



THE PURPLE COW

BY MOLLY BREWER HOEG

I should have seen the clues. It should have been no surprise to find that our styles clashed when we transitioned from individual training to touring together. But it was my first tour and I didn't know any better.

My husband Rich had done one short tour with our son, who was responsible for this bicycle resurgence in the family. Finding that cycling was kind to his aging knees, Rich promptly adopted it for his daily workout. After touring, he was hooked. I, on the other hand, considered myself a runner. My identity was wrapped up in collecting marathons, getting in my daily miles, and thriving on long runs. I agreed to this cycling thing on the promise of a new bike, enthralled with the idea of daylong workouts while touring, which appealed to my cravings for a daily dose of adrenaline and love of travel.

Newly retired, I had plenty of time to throw myself into training. Upon delivery of that new touring bike, I immediately set out to build up my cycling strength. I admit to being a bit hard-core. Rich calls it obsessed. Put a goal out in front of me and I develop tunnel vision. Hence on my training rides I would press on mile after mile, just like the running that it displaced.

Rich, on the other hand, takes a more holistic approach. He cycles to stay in shape but is not opposed to stopping for his favorite hobby — photography — or for myriad other reasons. His bike ride is the medium for pursuing his interests. Mine is a means to an end.

Nevertheless, we set off on our Trans-Superior Tour. It would take us 500 miles around the western end of Lake Superior with a ferry across the middle of the lake for a half-circle tour.

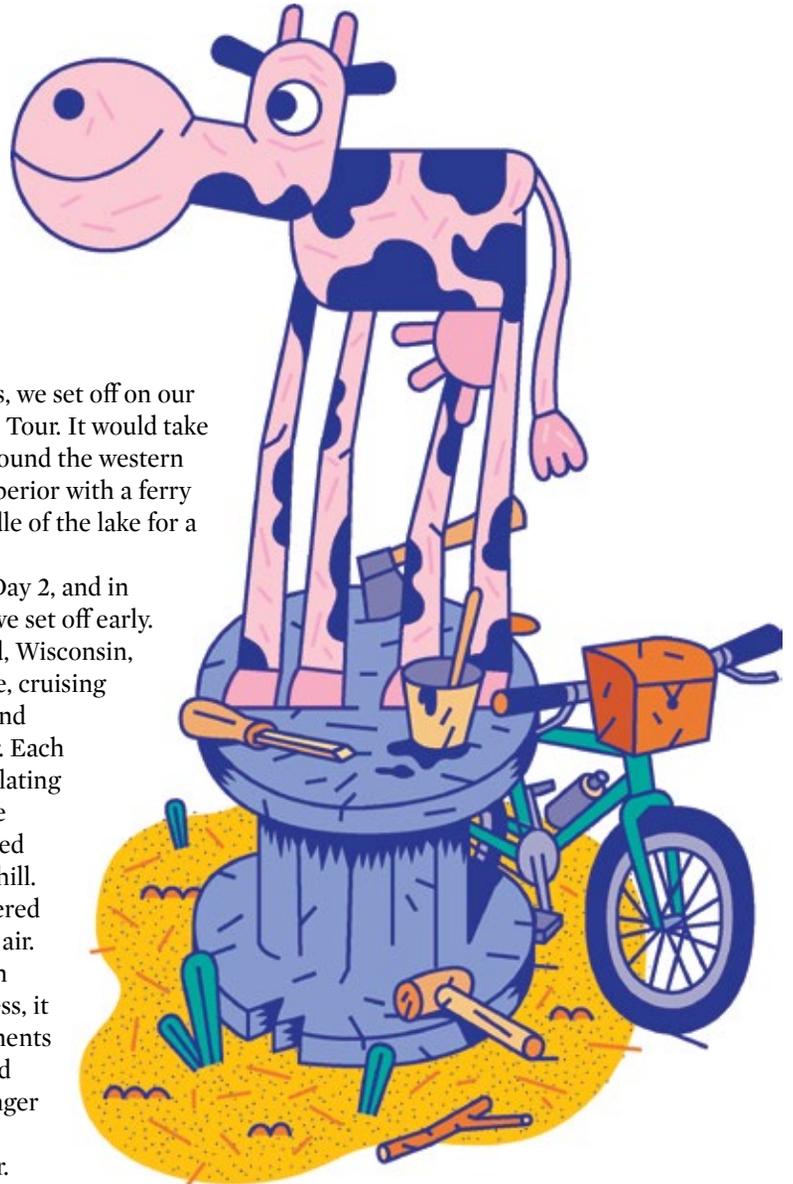
It was only Day 2, and in our eagerness we set off early. We left Bayfield, Wisconsin, with the sunrise, cruising through crisp and invigorating air. Each dip of the undulating road along Lake Superior dropped us into added chill. Each rise delivered welcome warm air. Passing through the semidarkness, it took a few moments before I realized Rich was no longer visible in my rearview mirror.

