

DETOURS

Stringing the blues

Mississippi lays down markers to tell the stories of native blues legends and events



BY DAVE HOEKSTRA
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JACKSON, Miss. — The Mississippi Blues Trail is the most ambitious heritage marker project I've seen since the Illinois Department of Transportation put similar postings along Route 66.

More than 40 markers telling the stories of native blues legends and events have been placed along the state's highways and byways, and plenty more are on the way.

Some are easy to find, like the James Cotton marker (No. 30 on map) at the intersection of U.S. 61 and Bonnie Blue Road, about 45 miles south of Memphis. Others are difficult to spot, like the David "Honeyboy" Edwards marker (No. 8), which I couldn't locate despite spending a half hour driving around Mississippi 448 in desolate Shaw while listening to Bob Dylan's "Love and Theft."

That's the point. Even though I never saw the Honeyboy marker, I felt the Delta heat. I absorbed the moisture of Porter Bayou. I saw the desperation of abandoned buildings in uptown Shaw. I did not have to take notes. I will always remember a place where I saw the blues.

The first of the regal blue and gold markers went in the ground in December 2006, and nearly 100 more will be added before the trail is complete, according to Heritage Trail director Alex Thomas. One side of each marker is cast iron with raised gold leaf lettering. The flip side is vinyl with images, photos and detailed information. The markers are easy to see, measuring 45 square inches.

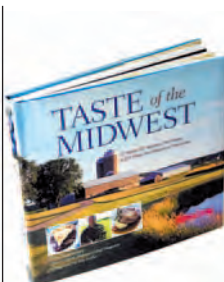
The trail runs as far north as Tunica, where a Son House marker (No. 13) sits near Clack

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GO FISH

See what you can catch during Wisconsin's free fishing weekend June 7-8, when state waters — including inland lakes and streams — are open to all anglers. No license or trout or salmon stamps needed. Several state parks will be loaning fishing equipment, too; <http://dnr.wi.gov/fish>



WORD TRAVELS FAST

Take a culinary journey through a dozen Midwest states with author Dan Kaercher. *Taste of the Midwest* (Insiders' Guide, \$29.95) is full of foodie events, sights, travel tips and photos sure to kick your taste buds into overdrive.

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Let's get into it.

MIDWEST ISSUE

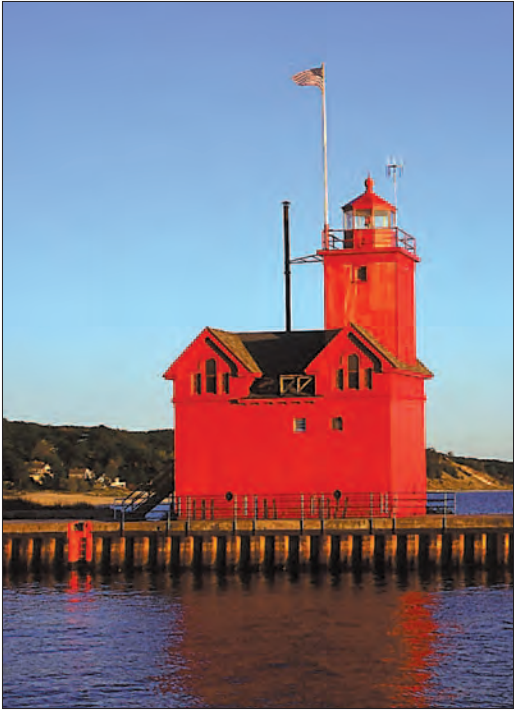


Jerry Soverinsky takes a break off the bike saddle on his way to Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Soverinsky pedaled roughly 1,000 miles around the coast of Lake Michigan. | PHOTO COURTESY JERRY SOVERINSKY

LOOP THE LAKE



Lake Michigan beach near Frankfort, Mich. | PHOTO COURTESY TRAVEL MICHIGAN



Big Red lighthouse in Holland, Mich. | PHOTO COURTESY SHARON VANDERBOON



MIDWEST | The 1,000 miles around Lake Michigan seem made for biking

BY JERRY SOVERINSKY

My heart started racing as soon as I saw her and those dark, defensive eyes. I sensed immediately there would be a connection.

