

MAGAZINE  BIG GAY NEWS DIGITAL EDITION ADVERTISE

RESOURCES 

## TRAVEL: WISCONSIN SMALL TOWNS

by Carla Waldemar | Aug 13, 2020 | Featured - Home Page, Our Scene, Travel & Recreation | 0 comments



*Street in Downtown Beloit.* Photo Courtesy of Travel Wisconsin

---

Wisconsin boasts scores of small towns worth a weekend's exploration. Here's a run-down of six favorites, moving from west to east.

Seeking a destination wrapped in a romantic, Victorian haze? Eau Claire is not one of them. And that's no accident. "Today it's a disruptive town. 'Alternative' is positive," declares Greg Johnson, a visionary entrepreneur who helped reverse a downward spiral.

Greg launched Artisan Forge in order to pull lonely, fragmented artists together in collaborative studios. It's become a petri dish of talent that has ramped up citywide cultural attractions. Its artists' studios welcome visitors and play host to musical events.

Nick Meyer also makes things happen, starting with his store The Local, source of all things witty and Wisconsin. He also converted a ho-hum hostelry into the Oxbow Hotel, a hipster's haven tricked out with art gallery, restaurant, and bar with live jazz and cache of vinyl LPs.

The record collection was curated by local musician Justin Vernon of Bon Iver. He's a major-major player in Eau Claire's six annual music festivals.

The banks of the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers sport 100 miles of biking/hiking trails that pass a lively Farmers Market and craft breweries like Brewing Projekt. Another brewery called Lazy Monk favors traditional lagers in a German-style setting: "No TVs, no Muzak. This is a place for meeting friends," declares its owner.

A young couple runs Autumn Harvest Winery, where apples share the glory with grapes. Pick your own Honeycrisps, put together a picnic (cheese and sausage available) and linger awhile.

The valley's fabled bike trails spurred the launch of Shift, a bike shop and coffeehouse. Joining it downtown, Revival Records stocks 25,000 LPs, from ABBA to Zappa." Down the street, Cinemas offers club seating for beer and pizza during films.



Dells Canyon. Photo Courtesy of Travel Wisconsin

Approach nearby Antiques Emporium with a U-Haul, for if you collect it, they've got it (stuffed animals included). Back at Nick's Local Store, you'll find Wisconsin everything: Drink Wisconsinally bottle openers, road-map blankets, loon cookie cutters.

The city's self-guided sculpture walk features 42 sidewalk creations to admire. Break for a cuppa at ECDC. It's housed in the former Lismore Hotel, boasting a cool bar, *Dive*, atop the rooftop's former swimming pool. Its avant kitchen highlights fried green tomato Benedicts on its inventive menu.

Mona Lisa's is the go-to for carefully-executed Italian fare. When a burger craving hits, steer to Classic Garage. You'll spot it by the pink Cadillac parked by the pump—a sexy advertisement for its fifties-themed menu, served on Formica tabletops. [www.visiteauclaire.com](http://www.visiteauclaire.com)

Wisconsin Dells is the waterpark capital of the country, exploding with kids running amok through plastic attractions. But if that's your idea of purgatory more than a relaxed vacation, read on. A healthy twenty-five percent of the Dells' visitors leave the kids at home and wouldn't be caught dead in a theme park. The area has become an alluring destination for girlfriends' getaways and man-cations.

That's how the Dells began life as a tourist destination. Flashback to the Ice Age's glacier melt. That water carved canyons into the surrounding sandstone, as what became the Wisconsin River rampaged through. A photographer's shots of the gorgeous bluffs fueled the Dells' first tourists, who rented rowboats to survey the scene—as tourists still do today, joined by just about anything else that



floats—kayaks, canoes, amphibious ducks. For landlubbers, an inviting Riverwalk anchors Main Street. Serious hikers can stretch their legs at three nearby state parks.

