

For the *Love* of Biking



Photo by Jeffrey Hammond



Scenic Bloomington Rides for Beginners to Experts

by **Kathy Gutowsky**

I fell helmet over cleats in love with Bloomington cycling a long time ago. It wasn't a matter of choice. How could I resist the bucolic country roads, the rolling hills, and, well...all the friendly men in tight Lycra?

For starters, Bloomington's a small town, and that makes it possible to leave for rides right from your front door. Most cyclists can hop on a bike and be pedaling by corn-fields or quarries in less than ten minutes.

Just outside the city limits are hundreds of miles of quiet country roads. Smack in the middle of rural southern Indiana, Bloomington is framed by forests, parks, and lakes. Morgan-Monroe State Forest, Griffey Lake Nature Preserve, Yellowwood State Forest, Brown County State Park, Lake Monroe, and the 200,000-acre Hoosier National Forest are all within 50 miles of Bloomington. Connect-

ing these natural areas and neighboring farms is a vast network of beautiful back roads perfect for leisurely rides. Scenic backdrops include working and abandoned limestone quarries and farms with exotic animals like emus, llamas, camels, and albino peacocks.

In all directions, there are things to see and places to stop. For mid-ride breaks, there are funky country cafés and restaurants, general stores, even bait shacks.

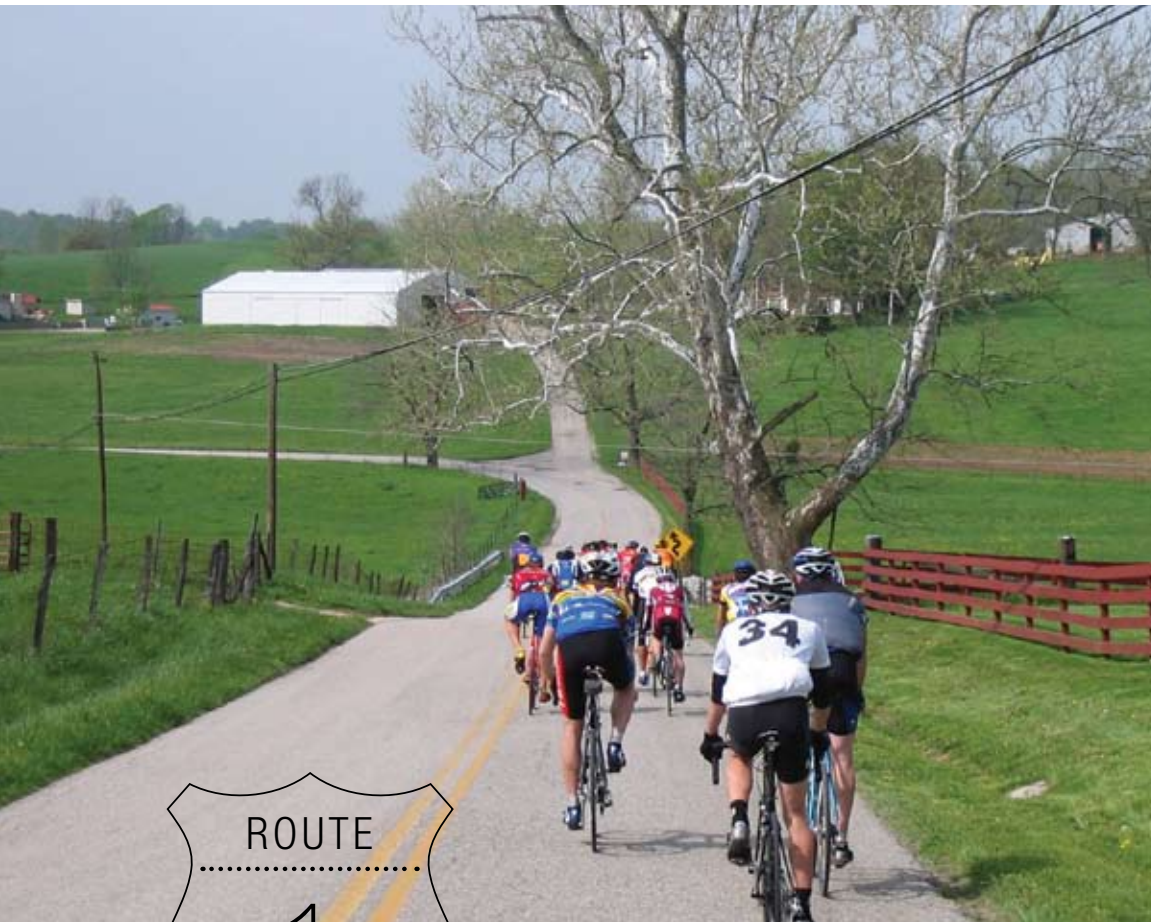
Admittedly my initial foray into cycling 20 years ago was probably more about the guys in Lycra than the scenery. And I did meet and marry a local cyclist. Each summer I follow him and his bicycle tour business to France where I work as a professional bike guide. And yet, every year I can't wait to get back to Bloomington and all its glorious hills.