Run-ins like this aren't all that uncommon in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Girls like her . . . they're hungry. They might go weeks — maybe months — without someone passing through, much less a male as vulnerable as me.

She was clearly sizing me up. The dance had begun.

With sweaty palms, I shifted gears on my touring bicycle and began pedaling furiously away from the farmhouse, the German Shepherd in hot pursuit.

As I reached the edge of the farm's front yard, she abruptly stopped chase. She stood at the boundary line, barking wildly, in near perfect synch with my heart arrhythmia. My escape — successful; my clinical-strength antiperspirant — ineffective.

Such is the fairly common fate for those who cycle in the rural Midwest. But despite occasional heart-pumping chase scenarios, along with unpredictable headwinds that could knock over a school bus, there are few areas better suited for bicycle touring than the nearly 1,000 miles of mostly level terrain that loops around the perimeter of Lake Michigan.

Undisturbed wildlife, pristine natural wonderlands, idyllic towns and villages, and two world-class cities all enjoy space along this lengthy stretch of coastline. And with the price of gas threatening to hit \$5 a gallon this summer, this network of (mostly) lightly traveled roads and dedicated bike



A family takes a spin on the trails in northwest Michigan. | PHOTO COURTESY CRYSTAL MOUNTAIN

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FROM THE COVER

BIKE | Plenty of peaceful, open roads in Michigan's Upper Peninsula

trails has never been more inviting.

Time to roll

You need two things to cycle around Lake Michigan. A large chunk of time and a comfortable bike seat.

If you lack the first — about three weeks for total circumnavigation, depending on your fitness level — consider breaking up your tour into smaller segments, as I did. And if you lack the second, think about driving instead. (Either that, or pack a decent diaper rash cream. I'm partial to Balmex.)

I began my loop as part of a longer trip, a late 2005 solo, cross-country tour that eventually wound through Wisconsin and into Michigan's Upper Peninsula, or U.P. I'd spent the previous 15 years guiding cyclists through Europe and wanted to finally spend time discovering the United States. The following year I pedaled much of western Michigan from Ludington, Mich., to Chicago and logged some miles on the Wisconsin side as well, biking the roughly 100-mile stretch from Chicago to Milwaukee. Last month, I finished my two-wheeled odyssey, cycling the last remaining legs between Traverse City, Mich., and Ludington and the segment from the U.P. border down to Milwaukee.

Michigan's U.P. is by far the quietest area along Lake Michigan's coast. It seems made for open road cycling. Comforting stretches of warm hues greeted me throughout my late-August ride, with a stiff west-to-east wind that helped propel me nearly effortlessly along a deserted U.S. Highway 2.

The largest town along my U.P. route was Escanaba, population less than 15,000. I didn't need a map to navigate its handful of browse-worthy shops — nor did I need encouragement to take full advantage of the all-you-can-eat Chinese food buffet I discovered later that night. (Five plates!)

At times, I felt like I had the entire region to myself, stopping in towns with ample tourist facilities yet never battling crowds. This might be due in part to an economic downturn, which I was often reminded of by the ubiquitous FOR SALE signs. But it's also true that the U.P. is a fairly well kept secret, an undiscovered playground of outdoor adventure.

The U.P. locals exude a friendliness that follows you as you ferry from St. Ignace to the car-free, lost-in-time Victorian village of Mackinac Island, before heading (via ferry again) to Mackinaw City in northern Michigan. Residents enthusiastically steered me to the best beef jerky stands, the most popular pancake restaurants and the tastiest local pie varieties — sustenance that made it easy for me to maintain my fast food-lover's physique. Cycle touring definitely burns calories, but I more than compensated for my metabolism spike with an eating prowess that started to make me self-conscious.

