DRIFTLESS IN WI

David Staab rides canopy-covered Ryan Road near Blue Mounds.
Deciduous leaves were just starting to hint at the vibrant show they would be sporting in a few weeks in the hardwood forests of southern Wisconsin. I felt fortunate to be road cycling in late September just outside of Madison. Many times in the past, I had hurriedly driven through the Badger State on my way farther east to visit relatives in Ohio, making only a few brief stops to sample some of the state’s outstanding rail trails, such as the Elroy Sparta and the Sugar River Trail.
I had always envisioned merrily spinning up and down the hilly Wisconsin landscape sharing the road with tractor traffic instead of automobiles, lush green pastures peppered with happy black and white Holstein dairy cows contentedly chewing their cud. So when the choice assignment of riding in a renowned cycling state like Wisconsin came along, with some of the best road bike courses in the Midwest, I knew it was an offer I couldn’t refuse.

I made the base for my cycling adventure in the thriving university and capital city of Madison, home to nearly a quarter-million inhabitants. Ranked as one of the most bicycle-friendly municipalities in the country, residents take advantage of the many bicycle trails and routes that crisscross the city. Madison sits on a narrow isthmus between Lake Mendota and Lake Monona, and the state capitol dome dominates the city skyline as the second tallest in the nation, after that of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC. There is a square of streets that surround the Capitol building lined with very popular eating and drinking establishments. I quickly learned that two of the most important ingredients in Wisconsin culture are cheese and beer (the third would be the Green Bay Packers), evident in the local affinity for cuisine like fried cheese curds and a sign at one local restaurant proudly touting over 150 beers offered, all brewed in Wisconsin. While in Madison, I, of course, had a journalistic duty to sample such items as cheese curds and the locally brewed Spotted Cow ale.

There are just so many quiet roads that beg to be taken, and a 50-mile loop can be ridden seemingly 50 different ways. After several days’ worth of intense interstate car travel and an evening of getting to know the downtown Madison culture, I was more than eager to clip into my pedals and take in the surrounding countryside. I met up with locals Kiersten Kloeckner and Markham Dunn for a tour called the “Red Barn Loop.” We were soon making our way west, out of the city, along nicely shouldered roadways. Before long, there were fewer buildings and cornfields were more prevalent. We crossed Highway 12 and spotted our first red barn stoically standing next to the rural road. They weren’t kidding about the loop’s moniker. Kiersten explained that this would be the first of 57 red barns along our 52 miles of riding for the day. Many of these barns housed dairy farmers’ Holstein cattle, and I could detect the distinct aromatic odor of dairy cow manure in the distance. As an ex-farmer, I started feeling right at home. I know my manures. The dairy industry is huge in Wisconsin, and we have it to
thank for the abundance of high-quality, smooth roads that were carefully paved so dairy trucks could pick up their daily haul of fresh milk from myriad small dairy farms in all seasons. No wonder the cows seem happy here; they have job security. I had to laugh when the road got a slight bit rougher and my companions called it “Dairy Roubaix,” the clever name associated with a local event ride.

As we turned onto the aptly named Enchanted Road, the setting suddenly switched from flat farm ground to rolling wooded terrain. We had entered a transitional zone called the Driftless Area. During the last ice age, the land where Madison is located was leveled and buried under 1,600 feet of ice, but the area just to the northwest was spared from the crushing southward march of lobes of immense sheets of glacial ice. The name driftless has nothing to do with snow. Instead it’s referring to a different kind of “drift” — a mixture of rocks and gravel, boulders and residue that’s normally left behind by retreating glaciers. We were riding in a region much hillier than the rest of Wisconsin. We rode past trailheads to the Ice Age Trail, a 1,000-mile hiking trail that winds through the state. In the narrow valley below us, a ripened and very orange pumpkin patch stood out against the verdant background, and the pumpkins seemed to be begging to be picked. Suddenly we began a steep incline, and I had to mash the pedals just to keep them turning. Breathing hard, I thought to myself, “I should have eaten that last cheese curd!”

