



The Guidebook, *Biking Iowa: 50 Great Road Trips and Trail Rides* by Bob Morgan of Cedar Falls



Top Rides for Autumn Splendor

Take 9,000 miles of public roads, add more than 1,000 miles of multi-use trails, throw in some eye-popping fall color and you've got a cyclist's paradise. With cool, humid-free days great for rides, the first two weeks of October typically offer peak colors and make Iowa a biker destination.

Northeast Iowa

This corner of the state is not only tops for fall color, its limestone bluffs and deep valleys ooze with regional character. For cyclists, the area's famed hills provide challenging climbs and white-knuckle descents. In fairness, dozens of area roads offer vivid autumn color and great views for riders of all skill levels, so get adventurous and explore the region. Some rides can be strenuous, but the rewards are hilltop views and steep, ear-popping descents.

DECORAH TO BLUFFTON—**MODERATE**

"Without a doubt, this is one of the first I'd recommend," says Ben Shockey of Decorah Bicycles. With two good climbs on the Bluffton Road, riders soak in hilltop views of dense woods rich in maple reds and views across tree-studded valleys. Roundtrip is 22 miles. Take Pole Line Road across Highway 52 on the north side of Decorah, following signs to Bluffton on W20. Or choose the gravel road to Bluffton parallel to the highway with its old iron bridges across the Upper Iowa River. "It's a favorite ride up here," he says. Other picks: Gravel roads from Decorah to Dorchester, Highlandville or Satry. "Anytime you head toward those towns you have pretty rides."

50-MILE CLAYTON COUNTY LOOPS—**STRENUOUS**

Loops are great for long rides, or ridden as short segments. Ryan Tenge of Elkader expects to put 12,000 miles on his bike this year and knows area rides by heart. From Elkader, take X3C blacktop, on the River Bluffs Scenic Byway, to Garber (13 miles), then C7X for a steep descent into Guttenberg (12 miles) and C43 to Osterdock to stop for a fish taco at the general store. Head south on X47 and rejoin X3C back to Elkader and grab something cold at Fennelly's Irish Pub.

A second 50-mile loop from Elkader via Volga, Wadena, Elgin and Clermont offers "one of my favorite loops for fall foliage and bluff views," says Tenge. The descent into Volga overlooks a huge valley, forests and pastures. A big drop into Elgin offers coasters a chance to hit 50 mph, then take a rest for antique shops in Clermont or a side jaunt up the hill to Montauk, the historic Governor Larrabee mansion. The ride home via Gunder offers a 1-pound Gunderburger at the Irish Shanti.

HERITAGE TRAIL, DUBUQUE COUNTY—**EASY**

With compact gravel and rest facilities, this flat route is an easy family ride past 450 foot deep valleys, old lead mines, mill towns and rugged woodlands. Mosey down 26 miles of a once bustling railroad line from Dyersville to Dubuque for numerous overlooks of the Little Maquoketa, sheer limestone bluffs, fossil collecting and interpretive sites. West of Epworth, the surrounding terrain flattens with fields and prairie and bluff.

www.dubuquecounty.com/HeritageTrail.cfm

GREAT RIVER ROAD—**EASY TO STRENUOUS**

"Iowa has 28 towns along the length of the Mississippi River," says Mark Wyatt of the Iowa Bicycle Coalition. He's ridden the entire Mississippi River Trail from New

Albin to Keokuk. "These are wonderful river towns used to welcoming visitors for many years," he says. Wyatt touts the fantastic sections around Pikes Peak State Park in Clayton County and Balltown in Dubuque County. "It is very hilly." A calorie-burning 12 percent grade near Balltown makes for challenging climbs or exhilarating descents for thrill seekers, and the nice, 6-foot-wide paved shoulders make a beautiful bike ride. Wyatt also rides Keokuk to Montrose on little-used Highway 96. "Montrose has a wonderful riverfront park with picnic areas and a clam shell button museum."

Other Iowa Rides

SOUTHWEST IOWA TACO RIDE—**EASY**

Hit the crushed limestone Wabash Trace from Council Bluffs to Mineola for the 19-mile roundtrip ride through terraced Loess Hills, woodlands, fields and pasture. Up to a thousand riders journey to the Mineola Steak House for the Thursday night special—a basket of tacos. A tree and shrub line along the way add color. Built on the former Wabash Railroad bed, "It's a gravel trail, but fairly flat," says Wyatt. "People show up after work to hit the Wabash—there is no set time," he says. Find the trailhead in Council Bluffs at the corner of U.S. 275 and East South Omaha Bridge Road, south of Iowa's School for the Deaf.

EAST CENTRAL FALL HARVEST—**EASY**

Watch the fascinating Amish harvest with horses pulling harvesters, steel wheel tractors and old style farming at its best. Ride southwest from Iowa City's Napoleon Park at S. Gilbert Street on W66, then take paved F62 to Frytown and W38 to Wellman for a 52-mile loop.

CYCLING RESOURCES

- *The guidebook, Biking Iowa: 50 Great Road Trips and Trail Rides* by Bob Morgan of Cedar Falls is a must with its detailed maps, stops along the way and insights on trailside nature and history. 136 pages, \$19.95. Order at www.trailsbooks.com
- www.bikeiowa.com offers group ride information, maps, trail links and discussion boards, with links to bike shops and bike clubs.
- www.Mississippirivertrail.org—From the headwaters to the Gulf, the 3,000-mile trail follows the Father of Waters.
- www.oneotrivercycles.com/routes offers Decorah area maps, distances and vertical profiles.
- www.iowabikes.com, the Iowa DOT site to order free bike maps, existing and planned trails and biking safety.
- www.inhf.org/iowatrails, find 43 trail maps, facts and local links.