"My friends will love this," I lied to the cashier at Yummie's Ice Cream Shop in Harbor Springs, Mich. I was too embarrassed to admit that my bagful of \$20 treats was an evening snack for one.

Finding gold out west

Some of Lake Michigan's most impressive scenery is concentrated along Michigan's west coast. While you'll find more tourists here compared to the relative solitude of the U.P., the coastal towns have more than enough facilities to accommodate the numbers. Hiking, mountain biking, river rafting, sailing — the list of outdoor activities is seemingly endless. Cyclists roll by forests, parks, dunes, beaches, rivers, inland lakes, and of course, a Great Lake.

Starting in Northern Michi-



The bike trail along the shore in Manitowoc, Wis., can be a popular place when the weather gets warm. | PHOTO COURTESY MANITOWOC AREA CVB



People flock to a pier in Holland, Mich., to watch the sunset. | PHOTO COURTESY CAROLYN STICH



A lighthouse and sandy beach in Frankfort, Mich.



Cyclists pedal past a former schoolhouse in Marinette, Wis., near the border of Wisconsin and Michigan's U.P. | PHOTO COURTESY MARINETTE CVB

gan and traveling south (and west, on occasion), my favorite cities and towns include Harbor Springs (its nearby Boyne Highlands golf course is a great challenge and relative bargain), Traverse City (I'm a sucker for miniature golf, the locals' sport-of-choice), and Holland (its state park is a great place to watch the sun set, and downtown is full of shops and restaurants). A Michigan cherry-flavored hot chocolate I savored somewhere near the town of Oneskama nearly made me weep with co-coa-loving joy.

The hills — and winds — made my cycling in northwestern Michigan some of the most challenging of my trip, though these obstacles paled in comparison to a kidney stone attack that gripped me just outside of Petoskey, Mich. Medical attention was first-rate, but I ended up spending more than a week out of the saddle while I waited to pass the stones.

A tale of two cities

My ride from Chicago to Milwaukee was easily one of the bike-friendliest of the trip.

Beginning from Chicago's lakefront path, an 18-mile stretch that ranks as one of my favorites of the entire 1,000-mile circuit, I traveled on mostly dedicated bike paths for the unofficial century ride. Chicagoans looking for a weekend adventure can tackle the 100-mile journey in a day if you're fit and the weather cooperates. Amtrak can take you and your bike back to your starting point (or at least to Union Station) if you'd rather not pedal home.

I pieced together one of the last legs of my trip from the Wisconsin-U.P. border heading south. A late-night cheeseburger washed down by a triple-thick milkshake at the 1940s Mickey-Lu-Bar BQ in Marinette, Wis., did me right. So did a slew of unpretentious, yet noteworthy food stops, including sausages



Pack as light as possible on a self-supported cycling trip because the extra weight can slow you down. | PHOTO COURTESY JERRY SOVERINSKY

(Konops) and cheese (Krohn's) in Stangleville. No bike trip that passes through Green Bay would be complete without refueling at Titledown Brewing Company. Even the most die-hard Bears fans have to admit they grill a tasty burger.

The locals here were equally as eager as their cross-the-lake neighbors to show off their home turf. I got a guided bike tour from Larry Corrado, who sits on the board of the Friends of Mariners Trail, nearly six miles of immaculate pathway that connects Two Rivers and Manitowoc, a couple of welcoming cities along a 20-mile stretch of Lake Michigan coastline. The lightly trafficked county roads I encountered while heading south meant miles of peaceful, undisturbed cycling — the perfect opportunity to log 60-80 miles a day.

You don't need to be Lance

If you're not shy about asking strangers for assistance, in decent physical condition, and

modestly proficient reading maps, cycling around Lake Michigan is a realistic goal.

I was never more than an hour or two from well-stocked stores and tourist facilities. And the Adventure Cycling and Shoreline maps (see below) helped me plot my daily rides and where to stop over night.

