



The best of the Midwest

*There's far more to America than the big cities on the coast.
Giselle Whiteaker meanders through the Midwest.*



Clockwise from top: The iconic Cloud Gate in Chicago; a view over the Mississippi River from Chestnut Mountain in Galena, Illinois; French Canyon at Starved Rock State Park, Illinois.



Left: Lost Lake at Canoe Bay in Wisconsin, Right: Vikre Distillery's delicious Boreal Cedar Gin.

Gazing across the skyline of Chicago from the 360 Chicago Observation Deck, 1000 feet above the famed Magnificent Mile, I can't believe my road trip across Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois is drawing to an end. The sun is being swallowed by the horizon, its orange glow a thin line, as the city lights twinkle on and it's with a sigh I return to ground level.

Nearly two weeks ago, I landed in Minneapolis, home of the Walker Art Center and the iconic *Spoonbridge and Cherry* sculpture. I browsed the city like a book, making the most of spring-like days, exploring Mill Ruins Park and roaming the skybridges connecting buildings. All too soon it was time for me to check out of my atmospheric abode at the Hewing Hotel and move on, filling the gaps in my oversized suitcase with tax-free, clothing and shoes from the many stores at Mall of America, my favourite places to shop.

The port-city of Duluth, Minnesota's third-largest metropolis after the Twin Cities, is made for drinking, whether it's at the Duluth Coffee Company, where coffee is roasted to order, or Fitgers Brewery, one of the six brewers that call this city home. If whiskey, vodka or gin is your tippie, Vikre Distillery obliges. This boutique outfit uses local grains, foraged wild botanicals, handcrafted Minnesota oak barrels, and the clean, cold water of Lake Superior to brilliant effect. Sampling the flavours in the Distillery Cocktail Room is a highlight, equalled only by roasting marshmallows for smores, a peculiar concoction of sweet crackers sandwiched around melted marshmallows and chocolate. Stay at Pier B hotel on the waterfront, collect your smore kit from the front desk, and head to the firepit, with views of the Aerial Lift Bridge, for a unique Duluth experience.

I left at sunrise, watching pink and orange hues glow across the frozen water of Lake Superior. Driving through the Superior National Forest to the northern enclave of Ely, the trees sparkled with a dusting of snow, deer grazing in the undergrowth. Ely is the gateway for the Boundary Waters, a vast network of waterways within a glacially-carved landscape stretching to the Canadian border. Crossing a small river, I spy fisherman tramping across the thick layer of ice, the lure of walleye and trout compensating for the frigid air. It's not just fish that abound here – beavers, eagles, bears and moose can all be spotted, if you're lucky. It's also wolf country, with the International Wolf Centre teaching visitors about these handsome, often misunderstood, creatures.

In summer, canoe enthusiasts flock to Ely. In winter, watersports give way to dog-sledding, the frozen water a perfect, white playground. Gliding across the ice with my own dog team in the wake of my Wintergreen guide, I'm awed by the power and enthusiasm of the Canadian Inuit Dogs that are my engine. Come evening, I watch the sun set from the warmth of my spacious cabin at Timber Trail Lodge. The air is still and quiet, a moment of peace so perfect it leaves me breathless.

A new day brings a new state, as I drive to Canoe Bay, in the heart of Wisconsin. Set within 300 acres of beautiful hardwood forest with three spring-fed, glacially carved lakes, the cottages at this Relais & Châteaux property are stunning, positioned discreetly apart, with decks looking out to a lake. This is a place for strolling, relaxing in the library, and fine-dining in the lakeside dining room. Wisconsin Dells, is a stark contrast. The southern city on the Wisconsin River sports its fair share of beautiful,



glacier-carved sandstone formations, but the “Waterpark Capital of the World’s” numerous theme parks and entertainment centres encourage unleashing your inner child. The largest waterpark, at Kalahari Resort, features 125,000 square feet of wet and wild indoor fun.

All that water leaves me craving seafood, so I indulge at the Del Bar. The “Prairie-style” ambiance was created by James Dresser, a protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright and the menu is a delight. I feast on oysters in the half shell, seared sea scallops in a delectable Moscato reduction, and an organic apple salad, with mixed greens, dried cranberries, walnuts and blue cheese. A raspberry mango dreamsicle, composed of sorbet, ice-cream and heavy cream, is a fitting finale.

Returning to Sundara Inn and Spa, a relaxation haven in a 26-acre pine forest, I collect a small tub of Sundara Sandstone Body Polish and complete the Purifying Bath Ritual, a five-step self-guided treatment to cleanse the skin and clear the mind. Replete, I relax in my suite, anticipating the morning massage I’ve booked before departing.