It's those hills that set Bloomington cycling

apart. The ridges, ravines, and mean little climbs make cycling in and around Bloomington equally humbling and rewarding. And mastering these hills is what sets Bloomington cyclists apart.

Having come of age as a cyclist on the roads of Bloomington, I feel a part of the city's rich cycling heritage, captured in the film *Breaking Away* and carried on every spring at IU's "Little 500" race as well as the "Hilly 100." Over the years I have had many patient guides show me the quietest roads, the cruellest climbs, and the most surprising views.

For this introduction to local cycling, I have chosen routes that vary in terrain and difficulty. From a short, perfectly manageable outing to one of the region's most challenging rides, here are four reasons for you to fall in love with Bloomington cycling.



Gentle hills and farmland just outside Bloomington.
Photo by Mike Feske

Early morning coffee before the ride.
Photo by Mike Feske



Clear Creek Trail

This short spin south of town provides a gentle introduction to Bloomington's terrain by linking a few small hills with the blissfully flat Clear Creek Trail. (If you would rather hone your cycling skills before mixing it up with motorists, the 4-mile Clear Creek Trail is a great place to practice.)

Distance: 12 miles

Ride Time: 1 hour

Difficulty: Easy

Terrain: Mostly flat with a couple of small rolling hills.

Sights: Old farms, possible waterfowl along Clear Creek Trail, steel and wood bridge over Clear Creek.

Directions: Head southwest on Rockport, a road that gets progressively hillier as you follow it south through limestone country. For this ride, however, you have to tackle only a couple of small hills on your way to the Clear Creek Trail.

Turn left onto Clear Creek Trail, being careful to look for pedestrians, inline skaters, dogs, children, and other cyclists. Follow the flat, paved trail across That Road and Victor Pike. When the trail ends in a circle, turn right across the wood and red steel bridge to Church Lane. Turn left on Church Lane and

follow it past Clear Creek Church and across Business 37 where it becomes Fairfax Road.

Take Fairfax past Bloomington Speedway and over a small bridge before turning left onto Schacht. This country road is slightly uphill all the way, but it offers peaceful farm views as compensation for your effort. Follow Schacht until it ends at Harrell. Turn left onto Harrell until it ends at Rhorer. Turn left onto Rhorer and follow it to a right turn onto Jamie Lane where you pick up the city's official green bike route signs that take you back to town.



Orchard Ride

Heading north out of Bloomington, the Orchard Ride is relatively rolling and combines a couple of short but memorable hills with sweet sections of quiet, open farm roads. If you are feeling good, there's the additional Forest Loop that, on mostly repaved roads, is a sublime if challenging bonus.

Distance: 27 miles with optional 10-mile Forest Loop

Ride Time: 2 hours

Difficulty: Intermediate

Terrain:

Mostly flat and lightly rolling with two short but challenging hills. More hills if you add the Forest Loop.

Sights: Dagom Gaden Tensung-Ling Tibetan Buddhist Monastery, Musgrave Orchard, and optional Morgan-Monroe State Forest.

Directions: Work your way north through town to Cascades Park. Turn left up Club House Drive. You'll climb a short hill past the colorful Dagom Gaden Tensung-Ling Tibetan Buddhist Monastery to the Cascades Golf Course. Work your way through the golf course watching for speed bumps and golfers. Turn right where the road ends at Kinser Pike. Then follow Kinser across SR 37. At that point, Kinser Pike becomes Bottom Road, a local road in need of repaving.