Lodging choices ranged from a generous assortment of no-frills motels (ear plugs came in handy) and cozy lakefront cottages and inns (Michigan's Sauble Resorts in Ludington and Bayshore Resorts in Traverse City set the bar high for personal service) to the most contemporary digs (the City Flats Hotel in Holland, Mich., rivals most downtown Chicago properties).

Cycling solo certainly comes with challenges, but in the end, my kidney stones (four) outnumbered my flat tires (one). And the only thing lost was about 14 pounds.

Jerry Soverinsky is a Chicago-based free-lance writer.

IF YOU GO

WHEN: Most of the Lake Michigan loop route can be cycled comfortably April through October, though evening temperatures routinely dip into the 30s in the spring and fall. I experienced morning temperatures in the low 30s as late as May in northern Michigan. Expect strong winds whenever you travel. I enjoyed 15-20 mph tailwinds while cycling south along Wisconsin's coastline and east across Michigan's U.P. but was hammered with equally strong head winds while headed south along Michigan's coastline.

GEAR: Carrying your gear on your bike takes a bit of practice. I've cycled both with bags (panniers) that clip onto a rear bicycle rack and with a small trailer I've pulled behind my bike. Lugging 30-

50 pounds of gear makes handling your bicycle more difficult than your leisurely Sunday morning ride. Get used to the additional weight before setting off on a long trip. If you don't want to transport your own gear, inquire with your overnight hosts or local tourist boards about arranging luggage transfers. For the right price, many can help coordinate the logistics with taxis, transport companies or even an entrepreneurial local teen.

SHORT CUTS: Not enough time—or motivation—to cycle the entire 1,000-mile loop? Consider transportation options that provide one-way alternatives. Milwaukee and Green Bay have airports. In Michigan, you can fly into or out of Escanaba (U.P.), Pellston (near Harbor Springs) and Tra-

verse City. Indiana's Gary airport is an alternative, too.

As for ferries, the Lake Express Ferry cruises between Milwaukee and Muskegon. The 2.5-hour crossing costs \$94.50 for you, your bike and the 2008 fuel surcharge; www.lake-express.com/default.aspx. S.S. Badger connects Manitowoc, Wis., with Ludington, Mich. The four-hour crossing costs \$67; www.ssbadger.com/newhome.aspx.

The Mackinac Bridge connects St. Ignace in Michigan's U.P. with Mackinaw City in northern Michigan. The bridge is off limits to bicycles; cyclists must call the Mackinac Bridge Authority for crossing assistance; (906) 643-7600. Alternately, I took a 20-minute ferry ride from St. Ignace to Mackinac Island, spent the night on the is-

land and traveled on another ferry in the morning to Mackinaw City (35 minutes).

MAPS: Shoreline Bicycle Tour Route Maps: Circle Tour (Manitowoc, Wis., to St. Ignace, Mich.) and West Tour (Mackinaw City, Mich., to Spring Lake, Mich.). Detailed turn-by-turn routes for Michigan's U.P. and a portion of Western Michigan; www.lmb.org. Adventure Cycling Association Bicycle Touring Maps: North Lakes, Sections 1-3. Detailed routes and sightseeing information for Michigan's U.P. and a portion of northwestern Michigan; www.adventurecycling.org.

Go on www.amazon.com to buy an updated copy (2006) of Peter Blommer's book, *Biking on Bike Trails Between Chicago and Mil-*

waukee, for detailed maps and descriptions along mostly dedicated bike trails for this roughly 100-mile route.

WEB SITES: Each state's transportation department has useful cycling information on its Web site. Tourism contacts: www.travel-wisconsin.com, www.enjoyillinois.com, www.visitindiana.com, www.michigan.org and www.wmta.org for western Michigan.

BIKE GROUPS: Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin, www.bfw.org; Chicagoland Bicycle Federation, www.biketraffic.org; League of Illinois Bicyclists, www.bikelib.org/index.htm; Indiana Bicycle Coalition, <http://bicyclicindiana.org>, and League of Michigan Bicyclists, www.lmb.org.



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