

MIDWEST
HILL
COUNTRY

GET THE DRIFT?

Despite its name, the ridges, valleys and rolling terrain of southwestern Wisconsin's Driftless Area are tailor-made for people who love to drift and explore

— by Terri Peterson Smith

HOUSE AND HILL IN HARMONY

Near the town of Spring Green, architect Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin estate tucks seamlessly into the rural landscape of Wisconsin's Driftless Area. Now a National Historic Landmark and UNESCO World Heritage Site, the main house sits on the brow of a hill, earning its name, which means "shining brow" in Welsh.

Ten thousand years ago, the Ice Age took a detour around southwestern Wisconsin and parts of three neighboring states. Without the glacial deposits of rock, clay, sand and silt called drift that flattened the rest of the upper Midwest, this region's winding back roads reveal picturesque limestone bluffs, spring-fed waterfalls, blue-ribbon trout streams and a rolling pastoral landscape — all nurturing iconic small towns, interesting people and acres of happy cows.

Located halfway between Chicago and Minneapolis, and encompassing roughly a quarter of the state, Wisconsin's Driftless Area packs in an eclectic blend of natural beauty, outdoor action and culture. The region's most famous citizen, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, built

his home and studio here, called Taliesin. "I meant to live, if I could, an unconventional life," Wright said. "I turned to this hill in the valley as my grandfather before me had turned to America — as a hope and haven."

But it's easy to overlook the Driftless. We've blasted by it countless times on the way to Chicago, Madison or Milwaukee from our home in Minneapolis, always thinking, "Gotta go there." So this time, foregoing the cities, we made the Driftless our destination, dipping south from Interstate 90 to explore the region at our own meandering pace.

PARKS AND REC

Our route followed State Highway 23 to Governor Dodge State Park, located between Spring Green and Dodgeville, which



we made our base camp for the trip. Named after General Henry Dodge, the first territorial governor of Wisconsin, the park contains more than 5,000 acres of idyllic natural beauty.

At Governor Dodge we hiked up cliffs, under waterfalls, over fields of grass and wildflowers and along spring-fed creeks where you can step into the cool air of the old spring houses that early settlers built as natural refrigerators. When we weren't feeling so ambitious, we cooled off in the park's two lakes, which have large picnic areas, fishing and boating (electric motors only).

The Dodgeville Kiwanis Club operates a concession stand at Cox Hollow Lake, offering boat and canoe rentals as well as treats such as pizza and king-size ice-cream cones at bargain prices. That lake also features a dog beach, just right for our golden retriever, Duffy, and other wet, furry, ball-chasing friends.

Owing to its unique geology and abundant rivers and streams — the Mississippi, Wisconsin, Kickapoo and Baraboo, to name a few — the Driftless region teems with recreational opportunities beyond the boundaries of its state parks. More than 40 percent of North America's migrating birds pass through the

area annually along the Mississippi River Flyway because of its abundant water and vegetation. Depending on the time of year, sandhill cranes and bald eagles nest on the riverbanks, while tundra swans and white pelicans stop in for a visit. Smaller species from orioles to ruby-throated hummingbirds make their home here, too.

Along the Driftless Area's northern edge is the 32½-mile Elroy-Sparta State Trail, a family-friendly three-tunnel bicycle route that has been inducted into the Rail-Trail Hall of Fame. To the south, cyclists may ride the 40-mile Military Ridge State Trail from Dodgeville all the way to Madison. Prefer paddling to pedaling? The many rivers flowing here make it a paddlers' heaven, and there are canoe and kayak liveries in Ontario, Rockton, La Farge, Readstown and Prairie du Chien, among others.

Finally, the Driftless area is known for thousands of miles of designated trout streams that *Outdoor Life* called "the best-kept secret in the trout world." And for fisherfolk who prefer boats to waders, area lakes and rivers offer walleye, smallmouth bass and northern pike as well as panfish, including bluegill, crappie and rock bass in abundance.



THE WRIGHT STUFF

One reason the Driftless Area is so appealing is that visitors can weave a love of the outdoors with opportunities to enjoy the area's fascinating culture and history. Those things come together just outside Spring Green at Frank Lloyd Wright's 800-acre estate, Taliesin (Welsh for "shining brow").

