

2005

Best of the Road



The Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium in Dubuque, IA, includes a number of outdoor areas.

For a road trip as relaxing as a Sunday afternoon drive, start your engine in Dubuque, IA, and follow the Great River Road to Saint Paul, MN. Thanks to a glacial detour, this part of northern Iowa, western Wisconsin, and eastern Minnesota boasts a landscape replete with rolling countryside, dense wetlands, and towering bluffs. By following road signs identified by a river pilot's wheel, the Great River Road leads to one charming river town after another. Catfish, cheese curds, and seismic chimes are all here in the Editor's Picks, shown in bold, our way of sharing with you those special things we call "Best of the Road."

The Great River Road

For full maps of Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, see pp. 38-39, 114-115, and 54-55 of Rand McNally's 2005 Road Atlas.



In Dubuque, silhouettes of Victorian homes perched on precipitous bluffs form a dramatic skyline, and an elevated one. For \$2.00, the Fenelon Place Elevator, originally built in 1882, provides a ride in a four-seat lift to the top of the bluffs (and down). Called the world's shortest and steepest scenic railway, the Fenelon ascends 189 feet via ropes and pulleys to a wooden platform nestled in a neighborhood of restored homes. The unrestricted views of Wisconsin, Illinois, the downtown, and the Port of Dubuque are well worth the shake, rattle, and roll of the ride.

Private homes aren't the only structures being restored in Dubuque. Much of downtown has been converted into trendy shops and eateries, such as The Pepper Sprout Midwest Cuisine Restaurant, which shows off its 19th-century façade with purple paint and green trim. Just down the street is Café Manna Java, also in a restored storefront. Luncheon menu favorite: Hot panini sandwich served with a choice of homemade sauces, like the béchamel made for a *croque monsieur* at \$7.25. Café Manna Java sandwiches, like chicken pesto or sprouts on grain (\$7.25 each), are served "Dubuque Riverfront style," meaning with a side of slaw made with red cabbage chiffonade.



Many vintage buildings in Dubuque have been transformed into boutiques.

An hour-long narrated tour via Trolleys of Dubuque covers the city's historic section and provides an alternative way to get to the top of the bluffs. With hop-on and hop-off service, riders can walk or ride from downtown to America's River, a tourism development set on the banks of the Mississippi.



A sculpture of Samuel Clemens as 'Mark Twain' gazes over his beloved river at the Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium.

Components of America's River are connected by a path that winds from the **National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium** to Shot Tower, where hot lead was dropped, spinning end over end, into the river to make cannonballs during the Civil War.

In the center of the development, the Grand Harbor Resort and Waterpark sports enough bells and whistles to keep the entire family happy. There are packages for families that include access to the 25,000-square-foot waterpark and membership in the WaterSquirts Kids Club for children ages 2 to 12. The adults-only fitness center overlooks the Mississippi. The resort is only minutes by foot from the Diamond Jo casino and the *Spirit of Dubuque*, an authentic dual paddle-wheeler sightseeing boat.

As the Great River Road heads north out of Dubuque, it rolls through hilly farmland before curving toward the state line, in this case, the Mississippi River. At the river, it continues north in Iowa between sandstone cliffs and railroad tracks evocative of the impact the railroad had on river traffic in the early 20th century. Crossing the river, it continues on the Wisconsin side at Prairie du Chien.

The Prairie du Chien Tourism Center is just across the bridge and a good place to stop for facilities and a chat with the staff. Anyone there will know how to find Willy & Nellie's Place, a local root beer stand that serves draft root beer along with ice cream, hot dogs, and freshly popped corn. Willy's is just this side of the tributary to St. Feriole Isle, where Villa Louis, a Victorian estate built in the 1840s, has been restored to its original splendor. In 1952, Villa Louis was named the first state historic site in Wisconsin. The peaceful park on St. Feriole Isle invites a leisurely walk before returning to the road.

The Great River Road is so clearly marked that driving into La Crosse, even at dusk, is easy. In the west at the end of the day, the sun appears to dance on the ragged edges of the bluffs before settling into a notch to backlight and eventually silhouette the Iowa side of the river.

Riverside Park in La Crosse is a great place to start a visit to this riverfront city, especially when one of the *River Queens* is docking. When a riverboat docks in La Crosse, she and her passengers are given a royal welcome.



Members of the local historical society dress in full period costume, a band plays, and both greet passengers as they disembark for a day.