When he didn't reappear, I backtracked to find him in what appeared to be a junkyard. He was standing in the midst of a scruffy clearing populated by large wood carvings. "Look!" he proudly announced. "A purple cow!" The three-foot-high wooden specimen left no doubt as to its identity.

In one day I had already found my cycling regimen severely challenged. It was a beautiful day and I longed to fly through the countryside feeling the wind in my face. I struggled to remain civil.

Rich bounced like a kid and insisted I take a picture of him with this creature. The cow was rather fanciful, I granted him that. Her overly large hooves and the playful turn of her head suggested a cartoon character. She stood on a wooden spool littered with carving tools as if paused in midcreation, but she looked quite complete to me.

Before we could make our retreat, an ominous voice boomed out behind us. "Who are you and what do you want?"



DANIEL MORGAN

We turned to lay eyes on a man about our age who appeared none too happy to see us. Unable to contain himself, Rich resumed his happy dance with an enthusiastic explanation of finding this amazing purple cow. I did my best to shrink and distance myself from the whole situation.

Gradually, a grin worked its way across the man's face. "You really like it?" he asked. More bouncing and superlatives flowed out of my husband. "Well, my old man is the Woodcarver of Washburn. This is all his work. Would you like to see his studio?" he asked. Suddenly, we were okay. Rich was in seventh heaven, sensing an adventure in the making.

Now that we were legit, I was better able to take in my surroundings. The cow was surrounded by life-size carvings that included an old man with a long beard and a cane. A baby bear posed with a garden shovel. Behind them was a well-endowed mama bear in a low-cut pink gown. A colorful gypsy caravan sat near the clearing. The hand-carved sign on the side confirmed that we were in the domain of Bill Vienneaux, Woodcarver.

We passed through a village of wooden sheds, each guarded by additional carved statues. The farther back we went the wilder the overgrown gardens, and we picked our way carefully on what was once a path of stepping stones. Carvings were both carefully placed and haphazardly strewn among the flowering plants. It all had an air of whimsy with a touch of neglect.

Reaching the studio, we stooped to enter a workshop overflowing with projects. It was more than the casual eye could take in, and we moved cautiously around the room in wonder. Grandfather clocks intricately carved with leaves and fanciful creatures drew my eye. Rocking horses lived next to ornate cabinets. Elves in pointy red caps were at home with Father Christmas figures and the ubiquitous bears. Looking more closely, I could see that niches in the wall contained little woodland critters, each a complete miniature scene. There was no visible order to the room, only delightful chaos. We had been invited into the private haven of a skilled and imaginative artist.

Our host seemed pleased with our sense of wonder. He said little but allowed us the freedom to roam mindfully and explore. We could easily imagine the woodcarver himself in this workspace. His personality was stamped on each piece, his humor and unique craftsmanship in evidence everywhere we looked. I marveled to see the breadth of skill in his hands, spying ornate formal furniture carvings as well as caricatures in a more rustic style. There was a lifetime of experience there, and surely some fascinating stories. We were only scratching the surface of a long and rich history.

Careful not to overstay our welcome, we reluctantly withdrew from the scene and returned to our bikes. There they stood, next to the purple cow. I now regarded the audacious figure with new eyes. Our host watched us mount, bid us a detached farewell, and silently monitored our exit from the property.

Pedaling away, Rich could hardly contain his excitement. Seeing that purple cow was the epitome of cycle touring, he insisted. "Wasn't it totally worth stopping to see it? Look what it led to!"

By now I was the choir, and there was no need to preach. I got it. The unexpected adventure was already the highlight of the day. I'm still very certain that, left to my own devices, I would have completely missed both the purple cow and the woodcarver's haven.

From that moment on, the purple cow became a symbol. It defines the unexpected delights made possible by traveling the countryside at 12 MPH. We see things that normally whiz past a car window. We have the time to indulge in exploring something unique. We experience things up close and personal.

We would see many a "purple cow" on our future cycling tours. And always we use exactly that term. We eventually devised a litmus test of sorts. Is that a gaudy yard display or a purple cow? Sometimes it's a fine line. But we know the real thing when we see it. And by now, even after 10,000 miles of touring, I'm willing to stop to investigate. Always. **AG**

Molly Brewer Hoeg is a freelance writer from Duluth, Minnesota, who spends about a month each year bicycle touring with her husband. She blogs about their travels en route on superiorfootprints.org, and is currently writing a book about the ups and downs of marriage at 12 MPH.

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