Climbing and descending abrupt hills became a regular theme through-
out our ride as we wove along obscure county roadways to the small town of Black Earth for a quick break. After an energy bar, we passed by my favorite ecosystem — tallgrass prairie, where restored stands of little bluestem grasses were turning reddish in color with the approaching autumn season. The roads were quiet as automobile traffic was practically nonexistent, although we did get an adrenaline rush by passing a tractor hauling corn silage on a long, speedy descent. I started to realize the locals’ perspective of their beloved sport as Kiersten explained, “We would never leave here, the road riding is that good!” I nodded my head in agreement as we ascended a twisty little road that suddenly popped us out at the bucolic and picturesque Vermont Lutheran Church.

There are just so many quiet roads that beg to be taken, and a 50-mile loop can be ridden seemingly 50 different ways. Riding in the Driftless Area reminded me of cycling in rural southern Indiana the previous autumn (see article in the February 2013 Adventure Cyclist).

The next morning back in Madison, I pedaled along at the University of Wisconsin campus on one of the many city bike paths to visit the Saris Cycling Group factory, some eight miles away. After touring the clean and modern facility where they make products like bicycle racks, parking racks, trainers, and rear-hub power meters, I came away very impressed. Even more impressive than the fine products were the passion and enthusiasm the company and its employees possess for cycling as an important lifestyle choice. Saris even put singletrack mountain bike trails in the woods behind their building for employees to get in a spin at lunchtime. Madison companies like Saris, Planet Bike, and nearby Waterloo-based Trek are strong supporters of bicycle advocacy in the region and are responsible for many of the bike trails on which I pedaled in Madison. It wasn’t hard to fathom why there are so many cycling events, places to ride, and riders in general as a fervor for all things cycling bubbles over in Wisconsin.

I was pumped up for another ride out in the Driftless Area. This time, I
Blue Mounds to the top of the nearby state park was steep, but with each strenuous pedal stroke the views down onto the surrounding landscape became better and farther reaching. Our reward for the effort was an outstanding 360-degree view onto the rural countryside at the summit. An even better prize was the fast and very fun descent along the serpentine-like Ryan Road where our fast-moving tires created wind forces that scattered fallen leaves in our wake as we dodged rather large walnuts that peppered the empty
I had a huge grin on my face as we pedaled back to Mount Horeb. I could see now why folks here love their road cycling!

I began my final day of riding from the small town of Lodi located about 45 minutes north of Madison. It was unusually hot for the last day of September with temperatures reaching the mid-80s. My riding partner for the day, Megan Greve, and I pedaled north along more pastoral roads past rows of ripening corn, red barns, and a prominent sandstone bluff called Gibraltar Rock that dominated the horizon to the east. We were on a ride that I had read about in the Wisconsin Biking Guide — the Merrimac Ferry Tour. It’s basically two distinct loops totaling 45 miles that are joined together by a five-minute ferry crossing across the Wisconsin River. The ferry has been in operation since 1848. There are ice cream stands on both sides of the river, and on a hot day it was pretty tempting, but because we were only doing the southern part of the loop due to time constraints, the extra sugar was deemed unnecessary.

Had we decided to tackle the northern loop, ice cream may have been just the required jolt needed to crest the steep grades of the Baraboo Range twice over. The range is actually termed a monadnock, which means it is an isolated mountain rising abruptly from the surrounding land. We also missed one of the most scenic spots in Wisconsin, Devil’s Lake, and a visit to the town of Baraboo, the boyhood home of the Ringling Brothers where the five brothers started their famous circus in the 1880s. In the brothers’ honor, the Circus World Museum is located in Baraboo.

Back on the southern loop, we rode empty county roads past pastoral dairy farms soaking up maybe the last really warm day of the season and enjoying all things Wisconsin. We took a turn onto what is called a “rustic road,” a state designation that indicates we would pass over rugged terrain with native vegetation and wildlife. Plus it has restricted speed limits that made for really enjoyable cycling. When we popped out of the forest and onto a high open ridge the commanding view of rolling farm fields complete with black-and-white cows beside a red barn below was worth pausing for. It’s nice when your notion of a place is exceeded by the reality. On my next visit to relatives in Ohio, I’ll need to plan a few extra days so I can ride some more in Wisconsin first.

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