At one end of the park, a towering wooden statue of Hiawatha looms over the riverbank. According to Native American legend, Hiawatha played a game similar to lacrosse with his warriors to console him when one of his daughters died. At the park's center, a bronze sculpture in the form of a soaring bald eagle foretells adventures to come. In this area along the Great River Road, bald eagle sightings are increasingly common.

The height of the bluffs along the Mississippi peaks at La Crosse, stretching to more than 500 feet at Granddad Bluff. Granddad's is a terrific spot to look over the city, back at Iowa, and into Minnesota. On the way to the look-out, it's difficult to miss **Rudy's Drive-In**; it is the largest in the Midwest. Rudy's has been making and selling root beer for three generations. The red hots are boiled hot dogs served as you like them and delivered to the driver's side window by roller-skating waitresses.



Rudy's, the largest drive-in in the Midwest, is located in La Crosse, WI.

The drive between La Crosse and Trempealeau alternates between wide-open spaces and canyon-like passes with bluffs encroaching on both sides of the river. The restored-to-period downtown stretches about four blocks before reaching the river. The Trempealeau Hotel, a wooden clapboard building, offers guestrooms with or without facilities. Its kitchen serves a veggie burger made with ground walnuts, which patrons can enjoy in the dining room or outside on a broad expanse of lawn overlooking the river.



The restaurant at the Trempealeau Hotel in Trempealeau, WI, specializes in vegetarian dishes.

Before crossing into Minnesota, a stop at the Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge is in order. Auto tours are clearly marked or visitors can walk or cycle any number of trails within the 6,220 acres. The refuge is in one of five major flyways in the United States. Depending on the time of year, there are red-shouldered hawks and bald eagles, bluebirds and yellow-breasted chats, grebes and geese, and residents, such as raptors. A birding checklist for 263 species is available at the visitors' center.

Entering Minnesota, the Great River Road turns north toward Winona where the imprint

of immigrant settlers is well documented. The Winona County Historical Society Museum has three levels of exhibits, including a full-size reconstructed Main St. from the early 20th century. The Watkins Heritage Museum and Store offers a brief look at the history of the home-remedy giant while the Polish Cultural Institute honors the contributions made by Polish laborers.

The Winona National Bank is an architectural gem built in the early 1900s. It invites patrons to bask in the beauty of its Tiffany Studio interiors and to be taken aback by its collection of big game mounts, bagged by members of the institution's original board of directors. The big cats and apes were stuffed for posterity and placed on the mezzanine level where they remain today.

While in Winona, do as the college crowds do and grab a bite to eat at the Jefferson Pub and Grill, located along the railroad tracks. Because it is a favorite meeting place, reservations may be required when an event is going on at Minnesota State College, Winona State University, or St. Mary's University of Minnesota, all located within the city limits. Jefferson's offers world-class burgers of both beef and vegetarian variety. The veggie burger is made with black beans (\$6.50) and provides a bit of heat in every bite.



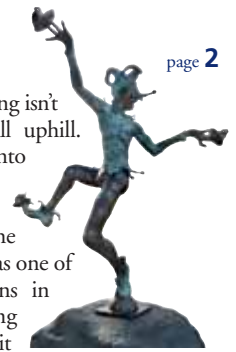
The St. James Hotel continues to welcome guests to Red Wing, MN.

Continuing north, the Great River Road curves along flat lowland, then stretches east toward the river into Wabasha. The confluence of the Mississippi and Chippewa rivers is located at Wabasha, and the force from the two rivers is so great that the water never freezes. That's lucky for the bald eagles that are able to overwinter – luckier still for residents, as eagle sightings are part of everyday life. The experts at the **National Eagle Center** report that eagles are partial to cottonwood trees when building a nest. Tree height and branch strength are important because eagles return to the same nest, repairing and enlarging it, year after year.



Visitors can spot eagles all year long from the Eagle Watch platform in Wabasha, MN.

The drive to Red Wing isn't too long, but it's all uphill. Red Wing is built into hills in the west and onto the banks of the Mississippi in the east. Annually rated as one of the best small towns in America, Red Wing is well known for its historic architecture, antiques, pottery, and Red Wing shoes. Its reality doesn't disappoint.



Outdoor sculpture entertains visitors in Red Wing, MN.