My path to Galena, over the Illinois border, takes me by two of Wisconsin’s quirkiest attractions. Dr Evermor’s Sculpture Park is an extraordinary collection of artwork by Tom Every, created from industrial salvage. The centrepiece is the *Forevertron*, the largest scrap metal sculpture in the world. It’s surrounded by an eclectic selection of beautifully crafted birds, each showing distinct character, space-age insects, and fantastical machines. I leave overwhelmed by the creative genius on display.

Tom Every also had a hand in the creation of the House on the Rock, providing salvage for Alex Jordan’s imagination-packed retreat. Wrapped around Deer Shelter Rock, this place defies description. The whimsical displays include the world’s largest indoor carousel; a re-creation of an

early twentieth-century American town; a 200-foot model of a whale; a collection of automatic music machines; and an Infinity Room that juts 218 feet over the forest, without supports. Several hours after entering, I stumble into daylight, in sensory overload.

Arriving in the historic town of Galena, I check in to a Victorian-style room at the DeSoto House Hotel, the oldest operating hotel in Illinois. It’s a great base for exploring Galena’s Main Street, boasting examples of architectural styles ranging from French Colonial to Greek Revival. Across the river, the Italianate former home of General Ulysses S. Grant, the 18th US President, is open to the public and at the Galena & U.S. Grant Museum, a hologram of the man himself welcomes visitors. A short drive away, the Soaring Eagle Zip Line at Chestnut Mountain takes punters high above the mountain’s peak for an birds-eye view of the Upper Mississippi River Valley.

For a small town, Galena has an impressive array of dining options, from healthy home cooking at Otto’s Place to juicy steaks at the Log Cabin Steakhouse and modern American dining at Fried Green Tomatoes. Dishes can be washed down with a pint of Guinness at The Irish Cottage, or one of the many beverages at Root Beer Revelry.

My penultimate destination is Starved Rock Lodge, in the State Park of the same name. This is one of those places that offers a bit of everything: hiking; relaxation in the cosy massage cabin; jaunts into nearby Ottawa, with a Himalayan Salt Cave at Salt Tree Yoga; and the August Hill Winery & Illinois Sparkling Co. Tasting Room in Utica, where you can sample varietals from the region. In the evening, I step outside to perch on the *Stargazer*, a statue of a figure observing the night sky, startling a racoon snuffling around the grounds. One night is simply not enough.



Clockwise from top left: The Forevertron.

I fell in love with Chicago on my first visit, and despite a chill wind swirling through the city, that affection hasn’t waned. It has an arty vibe, with the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the changing art programme within Millennium Park, not to mention Cloud Gate, more commonly known as The Bean, and scattered works by Miro, Picasso, Dubuffet and other well-known names. Cuisine in the city is superb, whether it’s GT Prime’s meat-centric menu, culinary invention at Cindy’s Rooftop Lounge crowning the Chicago Athletic Association Hotel, or the all-local dining concept at the Revival Food Hall in the North Loop neighbourhood. I’m staying at the Cambria Chicago Magnificent Mile Hotel and I couldn’t be more comfortable. I’ve looked up at the city from the streets and hovered above it in a glass box extending from the Skydeck.

In the words of Depeche Mode, I just can’t get enough. ■

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www.exploreminnesota.com
www.minneapolis.org
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www.ely.org

Wisconsin Links:
www.travelwisconsin.com
www.canoebay.com
www.wisdells.com
www.thehouseontherock.com

Illinois Links:
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The Estate

Bentley Park Circle, Orlando, Florida

This statement, custom-built powder-blue estate is located in a prestigious gated community just 20 minutes from the glittering Orlando attractions and a short buggy ride from Bay Hill Club & Lodge. From the grand pillared entrance to the swimming pool and gym, modern convenience and the grandeur of 18th-Century Europe have been combined to create a remarkable five-bedroom, family friendly home. Hand-painted murals, a carved fireplace, and grand twin staircases in the foyer give this property an abundance of character.

Guide price: \$6,450,000

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Spacious family home

Twin Eagles Loop, Reunion, Florida

This spacious ten-bedroom home in Reunion Resort on Twin Eagles Loop is just six miles from Disney World. However, if you prefer the quiet life, the expansive pool-deck area with summer kitchen and shaded lanai ensure you can enjoy the warm Florida evenings as well as the sun-filled days. The sizeable pool and spa overlook the seventh fairway of the Jack Nicklaus PGA course, which is just one of three championship golf courses this resort has to offer.

Guide price: \$2,955,000

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The Mediterranean property

East Lawn Drive, Celebration, Florida

This Mediterranean-style home has extraordinary waterfront views in Celebration. With a dramatic cool-marble entrance featuring a spiral staircase and soaring ceilings, the property has a real sense of grandeur. The open floor plan, cosy family room, and a surround-sound cinema make this a home to suit any family occasion. The outdoor space has a waterfront pool and summer kitchen to make the most of the summer in Florida. You can also welcome guests in the self-contained apartment over the garage.

Guide price: \$3,600,000

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