Follow Bottom down a rough hill, over a small bridge, and past the city water treatment plant. Continue on Bottom, bearing left at Simpson Chapel Road and past a couple of farms and a few fat, happy pigs before you come to Dittimore Road. Turn right onto Dittimore and after a flat, wooded section, you'll climb a tough little hill up to a ridge. Stay on Dittimore, turning right where it intersects with Buskirk. This flat to lightly rolling road eventually ends at Cross Over Road where you turn left and then cross SR 37 onto Chambers Pike. Though the

name changes, the road remains gently rolling.

Chambers ends at Old SR 37 where to your left you will see—but won't yet be able to enjoy—Musgrave Orchards. You'll have to wait until late summer to stop for cider and apples. So turn right* heading south back to Bloomington on Old SR 37, a relatively flat road until you hit "Firehouse Hill." A challenging half-mile, Firehouse takes you up through the woods to the Bloomington Township Firehouse Department's Station 5. Stay on Old SR 37, cross Business Hwy 37, and head back to Cascades Park where your ride began.

***Forest Loop:** For a tough but rewarding 10-mile addition, turn left at Musgrave Orchards and head north through Hindustan. Follow the new pavement into the hardwoods and pines of Morgan-Monroe State Forest. Turn right on Bean Blossom for a little climbing and a stomach dropping downhill to Anderson Road. Head west on Anderson on your way back to Old SR 37.



Lake Views

Exploring northeast Monroe County and just dipping into Brown County, this challenging ride features lakes Griffey and Lemon and their surrounding hills. The optional Helmsburg espresso stop might provide the extra fuel you will need to climb the North Shore “wall.”

Distance: 42 miles with optional 6-mile espresso stop

Ride Time: 3 hours

Difficulty: Challenging

Terrain: This is a hilly ride that includes several sections of consistently steep rollers, Griffey hill, Shilo’s constant uphill grade, and the steep North Shore “wall” as a mid-ride highlight.

Sights: Griffey Lake Nature Preserve, Lake Lemon from the north and south shores, Helmsburg’s zebra-style fire truck.

Directions: Take Fee Lane north out of town across the SR 45/46 Bypass. Once you are through the light, this schizophrenic road becomes Matlock, then curves left to become Headley, and finally turns into Hinkle after a smooth fast downhill to Lake Griffey. After crossing the bridge over Griffey, you’ll have a half-mile climb before the road eventually ends at Bethel. Turn right on Bethel and follow it until it ends at SR 45. Turn left onto SR 45 towards New Unionville.

After you see signs for Lake Lemon Riddle Point Park, look for Tunnel Road on your left. Turn left onto Tunnel and follow it until you come to a right turn for South Shore

Drive. After a half-mile downhill to Lake Lemon, follow the flat-to-lightly-rolling South Shore Drive until it climbs up to SR 45 where you turn left into Needmore. Head downhill into Trevlac across a large highway bridge and look for North Shore Drive on your left. Turn left over the railroad tracks onto North Shore Drive, following the road as it winds past an odd series of “river shacks.”

Now the fun begins. North Shore is a challenging collection of steep, short hills and includes one particularly mean hill some call the “wall,” which is not quite a mile long. You eventually will come to a downhill that cuts through cow and horse farms



Route 3 takes you over the bridge at Lake Griffey. Photo by Jeffrey Hammond

before the road ends at Anderson Road.

Turn left and stay on Anderson until you come to a left for Shilo Road. A rough and slightly uphill road, Shilo's quiet, wooded environs are worth a few bumps. Follow Shilo until it ends at Tunnel Road. Turn right onto Tunnel and then right onto SR 45, which you will take back into town.

*I highly recommend that you take the 6-mile Helmsburg detour for a mid-ride snack and caffeine boost. Instead of turning left onto North Shore, continue straight on SR 45 until you enter Helmsburg. Turn right onto Helmsburg Road and cross the tracks. On your left you'll see a zebra-striped fire truck and the two-story brick Figtree Gallery and Coffee Shop. A word of warning: Before you plan your ride around its coffee and lovely baked goods, make sure you check Figtree's varying hours.

Join the Club

Fast or slow, young or old, newbie or pro – if you are looking for other two-wheeled enthusiasts, the Bloomington Bicycle Club, Inc. (BBC), is the best place to begin. Formed in 1976, this 120 member-strong, nonprofit club welcomes all levels of cyclists.