Too slow for you fast-laners? The macho-inclined can scoot to Raceway Park for the behind-the-wheel challenge of racing solo laps in a 400hp stock car (after a short tutorial). Or hop on a zipline while the rest of us head for the spa.

Downtown displays its share of elite shopping interspersed with the plentiful T-shirt, cheese, and souvenir emporiums dotting the main drag.

Diners into nostalgia—or just plain good eating—hail Wisconsin as the supper club capital of the nation, starting with Del-Bar. Built in 1938 by a protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright, the venue’s claim to fame is its hospitable service, in close competition with their legendary, well-aged steaks.

See that groovy neon martini glass beckoning across the road? That’s the emblem of House of Embers, another of those classic supper clubs. This one’s a newcomer (think 1959), featuring house specialties like coconut-crusting shrimp, killer ribs, and classics like veal with creamy mushroom sauce.



Beer flight at The Brewing Projekt in Downtown Eau Claire. Photo Courtesy of Travel Wisconsin

This couldn't be Wisconsin without beer. Port Huron Brewing Company offers samplers of its handcrafted specialties as well as growlers for sale in its tap room. So, who needs a water park? [www.wisdells.com](http://www.wisdells.com).

Place the blame again on the glaciers. When those ice hulks flattened everything in their path, they somehow spared the Southwest corner of Wisconsin, where Spring Green is centered. Frank Lloyd Wright grew up here among its gallivanting green hills and chose this terrain on which to build his iconic Taliesin complex.

Another oddball dreamer treasured the view so much that he built a shack atop a mammoth rock—the start of what grew to become the House on the Rock attraction. Then a Shakespearean actor got a peek and founded summertime's American Players Theatre. Other artists followed, enriching the small town with galleries, one-of-a-kind shops and original dining ops. And did we mention great outdoor recreation?

The story really starts with Wright, and his ghost hovers over much of Spring Green. A disciple designed the town's bank a la Frank, and its Catholic church bears the master's signature, low-pitched roof and overhanging eaves.

Tour Taliesin to admire how America's most renowned architect "broke the box of conventional architecture" (his boast) with flat buildings of local sandstone: the Hillside Home School (where visitors can watch architecture students at work); the iconic Romeo and Juliet Windmill; the farm, where even the pigsty and chicken coop outshine many a modern condo; and his home/studio with collection of the Japanese art that influenced his credo. Tour guides eagerly whisper the accounts of Wright's steamy personal life.

No love lost between Wright and Alec Jordan, who opened his downright weird House on the Rock to the public 60-some years ago, which grew from a private getaway to become a complex which houses his More Is More collection. As you enter, bam! The beat of "Bolero" smacks you, blared out by the mechanical instruments that the self-taught eccentric constructed himself.

Follow the red carpet through the labyrinth housing Jordan's vast collections and self-built devices—an anti-museum that deliberately offers no signs nor explanations because this isn't an intellectual excursion; it's meant (he said) to "entertain, stimulate and fascinate."

And does it ever! Even the bathrooms outdo any Vegas club. There's a 19th-century village to explore, miniature circus scenes, a toothy whale that makes "Jaws" look like an aquarium pet, a mega-calliope with excesses of bells and whistles, and the world's largest merry-go-round.

Then, as a palate-cleanser for the mind, it's off for Shakespeare, at American Players Theater. The company performs classics on a thrust stage under the stars—and occasionally under the raindrops, for the show must—and does—go on. Many folks bring or pre-order picnics to embellish the performance.

You'll find their makings (and a whole lot more) at the General Store, which offers a bit of everything, from intriguing jigsaw puzzles to the Girl Geek Glasses (pink frames on the Coke lenses) I brought

home. [www.springgreen.com](http://www.springgreen.com)

A funny thing happened on the way to Lake Geneva: the Chicago fire of 1871. To escape the gritty rebuilding of the city, many of its industry barons hopped the train to this charming, Eastern Wisconsin outpost to while away the summer close to its cool, clean water. They—the Wrigleys, the Maytags—built lakeside mansions that anchor the shoreline to this very day.

