

DRIFTLESS AREA, WISCONSIN

When the glaciers got here, they stopped.
When you see the terrain, you'll want to
do the same. —ALYSSA KONERMANN

CATCH MY DRIFT
(Clockwise from
left) Wyalusing
State Park; the
Great River
Road just north
of Prairie du
Chien; The Village
Greenhouse in
Gays Mills.

IT ONLY TAKES SO MANY WOLVES HOWLING INTO THE star-filled sky to make you realize you're in the wild. That night sky in the Kickapoo River Valley beams with layers of the cosmos we often forget exist, over-spread as they are by blasts of city light. Up here, the sun rises like a yawn, light catching the morning frost as it stretches its way over the seemingly endless hills packed together like file tabs.

Glaciers steamrolled their way across the continent during the Ice Age, leveling out the land as they went. But they bypassed the 24,000 square miles where Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois meet, leaving it a topographical oddity, an island of

pointed hills and deep valleys in the midst of flattened prairies, giving the region its name—drift is the sediment left behind by glaciers—as well as its soul. Hemmed in on the west by the Mississippi River, Wisconsin's Driftless Area is a collection of small towns that punctuate rolling acreage and forested hills formed over time by relentlessly winding—and fickle—rivers, like the Kickapoo, which in the native Algonquian language means “one who goes there, then here” (apt, as its 125 river miles cover just 65 miles on land). Even the county roads, dotted in parts with furniture makers, fur traders, and canoe rentals, obey the geography; there's not a straight-shot freeway in sight.

Walk through the trees to Wildcat Mountain State Park's



PICKING ORDER 🍏 It's apple season, and you're in Honeycrisp country. Highway 171, winding the ridge that overlooks the hills and valleys between Rolling Ground and Gays Mills, is prime territory for orchard hopping at Fleming Orchards, Kickapoo Orchard, and Sunrise Orchards. At Sunrise, you'll find tables lined with bags and bushels of many varieties, homemade corn salsa, Amish candy, apple cider doughnuts (moist, dense, with perfectly crisp outsides), gallons of fresh-pressed cider, hot spiced cider, and—because it's Wisconsin—fresh cheese curds.



HOCKING HILLS PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY HOCKING HILLS VISITOR'S BUREAU

observation point and you enter a portal overlooking the valley: thin tracts of green farmland twisting between rolling tree-covered hills cut by the occasional glimpse of that crooked river. The park is best explored via hiking trails and canoe landings. Just south of Wildcat, the Kickapoo Valley Reserve—an area saved in 1975 from a proposed dam and development—is 8,589 acres of trails, bluffs, sandstone cliffs, and rare flora and fauna. The only remnant of the engineering project that wasn't: the abandoned white stone dam tower. In the southern reaches of the state, Wyalusing State Park claims the banks of the Wisconsin River at its point of confluence with the Mississippi, and the park's vantage of their meeting—ideally with some fog in the air—is downright mystical.

The trees may have it, but so do the towns. Viroqua, big digs with a population of 4,362, puts every ounce of its size to good use. The small stone-clad storefront of The Driftless Café on Court Street, with floor-to-ceiling tree trunks standing in for columns, serves a menu of local • CONTINUED ON PAGE 158



ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

HOCKING HILLS, OHIO



→ STAY

Kickapoo Valley Ranch: Into the wild, in comfort and solitude. kvranch.com

Westby House Inn: Historical high-style and gracious hospitality. westbyhouse.com

Inn at Lonesome Hollow: Home away in someone else's home in the hills. lonesomehollow.com

→ EAT

The Driftless Café: All local farmers/producers and a menu that changes daily will make you want to come back for every meal. driftlesscafe.com

Sunrise Orchards: Donuts and cider and bushels of apples galore. sunriseapples.com

Kickapoo Coffee Roasters: Beans from small farms roasted with care in small batches means one hella good cuppa—no matter what size. kickapoocoffee.com

→ DRIVE

You'll want a car. If love of the open road is not your personal mantra, fly into Madison and rent one. If you drive from Cincy, be warned: The topography between here and there is dead boring.