The St. James Hotel opened in 1875 and still anchors the downtown. Across from the railroad station and a stone's throw from the Mississippi, its décor and ambiance are closely associated with both. Each of the 61 elegantly appointed rooms is named after a riverboat, and photographs and information on the boats are displayed in the rooms. An arcade of boutiques winds through the first floor, where the lobby serves as a reading room as well as a gathering place for coffee or tea. From the Summit Room on the hotel's top floor, the entire Hiawatha Valley is in view, just as it was to the businessmen who brought commerce to Red Wing by way of the railroad. In their day, the Summit Room was a ballroom used for community gatherings and celebrations; today it is still a reception hall.

One of the town's treasures is the **Tale of Two Sisters Tea Room and Gift Shoppe**, where tea and its accoutrements are served in one of Red Wing's historic homes. There's shopping at the tea-room, too: trimmings for the table, accessories for the home, and a selection of choice teas including several cut exclusively for the two sisters.



Tea and tea accessories are offered at the Tale of Two Sisters Tea Room and Gift Shoppe in Red Wing, MN.

Nearby, the Golden Lantern Inn shines as a bed-and-breakfast. Elegant, the Tudor Revival was built in 1932 by the president of the Red Wing Shoe Company. Its spacious interiors are rivaled only by the garden's inviting seating areas, generous planting sites, fireplace, and spacious flagstone patio. The short downhill walk from the inn to the Sheldon Theatre passes many private homes that have been restored to turn-of-the-last-century grandeur.

The Sheldon, circa 1904, is a showcase, both as a building with delicately painted murals, marble columns, and gilded plaster, and as a venue for performances, concerts, and theater.

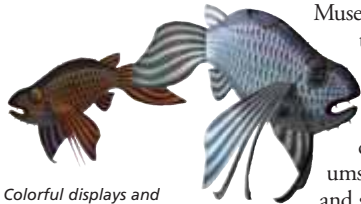


Tours (\$2.50 for adults) include the backstage and a stop on the mezzanine that also serves as a gallery for local artists.

North of Red Wing, the Great River Road curves toward Saint Paul. The section of the river that runs through the city is part of the National Park Service. Park service rangers staff an information center for the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area inside the **Science Museum of Minnesota**.

The museum's façade soars as high as a river bluff between the Mississippi's banks and Kellogg Blvd. Visitors are greeted by Iggy, a 10-foot iguana sculpture at the entrance to the museum. A towboat riverside serves as a viewing platform overlooking the river. The boat isn't in the water; it is located 75 feet off the ground on the balcony of the Mississippi River Gallery. Visitors can board and explore it to clang bells and take pretend trips along the world's fourth-longest river all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Interactive exhibits are the museum's hallmark.

In the downtown area, the Minnesota Children's Museum offers its own interactive play areas including a rooftop art exhibit. The Children's Museum and the cultural treasures within the restored Landmark Center – Skylark Opera, the Schubert Club's Museum of Musical Instruments, and the Traces Center for History and Culture – are all within a 10-minute walk of the Science Museum. Saint Paul is a city that encourages walking, even in the winter via its enclosed skyway system that connects hotels, museums, convention centers, and shopping areas.



Colorful displays and exhibits dominate the Minnesota Children's Museum in Saint Paul, MN.

The legendary and luxurious Saint Paul Hotel, with its award-winning restaurants and renowned afternoon and theme teas, is on the skyway system. It is only steps from the Ordway Center, the Xcel Energy Center (home of the Minnesota Wild hockey team), and Landmark Plaza, where larger-than-life bronze sculptures of native son Charles Schulz's cartoon characters, Charlie Brown and his friends, lounge about.

A 4.5-mile stretch along Summit Avenue in Saint Paul has more intact residential Victorian homes than anywhere else in the United States. The Cathedral of Saint Paul, whose dome rises 306.5 feet, is at the corner of Summit and Selby, across the street from the 36,000-square-foot home of railroad baron James J. Hill. On weekends during the summer, the Minnesota Historical Society hosts 90-minute walking tours along Summit Avenue starting at Hill House. Tickets are \$10 and reservations are recommended.

On weekend mornings, the most popular spot in town is the Saint Paul Farmer's Market. Starting at 6 AM on Saturday and 8 AM on Sunday, local farmers' best is offered in stalls that fill an entire city block.



The market is one outlet for PanDau, story cloth made by the women of the local Hmong community. Through stitching, story cloths depict daily life in Laos as well as a PanDau consignment shop, usually farming or celebrations, while some recount stories of political unrest. More information on the culture and history of Laos, as well as a PanDau consignment shop, is available at the Southeast Asian Ministry at 105 W. University Ave.