Lake Geneva and the town it spawned continue to offer an idyllic setting to spend away a summer. Golf and fishing, sure, but also wintertime's skiing, sleigh rides, and indoor pools.

The spring-fed lake is bordered by a 21-mile shoreline, open so hikers can ogle the homes of the Rich and Famous—including the multiple mansions built by chewing gum, where the Wrigleys keep a horse farm and polo court. An app details each home's history and architecture. Or hop aboard the ultra-popular narrated U.S. mail boat cruise.

The cruise departs from downtown Riviera Beach, named for the site's ballroom where Count Basie and Duke Ellington once entertained. The compact downtown district is lush with shopping ops geared toward lakeside living. A handful of classic mansions, such as The Baker House, are open to tour, as is the Geneva Lake Museum with its cache of history, starting with a Potawatomi wigwam and a street from the 1880s.

Guides point visitors to the mob corner, which includes bootleggers' special shoes, outfitted with the footprint of a cow—thus avoiding telltale tracks. It showcases a stagecoach, along with its written instructions: Keep firearms on your person. There's an exhibit of the world's first Playboy Club, complete with bunny costumes. More magic happens at Tristan Crist Magic Theater, as Tristan escapes from chains and saws his assistant in half.

Not far from town rises the Yerkes Observatory, financed by the fellow our guide labels "the robber baron, king of graft and corruption in Chicago." It boasts the world's third-largest telescope open to the public, amid ornate Gothic Romanesque carvings. Evening tours are popular but depend on visibility. ("Open the dome," we begged. "No, it's raining.") [www.visitlakegeneva.com](http://www.visitlakegeneva.com)

Beloit, straddling the scenic Rock River, is firmly planted on the border with Illinois, so don't be surprised to encounter cool Chicagoans vying for space in its hotels and restaurants.

That's new, however. Until recently, tourists avoided this once-blue collar town that got walloped by the Great Recession of '08. But Beloit decided not to lie down and die. Its citizens pulled themselves up by their well-worn bootstraps to make their city even more inviting than before.

A Beloit developer, who refused to let his hometown shrivel, first constructed Ironworks Hotel, a luxe boutique on the riverbank boasting rough-hewn industrial charm, along with a destination restaurant. Across the street and envisioned by the same developer, Hotel Goodwin, its cosmo sister, celebrates edgy art, an enviable vinyl collection (turntables in every room), and the classy, Velvet Buffalo café.

The Powerhouse, an aptly-named athletic complex, welcomes students from the college campus it anchors, as well as you and me. Beloit College, founded in 1846, reminds me of our own Macalester with its campus of tumbling lawns—Beloit's, however, is ruffled with Indian mounds attributed to the Ho-Chunks of 1,000 A.D.

The campus-housed Logan Museum of Archaeology showcases a collection gleaned from Mexico and Central America: baskets, pottery, bandolier bags. Its neighbor, the Wright Museum of Art, operates four galleries, all purposely sans identifying labels to make students do their own research. (Both are free.)

Main Street could double as a movie set for small-town American. Petunias overflow their sidewalk beds. A bandstand awaits summertime's free concerts. Tin Dog Records boasts vinyl, new and used. The Villager sells vintage items (Don't miss the beaded handbags). A nearby sign in a window promises pole dancing Lessons, And Saturdays during the summer, the street is the site of a vibrant farmer's market. If you cannot wait for a bite, check out Truk't (by those same hotel developers), intriguing diners with its trendy takes on tacos (Peking duck to shrimp curry).

OK, it's Wisconsin: Gotta have beer. In the gorgeous countryside, G5 Brewing Company serves flights and pints and tasty bar snacks. [www.visitbeloit.com](http://www.visitbeloit.com)

The Cape Cod of the Midwest, they call this gorgeous sliver of Wisconsin. The official title is Door County—the finger of land dividing Green Bay from the rest of Lake Michigan. Limestone cliffs border the rich fields of artisanal farmers, whose famous cherry trees blanket the land in vibrant blooms each May, while birch, maple, and pines create kaleidoscopes of blazing autumn color.

