was illegal in Canada. I asked whether I could simply remove the cartridge from the canister, and he agreed — never asking whether I had additional cartridges. After a mile past the border, I reloaded my pepper spray cylinder with a new cartridge and was on my way.

On the final day of my Canada ride, I was cycling along the northern border of Lake Erie, heading for Niagara Falls.

As I neared the top of a modest hill, a spy and focused German shepherd spotted me. I dismounted and shielded my body from the charging dog by keeping my bicycle between us, then I reached for my pepper spray and fired it into the dog's face. Confident that I was then safe, I continued my ride.

What I hadn't noticed, while fending off the dog, was a provincial police car across the street. It had stopped just in time to see me spraying the dog.

Skip ahead 10 minutes. I'm in the back of an OPP (Ontario Provincial Police) squad car, while Officer No. 1 is calling in my passport details. All of my clothes and equipment are scattered on the street, as Officer No. 2 is rifling through my bags.

Apparently, possession of pepper spray is punishable by a fine and/or imprisonment of up to five years. FIVE YEARS! In a Canadian prison. With "Hockey Night in Canada" playing on all the prison televisions.

I was fortunate that Officer No. 2 was a modest cycling fan. He mentioned a couple of Canadian cyclists who had earned spots on European teams, and I nodded my head in recognition, in reality having not the slightest clue. I offered a generous compliment of Canadian beer that seemed to hit the mark, and soon was released, on condition that I promised never to bring pepper spray back into Canada.

Later that night, standing on line at a fried dough stand, I shook my head as I concluded with absolute certainty: Failing to relinquish my pepper spray cartridges at the Canadian border — it was a very dumb thing to do.

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