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Hawarden native now leads Switzerland bike tours

By [Bret Hayworth](#), Journal staff writer

At age 12, John Klemme, with his father Ron Klemme of Hawarden, Iowa, rode the RAGBRAI bicycle tour west to east entirely across the state of Iowa.



(Submitted photo)

Now 25 years later, despite that unpleasant long-distance biking experience, Klemme is leading his own tours -- in Switzerland. From July to September for the last few years, he's led five 10-day tours of Switzerland, where bikers experience the rich cultural history and dine on fine cuisine after pedaling about 60 miles daily through mountains and by picturesque lakes.

As a junior at the University of Iowa, Klemme spent a year studying in France, and "at that point, I kind of fell in love with Europe, and did everything I could to get back." He graduated from Iowa in 1992, and "I've pretty much been in Europe ever since," Klemme explained.

Of the 1982 RAGBRAI that began in Akron, Klemme recalled, "It was terrible, but I did the whole thing. My dad had to push me. It was almost bordering on child abuse."

About that time he started biking 20-mile roundtrips in and back from Akron, and Klemme experienced "a feeling of independence" with his first Fuji bicycle. That joy of cycling grew more expansive a decade later in Europe, where he said the scenery is more breathtaking than going town to town in Iowa.

"It is magic biking in Europe. The towns have histories going back for hundreds of years, with historical and cultural significance," he said.

About seven years ago, Klemme helped some friends visiting in Europe rent some bikes. The following year, those friends brought more friends, and as Klemme showed them some routes, "it got me thinking about doing it in a larger, more organized way." Bike Switzerland soon was born.

Klemme -- who attended Sioux City North High School from 1985 to 1987, then graduated from an Arizona high school -- has lived in Geneva the last nine years. That's where the Bike Switzerland tour begins, then runs northeast 400 miles. At the end, a train brings the riders back south.

Bike Switzerland was founded in 2002. Klemme was back in Iowa that summer, and RAGBRAI played a part in his endeavor. He set up a Bike Switzerland stand along the RAGBRAI route, handing out fliers, and "everyone who came (to Switzerland) that first year was from RAGBRAI. Ever since then, I've had people who have come on Bike Switzerland from RAGBRAI."

He figures he owes a debt of gratitude to RAGBRAI not only for the clients, but for "that original interest in biking."

Firms have been offering organized bike tours to many countries for years. "They end up costing sometimes \$4,000 or \$5,000 for a week of cycling, and I thought we could do that a lot cheaper. I thought we could give a lot more value than some of the bike tours out there," Klemme said.

The first Bike Switzerland tour cost \$2,000, and today the price is \$2,950.

His parents, Ron and Kathy Klemme of rural Hawarden, had a big hand in Bike Switzerland as it got off the ground, handling credit card payments for reservations. They've increasingly scaled back, and Ron no longer bikes.

Klemme teaches English as a foreign language in Geneva, but has the summer off. Bike Switzerland, he said, "is really a full-time job, too." The other Bike Switzerland tour guides, "all with a passion for cycling," Klemme said, are also educators who live in Switzerland, including a North Dakota native.

"We know Switzerland. I biked this itinerary probably three or four times before we started," Klemme explained. The current route is along one of the nine national bike paths in Switzerland, where the usage is

limited to bicycles and rural vehicles, "so we very seldom have to share the roads with cars," he said.

The tour has a few nonbiking days thrown in, with a scavenger hunt in Geneva and wine tasting. Each of the five tours is limited to 14 to 16 persons.

"Each night we are in a different city, and we choose places that are interesting to stay," Klemme said.

In 2008, Klemme plans to change things up by adding a second and third course. "One will be more challenging, with more altitude, and one will be much easier. A lot of our clients are retired, maybe in their 60s and 70s," and could enjoy a less-taxing route, he said.

The Swiss weather during the late summer tours is similar to that of Iowa. Most of the clients are from the U. S., particularly Iowa and North Dakota. To date, Klemme has drawn clients from 20 states and four nations, although "this year I started advertising in magazines in Norway, Sweden, England and Canada, and we have people coming from all those countries this year," he said.

For more information on the tour directed by Klemme, see the www.bikeswitzerland.com Web site.

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