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Bikers cross the Milwaukee River via the Interurban Trail in Grafton. Bike routes on both sides of Lake Michigan offer plenty of options for cyclists.

What a difference a lake makes. Wisconsin and Michigan's lower peninsulas are only 80 miles apart as the gull flies, but they might as well be separated by 500 miles for all one side knows about the other. We're next-door neighbors separated by Lake Michigan, a body of water as imposing as any mountain range.

Two car ferries serve as passes in that liquid range, and together they create the opportunity for a memorable circle trip that carries you across Lake Michigan twice. The Lake Express sails between Milwaukee and Muskegon, Mich.; the S.S. Badger connects Manitowoc and Ludington, Mich., on a more northerly route. The Michigan ports are about 60 miles apart by freeway, and the Wisconsin cities are separated by 80 miles.

My wife, Sonja, and I spent a long weekend earlier this summer navigating the circle. You could make the trip by car, of course, but we chose bicycles. Over the course of four days, we put on more than 170 meandering miles and experienced the landscape in ways that simply aren't possible through a windshield.

The Lake Express terminal is less than two miles from our home in Bay View, and we felt admirably self-sufficient as we pedaled up with all our gear stowed in four saddlebags. Of the two ferries, the Lake Express is much newer, much faster, and somewhat more expensive. (Two people and two bikes traveling one way cost about \$200.) At a cruising speed of 37 miles per hour, the boat creates enough wind, even on a calm day, for everyone to reprise Leonardo DiCaprio's "I'm the king of the world" pose from the movie "Titanic." For most of the voyage, land was nowhere in sight; it wasn't hard to believe we actually were on an ocean.

Two-and-a-half hours after boarding, we docked in Muskegon, a city of 38,000 on a broad lake that was once a bay of Lake Michigan. For travelers above a certain age, Muskegon's most compelling attraction may be a boat docked near the Lake Express terminal: the Milwaukee Clipper, a luxury ferry that plied the same waters from 1941 to 1970.

Since the trek to Ludington was more than Sonja and I wanted to tackle in one stage, we timed our arrival to reach Whitehall, Mich., 15 miles north of Muskegon, by suppertime. Whitehall is a pretty little harbor town with an assortment of Victorian homes and a mile of petunias planted along its waterfront. After checking into our B&B, we strolled downtown as a mammoth barge of cumulus clouds drifted majestically inland.

That left us 50 miles to cover on the second day. As we hit the Hart-Montague Trail — Michigan's first rail-to-trail conversion — we concluded that bikers in Michigan and Wisconsin are unusually lucky, perhaps even spoiled. The two states rank first and third nationally in total rail-to-trail miles — Minnesota is in second place, completing a regional trifecta. When locomotives departed the scene, bikers pedaled in. We traveled most of the distance from Muskegon to Ludington on blacktopped trails with broad shoulders and no motorized traffic. Since trains are allergic to hills, the grades are easy, and so is the pedaling.

As the miles rolled by, western Michigan looked less and less like eastern Wisconsin, and it's all because of the wind. The prevailing westerlies have given Michigan towering sand dunes, sprawling beaches, water warm enough for swimming, and a temperate climate ideal for growing fruit. Michiganders pay for these advantages with cloudier skies, more rain, and lake-effect snow, but on balance they clearly came out ahead. Sunsets over the water are a picturesque bonus.

The wind's impact on agriculture is especially profound. North of Whitehall we began to pass fields of lacy green that turned out to be asparagus — a plant that thrives in sandy soil. Nearby were cherry trees, apple orchards, acres of ripening blueberries, and a succession of vineyards. The bike trail petered out before Pentwater, and Sonja and I split a \$5 wine-tasting session before we tackled the last rolling stretch of the Pere Marquette Highway into Ludington.

Named for a Milwaukee mayor (and Wisconsin governor) who had business interests in the area, Ludington is a former lumber town that has rebuilt itself on a foundation of tourism. The lumber barons' mansions, most of them converted to B&Bs or offices, still line the main street, which ends at a broad beach that any chamber of commerce would be proud to call its own.

We rose early the next morning to catch the ferry. Of the two cross-lake competitors, the S.S. Badger is by far the older (launched in 1952), the slower (moving at the still-brisk pace of 18 miles per hour), and the larger (with room for 600 passengers). This floating historic site is also somewhat cheaper than the Lake Express; the one-way trip cost us about \$150. The Badger makes the crossing to Manitowoc in four hours — enough time to relax with a book, take a nap, watch a movie, or play a leisurely game of Badger Bingo in the main lounge.

For any longtime Wisconsinite, there is inevitably less to discover on the west side of Lake Michigan. The lakeshore cities have plenty to offer — Manitowoc's fine Wisconsin Maritime Museum, Sheboygan's reborn waterfront, postcard-perfect Port Washington — but the real attraction is the route itself. We seldom saw the lake on Michigan's trails. In Wisconsin, County Highway LS (for "lake shore") runs within sight of the water for much of the distance from Manitowoc to Sheboygan.

After picking our way through Sheboygan, we crabbed across southern Sheboygan County on farm roads to Oostburg, where we caught the bucolic Interurban Trail. Like its Michigan counterparts, the Interurban is completely paved and nearly level. Pushed by a brisk tailwind, we ended a 60-mile day in Port Washington.

Our last 40 miles were all literally, if modestly, downhill, first on the Interurban Trail and then on Milwaukee County's incomparable system of parkways. They wind through Brown Deer, Kletzsch, Lincoln and Estabrook parks before joining the Oak Leaf Trail that took us downtown and ultimately back to Bay View.

There is something immensely satisfying about pulling up to your own home after a journey of four days and 170 miles with your car still in the garage. Bicycle touring, in my view, offers the best of two worlds, enabling you to cover significant ground but still experience it fully.

Our two-ferry tour enabled us to fully experience both the lake and the land. Combining hints of an ocean cruise with a visit to unfamiliar shores, this excursion has to be one of the most exotic getaways in the settled heart of the Midwest.

IF YOU GO

Although the trails are well-developed on both sides of the lake, don't even think of attempting the two-ferry trip without good maps. The signage is imperfect, and the connections can be confusing. The Wisconsin Bicycle Federation publishes a first-rate series of maps for Wisconsin (available for purchase at bfw.org), and you can get complete information about the Michigan network at westmichigantrails.com.

Find more about the Lake Express at lake-express.com or by calling (866) 914-1010. For the S.S. Badger, see ssbadger.com or call (800) 841-4243.