→ FYI

Fall hits early around southern Wisconsin, reliably peaking in mid-October.

GO FOR: An escape full of cliffs, caves, waterfalls, and the tree canopy... with a chaser of moonshine.



WHEN YOU NEED TO DISCONNECT, HEAD FOR

the hills. Cell reception in Hocking Hills is spotty at best, forcing you to go analog and get lost in prehistoric forests and small towns. The craggy typography also makes for epic foliage-admiring, and there's no shortage at Hocking Hills State Park (where you'll find Devil's Bathtub, *above*) and adjacent Hocking State Forest. The region is ragged with "black hand" sandstone 345 million years in the making, named not for the rock's color (it's actually tan, or stained red by iron), but for a black handprint inscription discovered by early settlers in a gorge.

Trek through the park, taking in cliffs, waterfalls, gorges, and caves aplenty: Ash Cave, the park's largest recessed cave; Old Man's Cave, where fabled hermit Richard Rowe lived out his life; and Cantwell Cliffs, with a difficult-bordering-on-dangerous rim trail that rewards ambitious hikers with sweeping views. Get the full lay of the land on a guided hike with the park's only full-time naturalist, Pat Quackenbush, also a longtime ghost hunter who leads haunted night hikes. At Hocking Hills Canopy Tours, navigate the terrain on off-road Segways, or soar above the trees on the Super-Zip tour. After being double harnessed and rolled up like a human burrito, you're launched headfirst from 85 feet up, plunging over a cliff and the Hocking River. If the kids tire of the woods, take a free factory tour at The Columbus Washboard Company or find 3,450 little distractions at the Paul A. Johnson Pencil Sharpener Museum, both in Logan.

In neighboring Wayne National Forest, more sandstone forms the walkable, 39-foot-high Irish Run Natural Bridge, while below the forest floor the world's largest mine fire, lit near New Straitsville in 1884 by striking coal miners, still smolders. As the story goes, the smoke helped bootleggers conceal stills, making the town a moonshine mecca during Prohibition. Today, you can get legal hooch at Straitsville Special Moonshine Distillery.

—CAIT BARNETT



Night Moves → Rough it in one of Hocking Hills State Park's electric campsites and cottages (parks.ohiodnr.gov/hockinghills); go glamping at the Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls (innatcedarfalls.com); or spread out at Cedar Grove Lodging (cedargrovelodging.com).



DRIFTLESS AREA, WISCONSIN: CONTINUED FROM PAGE 69

farm-to-table food that changes daily and could hold its own in any foodie city—like lamb ragout with deep-rooted tomatoes, horseradish gnocchi, and a salad of micro-greens. Being in a small town doesn't mean being without small-batch, fair-trade coffee, either; Kickapoo Coffee Roasters takes care of that.

To feed your mind, walk the half mile to Driftless Books and Music: 25,000 square feet of new, used, and rare stacks, eclectically (but navigably) arranged and interspersed with art and miscellaneous seating in a former leaf tobacco warehouse. Seven miles up the road is Westby, a Norwegian town, which is made clear not just by Norskadalen (a natural/cultural heritage center with trails and a homestead composed of some of the valley's oldest buildings and settlers' artifacts), but by all the *Vilkommen* signs, Norwegian murals, and weekend festivals celebrating holidays like Syttende Mai. It's also where "championship cheese" is a thing, which you can learn more about at Westby Cooperative Creamery. (Pro tip: Try the yogurt, too.)

Before departing, drive west toward the Mississippi and turn south on Highway 35—The Great River Road—to Prairie du Chien. The second-oldest city in Wisconsin, it's a river town whose small, pleasant center is stocked with a coffeehouse, bakery, and a few restaurants and bars. But getting there, sandwiched between riverbanks and towering bluffs, wispy fog peeking past humpbacked hills, you'll feel stung by the energy and tension of the river. The only true flatness for miles around, it looks calm, even creek-like in places—but that belies its power. It's the same energy of the Driftless region: peaceful but not lethargic, suffused by a quiet, persistent buzz. Restless yet rooted, just like its name. ☉

YELLOW SPRINGS, OHIO: CONTINUED FROM PAGE 70

Xenia Station, with a water fountain, maps, and restrooms. Upstairs, past the replica of the old telegraph office, there's a belvedere where you can look out over the treetops. As you enjoy the view, remember that 41 years ago one of the worst tornados ever to hit the Midwest bulldozed a half-mile swath of death and destruction through this city. Yes, this is the place. So check your phone's weather app before deciding how much farther you want to ride.