For group rides, peak season is March through October. The club leads a wide variety of weekly rides that include everything from “Nice ‘N Easy” tours to fast training rides with local race clubs. Almost all the rides are local and leave from either Bryan Park or the YMCA parking lot. Though you don't have to be a member to join rides, membership does have its advantages. Some of the benefits include free copies of the BBC's area route maps and discounts at local bike shops.

For the 2007 ride calendar or to join the BBC (\$15 for an adult or \$20 for a family), go to bloomingtonbicycleclub.org.

Nashville 90

You can't really call yourself a serious Bloomington cyclist until you have experienced this epic, four-county, three-forest tour of the hills and dales of south-central Indiana. For validation (and more fun) make your first "90" with a group of experienced locals.

Distance: 90+ miles

Ride Time: 6+ hours

Difficulty: Challenging and long

Terrain: Most of the ride calmly rolls along on captivating country roads, but there are a few longer hills that will get your attention.

Sights: Lake Monroe, "Cutrock Hill," Hoosier National Forest, Brown County State Park and the "Little Rockies," Yellowwood State Forest, Story, Nashville, and Bean Blossom.

Directions: Pick up 7th Street in town and take it east to where it becomes Eastgate Lane and intersects the SR 45/46 Bypass. Immediately after crossing the Bypass, take a quick left onto a narrow, wooded bike path that will drop you off on Morningside Drive. Follow Morningside as it winds through the Park Ridge East neighborhood until it ends at SR 46. Turn left onto 46 and then take an immediate right at the light onto SR 446.

About a mile up the road, just after the light at Moores Pike, pick up Old SR 446 on your right. Follow this neighborhood road as it parallels, then crosses, then parallels SR 446 again before it ends and you turn left onto SR 446 for good. You will stay on SR 446 for about 25 miles. This wide-open highway rolls and dips its way south across Lake Monroe and along the western edge of the Hoosier National Forest. You will pay for the sweet downhill views of Lake Monroe with a mile-long climb up from the reservoir. "Cutrock Hill" is another worthy climb and gets its name from the dramatic limestone walls flanking the highway.

At the flashing stoplights just outside Heltonville, turn left heading east on SR 58. Follow this quiet farm road through the tiny communities of Zelma, Norman Station, and Kurtz until you come to a left turn onto SR 135. A road *The New York Times* called one of the prettiest in the state, SR 135 ripples and weaves through vast pastures and untidy woods.

At the corner of 135 and Becks Grove Road—just about the halfway point—is Spurgeon's Corner. This unassuming general store is home to some of the finest homemade pumpkin muffins around. (Call ahead for muffins hot out of the oven.) But if you are

looking for something more substantial, continue a few miles northwest on 135 to the charming hamlet of Story where you can stop for lunch at the casually elegant Story Inn restaurant. Be careful not to overdo the fine dining because the only way out of town is up.

After the nice climb out of Story, stay on SR 135 until it ends at SR 46 where you'll turn left and then right to take Old SR 46 into Nashville. Alternatively, if you are looking to gain some serious elevation on the surrounding "Little Rockies," about two miles out of Story turn left into Brown County State Park. After paying the park entrance fee, you will also pay for one of the area's finest vistas and sweetest descents by arriving breathless atop the ridiculously steep Horseman's Camp Hill. (Known worldwide for its punishing terrain, the Brown County State Park was the site of the 1987 Pan-American Games road cycling race.)

With about 30 miles and a handful of hills still to go, you will want to do just a quick survey of Nashville's eating and shopping options. Then head back out of town on Old SR 46, looking for the recycling center on your left. There you'll turn onto Greasy Creek Road. Take this narrow road north and up another unreasonably steep hill. At the top, turn right onto SR 135 and head north to the bluegrass mecca of Bean Blossom, home of the oldest, continuous-running bluegrass festival in the world.

From Bean Blossom, you can take west SR 45 all the way home. It will be the longest 20 miles you have ever ridden, but there's some comfort to be found in the thick green canopy of Yellowwood State Forest as the road undulates and lifts you back to Bloomington. ✨



Sunrise at Lake Monroe.
Photo by Jeffrey Hammond