

Onalaska to Chicago by Bicycle
By Scott McMurray

Are you up for a bicycle expedition? How about a ride to Chicago? What seems like an impractical idea makes perfect sense upon closer consideration. You experience some of the very best of both Midwestern rural and urban biking on this 340 mile destination trip and the beauty of it is that your return can be on the comfortable and convenient Amtrak Empire Builder. You don't have to be an athlete to do this trip which averages 60 miles a day. Most of your route is on rails to trails. I have done the route four times and wouldn't mind a fifth. The following is a suggested itinerary:

Day 1 – Onalaska to Sparta. A relatively short ride on the La Crosse River Trail but makes sense as you space out the subsequent days.

Day 2 – Sparta to Reedsburg. You will be on the Elroy-Sparta Tunnels and 400 trails this day.

Day 3 – Reedsburg to Lake Mills. This is mostly highway riding on Hwy 33 and then Hwy 12 to Madison, but the shoulders are wide and well-maintained. Your steepest climb of the trip is a four mile stretch coming up out of the Wisconsin River valley. Shortly after reaching the top of the steepest climb you will notice a paved bike path paralleling Hwy 12 on the left for the rest of the way to Madison. Once you reach Madison take University Ave. to the UW lakefront trails, go through the campus area, cruise eclectic State St., swing around Capitol Square, while skirting Lake Monona, proceed to Cottage Grove road and east to Cottage Grove. Once on the Glacier Drumlin Trail proceed to Lake Mills. This is the longest day and you may want to break it up into two days, staying at Madison instead of going on to Lake Mills.

Day 4 – Lake Mills to New Berlin. Most of this day is a continuation of the Glacier Drumlin Trail until it ends at Waukesha. I stay at one of several motels in New Berlin on S. Moorland at the Interstate 43 interchange.

Day 5 – New Berlin to Kenosha. Take W. Grange to the Milwaukee County Oak leaf Trail, proceed south and then east to Old Chicago Hwy 32 south. There is a trail paralleling 32 but it is in rough shape and I just take the highway to Racine.

On the south side of Racine find the North Shore Bike Trail off of 19th St. and proceed to Kenosha on the trail. The Best Western Harborside motel is a particularly nice place to stay this night.

Day 6 – Kenosha to Chicago. Use the interconnecting trails starting with the North Shore Bike Trail to take you all the way into Chicago. You will go through the rather grim Waukegan area but then the surroundings improve considerably as you cycle through the north Chicago communities such as Lake Forest and Highland Park with the active commuter rail lines always on your right. The route then takes you through the Northwestern campus, along the lake and through various Evanston parks. Downtown Evanston is a bit congested but just follow the well placed green bike signs directing you to the Lakefront Trail. Once on this trail the skyline of downtown Chicago dramatically appears and you realize you have made it.

Why not check in at a Chicago downtown motel and stay a few days, enjoying the fruits of a ride you will probably want to do again? When you are ready to depart, make your way to Union Station. After you obtain your Amtrak ticket, ask directions to the cargo area where for an additional \$25.00 shipping fee you will be issued a bike box and directions for packing your bike.

I would suggest you have maps of the major urban areas you will be going through that indicate the bike routes and make motel or B&B reservations for each night. A good guide is *Biking on Bike Trails Between Chicago and Milwaukee* by Peter Blommer. Besides your standard bike repair kit make sure you bring a wrench to remove your pedals as this will be necessary in order to box your bike for its return on Amtrak. You will need a Wisconsin trail pass but nothing is required for Illinois.