As a child Wright spent summers in this valley on his uncle's farm where he witnessed the patterns and rhythms of nature. He incorporated his observations of nature's design into his philosophy of "organic architecture" maintaining that a building should be suited to its environment, purpose and time.

Wright's Prairie Style, so prominently displayed at Taliesin, is considered the first uniquely American architectural style. Wright expanded and refined those ideas in his studio and school for architecture here, concepts that continue to influence architecture around the world. That's why the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recently named it a World Heritage Site.

Taliesin can be entered only on guided tours that

Above: More than 14 miles of trails meander through Wyalusing State Park, some with serious climbs and all with scenic views. Below left: A short but steep trail at Governor Dodge State Park takes hikers to pretty Stephens Falls.



TRAVEL GET THE DRIFT?

start from the visitor center and go by bus across the road to the estate. Strolling outside Wright's home, with dramatic horizontal lines and limestone construction that seems to rise straight from the land, it's easy to understand his thinking. A house, he said, should be "of the hill. Belonging to it. Hill and house should live together, each the happier for the other."

Inside, Wright's starkly simple interior spaces offer commanding views of the valley. The tours downplay it, but many stories from Wright's own life add to the drama of Taliesin. For example, in 1914, while Wright was away, a worker at the estate murdered seven people and set the house on fire. Read about it in Nancy Horan's somewhat fictionalized bestseller, *Loving Frank*.

OVER THE TOP

Not far from Taliesin but light years away from Wright's austere aesthetic, Alex Jordan built his House on the Rock atop a chimney-like rock formation. Leading his own "unconventional life," Jordan started building his dream house in 1945 and kept adding until it resembled, as one *Boston Globe* writer said, "the lair of a 1970s James Bond villain," a testament to over-the-



top excess.

Inside Jordan's home, opened to the public in 1960, you'll see his life's worth of collections including the world's largest indoor merry-go-round with 269 carousel animals and 182 chandeliers. Also on display are 200 model ships, a 200-foot-tall sea creature, hundreds of musical instruments, model airplanes, dolls and suits of armor. Don't miss the glassed-in Infinity Room that extends 218 feet over the valley floor. Kitsch or art, depending on your taste, it's like nothing you've ever seen.

From Taliesin or the House on the Rock, you'll want to swing into Spring Green, a great place to get supplies and artsy gifts, and to visit its excellent bookstore, Arcadia Books.

Above and below: Tours of Taliesin take visitors through the rooms, decks and courtyards that Frank Lloyd Wright designed to blend in with the natural surroundings of the Driftless Area.



WHERE TO STAY

A number of RV parks are located in Wisconsin's Driftless Area, including Fox Hill RV Park and Campground, a Good Sam Park in Baraboo, and several more in nearby Wisconsin Dells. The campground search tool on the Good Sam website can help locate them and other campgrounds, including state and municipal parks.

www.goodsam.com/campgrounds-rv-parks

Several Wisconsin state parks in the Driftless Area offer campgrounds that accommodate RVs, including Governor Dodge in Dodgeville, Perrot in Trempealeau, Wildcat Mountain in Ontario and Wyalusing in Bagley. Wisconsin state parks are busy in summer and during the fall leaf-peeping season, so be sure to make reservations well in advance. wisconsin.goingtocamp.com

IF YOU GO

The Driftless Area makes a great getaway for every kind of traveler, even the family dog. Wisconsin state parks welcome well-behaved dogs on leashes, and Governor Dodge State Park has a special dog beach. Most bars and eateries allow leashed pets on their outdoor patios.

As with most of the Midwest, the Driftless Area can be humid and buggy in summer, so come prepared with insect repellent and a fan.

A TASTE OF SWITZERLAND

From Spring Green it's about 45 miles southwest to New Glarus, a bit of Switzerland transplanted to Wisconsin. Swiss immigrants came to the area in 1845 from the Canton of Glarus and settled here because they found the region similar to home, just without the Alps. You'll feel like yodeling when you see the town's Swiss-inspired brown-and-white architecture adorned with happy cow statues and window boxes filled with red geraniums. The



community displays its heritage to the fullest during its many festivals including the Wilhelm Tell Festival, Polkafest, the Heidi Folk Festival and, naturally, Oktoberfest. New Glarus celebrates its 175th anniversary in 2020 so expect even more festivity.

