

Wisconsin Bicycle Tour Planning Guide

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Southwestern Wisconsin's extensive network of quiet, paved, farm roads makes the area a true cyclist's paradise. Aside from the occasional milk truck, for which the roads were built, traffic is generally light. I've toured in many other places, but I haven't found anywhere with a better combination of lightly traveled roads, scenery, and all the other things that make for enjoyable bicycle touring. Other parts of Wisconsin also offer excellent bicycle touring conditions, with less demanding topography. While many of the comments below apply to most of Wisconsin, they most accurately apply to the area south of I-94 and west of Madison.

The information below is intended for planning of overnight tours. Much of it, however, applies equally to day trips. There are no specific tour descriptions, as the purpose of this guide is to provide the information cyclists need to plan their own tours.

Topography

The southwestern fourth of the state, known as the driftless area, has never been glaciated, resulting in hilly topography. It is generally a rolling plateau with deeply eroded valleys. Near the major rivers, the valleys are nearly 600 feet deep. The driftless area is hilly, to be sure, but also rewarding. The most pleasant cycling routes are those which generally follow the valleys, rather than cutting across all the drainages. Ridge-top riding can be quite demanding, especially with a headwind, because the ridgetops are far from flat. It is often possible to find driftless area routes which follow valleys most of each day, with perhaps 4 or 5 climbs over the ridges.

Elsewhere in Wisconsin, the topography is varied. While some areas are quite flat, the glaciers have left behind some serious hills in others. The most difficult cycling is in those areas, such as Lafayette County in the far south, where straight roads follow the section lines over significant hills.

Maps

To take advantage of Wisconsin's excellent cycling roads you have to be prepared to do some navigating. Simply following the major highways guarantees you'll see plenty of traffic and breathe a lot of exhaust. Once you have a suitable map, make copies of the sections you need, mark your route on it, and attach it to your bike where you can read it as you ride. **Having the map before you all the time is essential:** It helps you avoid getting lost, and allows you to check out interesting alternatives along the way.

By far the best are the Milwaukee Map Service maps. A set of four covers the entire state, and they show virtually every road, except in cities and towns. They show rivers and streams, which can tell you a lot about topography. These maps show road names, but use caution in navigating by them: Often signs are missing or the names are wrong. The maps contain some errors, and do not indicate which roads are gravel. Also, when you make copies of these maps to carry, mark the centers of the towns, as the yellow shading won't show up. Careful adjustment of the copy machine will preserve most of the other details like those little blue lines indicating rivers and streams, the only topographical clues. They are available at many bookstores or:

Milwaukee Map Service
4519 W. North Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53208
414-445-7361

The official state highway map doesn't even show all the county roads, and the ones omitted are precisely the best for cycling. It's a useful reference for longer trips, but must be used only in addition to more detailed maps.

The state Department of Transportation publishes individual county maps, but they generally offer less information than the Milwaukee Map Service maps. The DOT also publishes a book of **traffic count maps** covering the entire state, which is very useful.

Wisconsin Department of Transportation
Publications and Map Sales
3617 Pierstorff
Madison, WI 53707
(608) 246-3265

The USGS 1:250,000 series topographic maps are useful references, though the road information on them is hopelessly out of date. The hills, for the most part, are still there. The DeLorme Atlas is also a useful reference, but is way too large to carry and copies very poorly.

The Department of Tourism has published bicycling maps, but they are now out of print. Check for a future edition. These maps may indicate the presence of paved shoulders on some of the busier roads.

Campsites

The most pleasant campsites are often those out-of-the-way places like town and county parks. One of the best ways to find them is to send a letter to the county clerk of each county you plan to visit. Asking the locals along the way sometimes leads you to interesting campsites. There are many public spots where camping is permitted, but not particularly encouraged. In small towns, bicyclists can often get permission to camp in parks or schoolyards. (The mayor is probably tending bar just down the street.) Be considerate, though, for the sake of future cyclists: Keep your group small and **don't ask for special camping considerations when you have a car available**. While I've never had a serious problem, I try not to advertise the location of my campsite. Discrete camping usually results in a more peaceful night, especially on weekends.

Camping on private land is possible, but it is often difficult to find the landowner to get permission. If you find a great spot, you may not be able to find the owner. If you find a landowner, s/he may have no concept a decent campsite. In any case, be sure the landowner understands the difference between tired cyclists getting some sleep, and that bunch of high-school kids who "camped" on his land last spring and left a big mess behind.

Many state parks have campgrounds, as indicated on the state highway map. There has been a long-standing policy of providing campsites for cyclists who arrive late in the day, if there are no nearby alternatives. The park staff may not be aware of this policy, so you may have to be persistent.

Wisconsin has hundreds of commercial campgrounds, though most are distinctly unpleasant. There are many exceptions, though. The smaller ones listed in the commercial campground guides are your best bets. Note that in some counties, commercial campground operators have apparently succeeded in eliminating all public campsites. In others, public campsites may exist, but they aren't publicized.

Route Planning

The first step in planning an overnight tour is usually to select overnight stops. Then try to map a suitable route between them. It's often an iterative process. You could, of course, plan the route first, then look for overnight stopping places. For longer trips, you can often plan day-by-day, as long as you have along maps and campsite or lodging information. Depending on your style, you may or may not want to try to include a number of towns on your route each day.

Some general rules for route planning:

The most direct route is hardly ever the nicest.

Take the smallest road.

Follow valleys.

Avoid straight roads.

Tolerate some gravel.

In most of Wisconsin the county roads, designated with letters, are the best for cycling. Almost all are paved, and traffic is usually light. Those county roads which lead directly to or connect major cities are often busy, but in such areas the township roads are usually paved. **State and US highways are usually far too busy for cycling**, though some have paved shoulders. There are a few state highways with light traffic. The state traffic count book (above) allows you to identify them. Roads with traffic counts of under 400/day are pleasant for cycling, while those with counts over 1000/day are not, unless the shoulder is paved. Cycling conditions deteriorate very quickly as the traffic count goes up.

Township roads are my favorites, where they are paved. Unfortunately, aside from my personal collection, there exist no maps which show which of these roads are paved. Virtually all the township roads are paved in Dane, Green, Columbia, Dodge, Marquette, Waushara, Waupaca, Door, Walworth, Waukesha, Rock, and most other southeastern counties. Elsewhere they vary. If you don't mind an occasional stretch of gravel, your route possibilities are greatly expanded.

Then there are the well-known Wisconsin rail trails. The Department of Tourism has information on them, and they are shown on the official state maps. In general, I find the surrounding roads more pleasant, but sections of the trails often make useful connectors. The towns they pass through often have nice campsites, and one of the parking lots along the trail is often a convenient place to leave a car.

A few favorite overnight routes:

Muscoda-Wyalusing-Platteville-Muscoda (Grant County)

Trempealeau-Strum-Alma-Trempealeau (Buffalo/Trempealeau Counties)

Gays Mills-Wilton-Esofea-Gays Mills (Kickapoo River Valley)

Montello-Waupaca-Montello (Sand County)

Madison-Blanchardville-Dodgeville-Madison

Madison-Spring Green-Madison

Madison-Monroe-Madison

Madison-Muscoda-Madison