



WARBLERS, WINE, & FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

*From bird watching to architectural tours,
Wisconsin day trips offer a treasure box of
cultural gems*

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Spring and summer are synonyms for life and motion, especially here in the Midwest. Given our long winters, whose frigid winds stiffen even the most energetic travelers, these two seasons of sun and vigor can be a sail to pull our spirits out of hibernation and an elixir to revive our bodies. And where to shed the lethargy imposed by the frost?

Wisconsin.

The land of milk and honey, custard, wine, cheese, cheese curds, and spicy cheese bread, and excellent beer too, is proudly called God's country by Wisconsinites. And with good reason. That land not only delights the taste buds. Its green hills, lakes, towns and cities provide a myriad of pleasures both simple and sumptuous. The itinerary is up to you. Start off in Milwaukee or go the way of Madison, the capital of the state and the home of the University of Wisconsin.

Madison will seduce you with music, food and water. The city sits amid four lakes: Mendota, Monona, Wingra and Waubesa. They give the city a relaxed, backcountry feel. Boats zip by. Joggers trot. Fishermen patiently wait for tugs at their lines while townspeople and students amble by the lakeshore.

If it's Saturday, they're picking up locally grown fruit, vegetables, flowers or bread from local bakeries at the Farmers Market. From mid April to early November, sellers set up shop on Capitol Square from 6:30 a.m.-2 p.m. This is an invitation to relax and let go. Spend your morning there, walk around or shop nearby. Later, head into one of the city's many restaurants. There is traditional American fare, Italian, Japanese, Thai and Mexican among (many) others. You will find one to suit your taste. Afterwards make sure you catch the sunset at the water's edge by the university's Memorial Union.

Orange, red and violet seem to seep up from the land and into the sky as the sun dips into the horizon swallowed by city and lake. Bands liven up the night with music calling everyone to dance. Many do. Some listen to the music. Others simply sit by the water and take it all in, between sips of wine and words.

WRIGHT'S SKETCHPAD

The next day, lovers of architecture will want to go west from Madison to Spring Green and nearby Taliesin (Pronounced Tally-ES-in. It is Middle Welsh for shining brow), which was the Wisconsin estate of Frank Lloyd Wright. A national landmark since 1976, the mansion and other buildings on the site are a testament to his genius.

Taliesin was Wright's sketchpad and its environs were his inspiration for other projects. This is where he sought to join human works with nature in harmony, following natural patterns for construction and designs. The residence and farm buildings are not built on a hill, but seem part of it, accenting the hills contours in the process. Take your time and take a tour. Get an intimate look at one of the homes of an American master.

Afterwards, prepare yourself for the House on the Rock. Breathe in and clear your mind because it is not really a house, but a museum of imagination and madness. Its creator Alex Jordan Sr. and Frank Lloyd Wright crossed paths, but never shared muses. Many call his creation eccentric. It's not...it's really not. It's bizarre!

Jordan's building is, to put it mildly, unforgettable, in the same way you would never forget being haunted. And that is the House on the Rock, a labyrinth of rooms haunted by trinkets, guns, dolls, musical instruments in an unending collection that seems to have no reason, or unifying motif. Among its diverse collections there is beautiful stained glass, winged mannequins, sculptures and the world's largest carousel. It also has a breathtaking infinity room extending 218 feet into the air and standing 156 feet above the forest floor completely unsupported. This clashes with the strange creations and collections that go on and on and on, a mishmash of fantasy, kitsch and nightmare. It's worth the visit just for the experience. Seeing this could make you forget that the House on the Rock is part of several complexes that include The Inn and The Resort, which by the way, are normal and rather plain.

Leave to rest and regain some sanity with an afternoon of wine at the Wollersheim Winery just across from the town of Prairie du Sac. It could be said that the California wine industry was born here. Hungarian immigrant Agoston Haraszthy planted his first vineyards on American soil in Wisconsin, before moving west in December of 1849. He is considered the father of modern wine-making in California, one of the top wine producing regions in the world.

Despite this important contribution there are no monuments to him, just a collection of buildings with the sole purpose of making and selling wine. They sit among the vineyards, soft hills and tall trees – a pastoral setting, perfect for a picnic. Stop in and sample their creations and make sure you get a bottle of the fruity, refreshing Seyval wine, Prairie Fumé. Buy some extra bottles for a night of extraordinary theater back at Spring Green.



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ENTERTAINMENT UNDER THE STARS

Passion has found a purpose and a place in the forest where since 1980 the American Players Theatre has been presenting the works of Shakespeare, Shaw, Chekov, Shiller and Wilde among others. Sitting in a meadow near the Wisconsin River, the natural amphitheater is a cozy venue. There are no bad seats. The forest, the fading pastel colors of the sunset and the starry sky provide a wondrous shifting backdrop. No curtains, actors simply come on stage and give the audience their best, sweeping you from emotional crescendos to whispers to joy and laughter. The theater continually draws more than 100,000 visitors to the intimate venue, a testament to its quality. Catch a play from June through October.

Music lovers might want to plan their jaunt northward around Summer Fest, which Milwaukee boasts as, "the world's largest music festival." First celebrated in 1968, this year's music party is scheduled from June 24 to July 4. Held at Henri Maier Park on the city's lakefront, it draws talent from around country and the region. There is sure to be some music you'll like: Artists charge the air with rock, country, R&B and Latin beats. Last year, Bon Jovi opened the event, and the year before that Stevie Wonder filled the night sky with soul.

The festival grounds hold the Marcus Amphitheater with capacity for 23,000, ten additional stages, as well as a wide selection of food and beverages stands. Opening night features a dazzling fireworks show visible from any point on the lakefront.

If you want a more quiet trip in Milwaukee, then you might want to stay in the downtown area, which has enough posh to satisfy those looking for some comfort and style. Pick a fine hotel, settle in and then walk over to the Milwaukee Art Museum, a masterpiece by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. His curvilinear style often imitates natural forms and here, they resemble sails or wings lifting you over the water and into the sky. The two large sails that sit atop the museum are a siren

song, pulling your vision with their delicate lines, making it hard to walk away. Inside, you can move between the museum's three sections and view contemporary art and the works from many masters, which include Rodin, Degas, Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, Miró and Warhol.

Continue the feast of the senses at the Bacchus restaurant. Located in the Cudahy building in city center, the restaurant showcases fresh seafood, handmade pastas, and delicious grilled meats. The attention to detail and service is impeccable. No doubt you will spend hours here. It is a good place to get pampered before resting or to recharge before going out on the town. By then, Wisconsin will have reawakened that desire to travel that so fills our thoughts as the days grow longer. Return revived, full of memories and ready to do much more. The rest of spring and an entire summer await.

GREEN TRIPS IN GOD'S COUNTRY

Get out and get in touch with nature. Here's a short list of places that our northern neighbor offers to deepen our connection with Mother Earth:

Apostle Islands National Lakeshore: Located off the northernmost point of the state in Lake Superior, the Apostle Islands can be a playground for nature lovers. Hike, swim, scuba dive or bring your kayak. www.nps.gov/APIS/index.htm

Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest: Up in the corner of Wisconsin near Michigan, you can also find vast areas of enchanting woodlands. Make a long weekend of it. The two separate preserves have miles of trails and plenty of space to forget your harried city life. www.fs.fed.us/r9/cnnf

Schlitz Audubon Nature Center: Closer to home and 15 minutes from downtown Milwaukee, the center is a green gem along the shore of Lake Michigan. It has nature exhibits, workshops, hiking trails and great views from its 60-foot observation tower. www.sanc.org