About two miles further west on University is Chocolat Celeste, an exclusive chocolatier that specializes in handcrafted grand truffles. Grand truffles are a full ounce of chocolate-covered ganache (filling). A Celestial Sweetie, one of the shop's signatures, is filled with pure bittersweet chocolate ganache. Throughout the year, Chocolat Celeste schedules chocolate and wine pairings during which the nuances of fine chocolate are discussed, then savored with fine wine.



Chocolat Celeste in Saint Paul, MN offers chocolate tastings and pairings.

Visitors learn tips such as serving cognac with a very dark chocolate, as the full-bodied flavor of one enhances the other. They'll also learn to listen when tasting a piece of fine chocolate – it should snap when bitten.

While the chocolate at Chocolat Celeste is exclusively European, the ingredients used to create the 22 different flavors of ganache are strictly local and selected from the artisanal farms that dot the country roads around the city.

Saint Paul was founded as a riverboat landing long before it was named territorial capital in 1849. Then it served as a port of call for adventurers, an opportunity for settlers, and, much like our drive along the Great River Road, a final destination for all.

For additional information:

Café Manna Java, 269 Main St., Dubuque, IA, 52001, (563) 588-3105, www.mannajava.com

Chocolat Celeste, 2506 W. University Ave., Saint Paul, MN, 55114, (651) 644-3823 or (866) 644-3823, www.chocolatceleste.com

Fenelon Place Elevator, 512 Fenelon Place, Dubuque, IA, 52001, (563) 582-6496, www.dbq.com/fenplco

Golden Lantern Inn, 721 East Ave., Red Wing, MN, 55066, (651) 388-3315 or (888) 288-3315, www.goldenlantern.com

Grand Harbor Resort & Waterpark, 350 Bell St., Dubuque, IA, 52001, (563) 690-4000 or (866) 690-4006, www.grandharborresort.com

James J. Hill House, Minnesota Historical Society, 240 Summit Ave., Saint Paul, MN, 55102, (651) 297-2555, www.mnhs.org

Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth St., Saint Paul, MN, 55102, (651) 292-3228, www.landmarkcenter.org

Minnesota Children's Museum, 10 W. Seventh Ave., Saint Paul, MN, 55102, (651) 225-6000, www.mcm.org

National Eagle Center, 50 Pembroke Ave., Wabasha, MN, 55981, (651) 565-4989 or (877) 332-4537, www.nationaleaglecenter.org

National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium, 350 E. Third St., Dubuque, IA, 52001, (563) 557-9545 or (800) 226-3369, www.mississippirivermuseum.com

Pepper Sprout Midwest Cuisine Restaurant, 378 Main St., Dubuque, IA, 52001, (563) 556-2167, www.peppersprout.com

Prairie du Chien Chamber of Commerce, 211 S. Main St., Prairie du Chien, WI, 53821, (608) 326-8555, www.prairieduchien.org

Rudy's Drive-In, 1004 La Crosse St., La Crosse, WI, 54601, (608) 782-2200, www.rudysdrivein.com

Science Museum of Minnesota, 120 W. Kellogg Blvd., Saint Paul, MN, 55102, (651) 221-9444, www.smm.org

Sheldon Theatre, 443 W. Third St., Red Wing, MN, 55066, (651) 385-3667 or (800) 899-5759, www.sheldontheatre.org

Spirit of Dubuque, Dubuque River Rides, Third St. and Ice Harbor, Port of Dubuque, Dubuque, IA, 52001 (563) 583-8093 or (800) 747-8093, www.dubuqueriverrides.com

St. James Hotel, 406 Main St., Red Wing, MN, 55066, (800) 252-1875, www.st-james-hotel.com

Saint Paul Hotel, 350 Market St., Saint Paul, MN, 55102, (651) 292-9292 or (800) 292-9292, www.saintpaulhotel.com

Tale of Two Sisters Tea Room and Gift Shoppe, 204 W. 7th St., Red Wing, MN, 55066, (651) 388-2250

Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge, W28488 Refuge Rd, Trempealeau, WI, 54661, (608) 539-2311, www.fws.gov/midwest/trempealeau

Trolleys of Dubuque, 2728 Asbury Rd., Dubuque, IA, 52004, (563) 552-2896

Winona County Historical Society and Museum, 160 Johnson St., Winona, MN, 55987, (507) 454-2723, www.winonahistory.org

