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FEATURED RIDES

Bike Travel: Trempealeau County, Wisconsin

The Perfect Getaway

Welcome to cycling nirvana, the American Dairyland edition— where cows, not cars, bear sole witness to nearly perfect rides.

By Emily Furia

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It is somewhere near the top of the world that I begin to wonder about this place. Not the actual top of the world, of course—I mean the spot that is the namesake attraction on the official Top of the World Tour, a 23-mile ride created by the enthusiastic and intensely friendly organizers of a newly established riding hotbed in remote western Wisconsin.

This particular global zenith looms at the crest of a relatively gentle climb that I'm surprised to find rises only about 400 feet—an ascent on which I pushed a little harder than usual, eager to see what lay ahead. When I arrive near the front of our loosely organized group, I step off my bike and scan the horizon: It's pretty, sure enough. For the past hour, we pedaled through a patriotic anthem's worth of scenic clichés— spacious blue skies, amber waves of grain, even a fruited plain or two—and from this vista there is lots more of the same, bathed in late-afternoon

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sunlight.

But I really have no idea why this particular landmark might have gained such a lofty designation until I look down, and there it is: a bright globe painted on the surface of the road. On an earlier section of the climb, someone had helpfully sprayed "VIEW!" onto the pavement, along with an arrow. Now, Ron McKernan, president of the Bicycle Club of Trempealeau County (BCTC), looks around and smiles as he watches riders pop over the crest in twos and threes. "Well," he says, "it's the top of Trempealeau County, anyway."

Ah. This moment of congenial hyperbole went to the heart of a question that had been clawing at me ever since I'd begun to hear, months earlier, of the discovery of a new cycling nirvana in the Midwest. Reports told of velvety-smooth empty roads and rolling hills that escaped bulldozing glaciers 10,000 years back. Apparently the place was so beguiling that some 19th-century traveling preacher had proclaimed it to be the literal Garden of Eden.

The whole thing sounded vaguely preposterous. But the buzz was intriguing enough for me to book a flight that would get me there in time for the three-day Trempealeau Invitational Ride Event, or TIRE, which takes place each September. It's one of no less than six yearly bike rides in Trempealeau, most of which are dedicated to local delicacies such as catfish or broiler chickens.

And now here I stand, trying to muster a proper camera smile as I hoist my bike above my head for the obligatory Top of the World photo op—at a whopping 1,200 feet above sea level.

Cycling nirvana? Garden of Eden? Or just some kind of good old-fashioned Midwestern hucksterism that went viral? I have only the next four days to find out for myself.

He was a circuit-riding Methodist preacher who happened upon this landscape—perhaps even this very same vista—sometime in the 1880s. The Rev. David Van Slyke, it's safe to say, might have bought the whole top-of-the-world gambit: He was so taken with the area that in 1886 he published his manifesto, to which he attached the modest title *Found at Last: The Veritable Garden of Eden, or a Place that Answers the Bible Description of that Notable Spot Better Than Anything Yet Discovered*.

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COMMENTS

Iceman007 Sun, 2011-07-31 11:45

My wife and I just got back from our anniversary trip to whitehall to ride. We stayed in the Oak park inn. this was a great place to stay. The staff went out of their way to help my wife and I. Once they went out in their cars to check on road construction to make sure we could ride through an area that we had planed on riding through. Also if you have never been in this area (we hadn't) Whitehall is in the middle of the area so makes the loops they have very easy to start from with out having to drive. We did need the bike shop and rode to the bike shop in Fountain City Brone's (bronesbikeshop.com). Mr Brone was very helpful and had a huge shop for such a small town. He had a full supply of about anything you could need. In comparison his shop was as stocked as our local REI in St Louis very impressive. The biggest thing I didn't expect was the climbs and descents. Most of the climbs go right over small hills and back into valleys so the roads climb to 10-15% grades (Garmin GPS readings) and descend fast. Very hard but very fun. Be ready for this because it will zap you. Two things to watch for is the directions on the maps can be a little vague so I would pull up Google maps and look at all the directions before getting out on the road also we had no cell service on any of

the roads and most of the towns so don't count on the iphone GPS to help you out.

bronson1 Fri, 2011-01-28 19:18
La Crosse is the base for me in Wisconsin.

rmarqusee Tue, 2010-10-05 18:07
Should the article be "Getway" or "Getaway"?

James Blodgett Fri, 2010-10-01 05:02
The valleys and ridges of Buffalo, Trempealeau and Pepin counties make for wonderful, stress free riding. Ron and the gang have done a wonderful job laying out route and putting on tours to showcase some of the best road biking in the country. Though I beg to differ on the closest city, which is clearly Eau Claire (we even have a water park). At only 40 minutes from Whitehall and 20 from Mondovi, it is a perfect place to base out of, not only for the rides south, but also for the kettle morrains of Chippewa County, the valleys and ridges in Dunn county and the Amish County to the east. Plus if you are in town on a Wednesday, swing by Fairfax Park a little before 6pm and Overdrive Cycling (<http://OverdriveCycling.com>) will take you on a tour of some of the prettiest roads Wisconsin has to offer. Don't forget your mountain bike. We have some of the best single track in the mid-west: Lowes Creek Park and the Northwest park in Eau Claire and Hickory Ridge just north of Bloomer. West-central Wisconsin is a cycling Eden!

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