Even if lederhosen and polka dancing aren't your thing, you'll enjoy New Glarus' history on display at the Swiss Historical Village and Museum, a collection of 14 buildings where tours and exhibits trace the Swiss colony's growth into a prominent dairy-farming community. And if the way to your heart is through your tummy, you'll fall in love with New Glarus' authentic Swiss bakeries, butcher shops and restaurants. For our campsite dinner, we stocked up on cheese at the Edelweiss Cheese Shop, Swiss sausages at Ruef's Meat Market and an assortment of gorgeous *läckerli*, *bratzeli* and *pfefernüsse* cookies from the historic New Glarus Bakery.

Wisconsin wouldn't be Wisconsin without breweries, and one of the state's best is the New Glarus Brewing Company on the south edge of town. We walked from the parking lot up to the brewery's hilltop site with beautiful views of the surrounding countryside from its rustic outdoor terraces. We sampled flights of Spotted Cow Ale, Two Women Lager and fruity beers that are their specialties.

ARTISANS AND ARTISTS

Without the layers of glacial rocks



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Untouched by glaciers, the Driftless Area's sculpted topography covers southwestern Wisconsin as well as southeastern Minnesota, northeastern Iowa and northwestern Illinois. For those who like to imagine their destination before they go, several books give an accurate idea of the Driftless. David Rhodes' prizewinning novels, *Driftless* and *Jewelweed*, beautifully capture the people and the land of this region, and Nancy Horan's *Loving Frank* offers an account of Frank Lloyd Wright's life in Chicago and Wisconsin.

and sand, the Driftless Area's lodges of lead, zinc and other minerals rested tantalizingly close to the surface, attracting miners from Cornwall, England, in the early 1800s to what is now the town of Mineral Point. The story goes that the first of these prospectors made shelters in makeshift hollows in the ground called badger holes, thus giving the state its nickname.

They didn't remain in badger holes long, however, because these miners brought with them expertise in stone building construction. Their sturdy and fireproof stone legacy remains the trademark of Mineral Point. The city was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation called the town one of America's Distinctive Destinations. Other Cornish legacies: the pasties (meat pies) and figgie hobbin (a cinnamon-and-raisin pastry concoction) you can savor at Mineral Point's Red Rooster Cafe.

Mining faded, leaving the historic buildings empty until 1935 when two farsighted gentlemen, Bob Neal and Edgar Hellum, began restoring a group of stone houses, now called Pendarvis, on Shake Rag Street. You can visit the historic buildings and then hike the trails on Merry Christmas Mine Hill to see remnants of mining equipment along with one of the largest restored prairies in southwestern Wisconsin.

Over the years, artists have continued Neal and Hellum's work, taking up residence in derelict buildings and turning them into art studios. Now, the 70-plus artists who reside in Mineral Point are delighted to show you their work and share their stories. In addition, anyone who wants to foster their creative side is welcome at Shake Rag Alley Center for the Arts where

Right, top to bottom: Near Wisconsin Dells in Baraboo, Fox Hill Campground offers full-hookup sites for all sizes of RVs. In New Glarus, Swiss Historical Village gives a peek into the lives of immigrants in a re-created 1850s Swiss settlement with a cheese shop, sausage shop, blacksmith forge and schoolhouse.



classes range from blacksmithing to fiber art, pottery, photography and much more. Even nonstudents are welcome to stroll Shake Rag Alley's collection of historic buildings and its oasis of trees and gorgeous gardens.

You'll find more of the Driftless Area's natural beauty and local culture along its scenic rural roads. Dozens of small family farms dot the landscape, seemingly plucked straight from a Norman Rockwell gallery, and many supply award-winning farm-to-table restaurants in Chicago, Minneapolis and Milwaukee. Amish buggies and Mennonite roadside stands with crafts and baked goods evoke a simple, local lifestyle. In the warmer months, music lovers can enjoy a variety of outdoor festivals, especially Larryfest, a terrific August celebration of bluegrass, folk and old-time music in LaFarge.

So what's the best way to enjoy the Driftless? Ironically, by just drifting through it. Meander. Stop and sample. Meet the locals. Transport yourself back to a simpler yet surprisingly rich time and place. And be thankful for those wonderfully fickle glaciers. **TR**