On the warmer, more sheltered bay side, Hwy. 42 ambles through a succession of small villages: Egg Harbor, Fish Creek, Ephraim, and Sister Bay being the standouts. You'll find family-run cafes and wineries scattered between art galleries, crafts shops, and outdoors outfitters.

For an overview, rent a bike or kayak. You can book a tour aboard Door County Trolley, based in Egg Harbor, whose gregarious guides troll folks through Peninsula State Park enroute to Sven's Bluff, a knock-out of a lookout. They'll point out the trail to Eagles Bluff lighthouse, too.

Nearby wineries offer tours and sips (for free). Purchase a bottle for a picnic produced by Wisconsin Cheese Masters, stocking 50 artisanal varieties. "There are two ways to make cheese," they instruct: "Fast and cheap, or slow and artisanal." For a caffeine chaser, head to Door County Coffee, a café-cum-roastery almost as proud of its famous egg bake, gleaned from a church cookbook.

Brake for art before you break for dinner. At Hands On Art Studio, in Fish Creek, you can even make your own. Drop-in Picassos can choose lessons in wood, metal, glass, and painting pottery or canvas. At Plum Bottom Pottery Gallery, spectators watch an artist at the wheel.

And now for art on the plate: Wilson's Restaurant and Ice Cream Parlor promises a "walk down memory lane" via jukeboxes and (ill-advised) weighing machines amid its memorabilia. Accompanying its old-fashioned ice cream sodas and homemade root beer are baskets of burgers and fish.

Speaking of fish, you're not allowed out of the county until you've experienced an only-in-Wisconsin fish boil. The Old Post Office Restaurant in Ephraim provides this dinner-as-theater experience nightly. Its boilmaster walks the walk, heaving logs under a boiling cauldron while tossing in potatoes, onions, Lake Michigan whitefish and (I'm not kidding) a quart of kerosene, which (cameras ready) he ignites with a flash, just the way fishermen have done for a hundred years. The performance continues as guests line up to fill their plates and grab a slice of cherry pie.

Cherry's the best-seller (duh) at Sweetie Pie, occupying a one hundred-year-old homestead that turns out 11,000 pies a year. Point at your choice from the display, then cart it to the outdoor picnic tables. Better buy another for the journey home. [www.DoorCounty.com](http://www.DoorCounty.com)



Facebook



Twitter



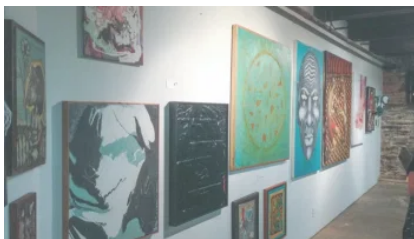
LinkedIn



0

---

## RELATED



Time To Deck The Walls

June 18, 2020

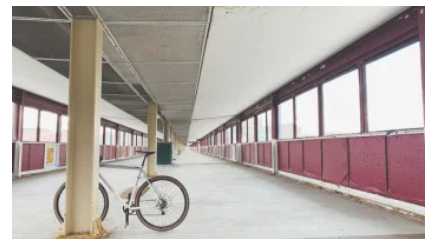
In "Crafting & Home Arts"



Grant Wood's Iowa: Take It for Grant-ed

June 23, 2016

In "Featured - Home Page"



From the Editor: How I Spent My Summer Staycation

August 11, 2020

In "Featured - Home Page"



---

## CONTESTS & PROMOTIONS

ENTER TO WIN AN AUTOGRAPHED POSTER OF VICTORIA  
MONÉT CELEBRATING THE RELEASE OF HER NEW PROJECT  
JAGUAR

[Read More](#)