From Xenia, you can continue south—toward Morrow, Loveland, and all the way to Newtown. But here's your chance to explore new territory. Head west via the spur marked Creekside Trail, dodging black walnuts (an autumn biking hazard) and zipping along wetlands where you can catch glimpses of migrating waterfowl. A crossroads with a handful of wood-framed buildings and the remnants of the Alpha Grain & Seed Company is a textbook example of what a railroad town looked like circa 1900. Beyond it, the posh suburb of Beavercreek welcomes trail riders with public restrooms and a 9/11 memorial made of rusted girders. At this point you're about 17 miles from Yellow Springs. Over-achievers: You can continue through Dayton to pick up the Huffman Prairie Trail, which ends high on the hill where a couple of bike mechanics named Wilbur and Orville experimented with their crazy idea for a flying machine.

Return to Yellow Springs in time for dinner at the Winds Café, a farm-to-table spot that's arguably one of the best restaurants in this corner of the state; you'll need the calories the next day for the trip north. If your legs are up for it, the trail will take you all the way to Urbana (about 25 miles), where the Depot Coffee House serves lunch and where you can use Uncle Al's Fixit Stand—a kiosk with an air pump and bike tools for emergency repairs.

Twenty-five miles there means the same distance back. Recover from your "half-century" at the Yellow Springs Brewery, conveniently located just north of the village at the edge of the trail. You can toast autumn with their Not Punk Enough Pumpkin Ale while weighing the possibility of lingering in town another night. If you can find a room. ☉

TRAVERSE CITY, MICHIGAN: CONTINUED FROM PAGE 78

reserve a two-top at one of downtown's swankier restaurants: Amical is a stylish European-style café, and Georgina's is an Asian-Latin fusion taquería. Out with your buds? Head to one of the town's many brewpubs (but be prepared for the standard menu of burgers, fries, and pizza). North Peak Brewing Company is a standout; the spectacularly hip brewpub-meets-ski-lodge (complete with cozy fireplaces throughout) occupies a former candy factory. Have some beer—the seasonal stuff is always a good bet—and order the beer-steamed mussels, which arrive simmering in savory broth with tomatoes, whole garlic cloves, onions, and Cajun sausage. Traveling with hungry kids? Try The Franklin: It's hospitable enough to hand out crayons but stylish enough to offer a full cocktail menu, a locally sourced drink list, and dishes like cured salmon with beets, wasabi, and microgreens.

Like any good resort town, Traverse City furnishes visitors with an excellent breakfast. The Flap Jack Shack (its name alone makes it worth a look-see) is 1970s diner kitsch at its finest, and the flapjacks at said shack are as good as you'd wish them to be; the blueberry version doubles down on the fruit by adding blueberry compote.

A trip to this part of the world would be incomplete without a scenic drive or two. Mosey on up the Old Mission Peninsula, the thread of land extending out into Grand Traverse Bay. A slew of wineries dot the main road leading to Old Mission State Park and Lighthouse at the end. If you feel like dropping some cash on your lodgings, look up Chateau Chantal; this winery-cum-B&B commands a stunning view of the bay. On your way, stop at one of the most sought-after craft breweries in the nation, Jolly Pumpkin, for some artisan ale. The much larger Leelanau Peninsula to the west is home to the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, a 65-mile-long stretch of stunning "sugar sand" beaches and bluffs that look out over Lake Michigan and practically demand a day trip for picnicking, swimming, and roaming.

Wherever you wander in Traverse City, don't be afraid to talk to locals about their state. Michiganders tend to evangelize, and their civic pride is contagious. ☉