



Farm Fresh

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Wisconsin officially designated milk as its state beverage in 1987. Legislators have also passed directives to honor corn and the badger as the state grain and animal, respectively. Over in Minnesota, too, milk and badgers are among the state's emblems, although old-timers wryly recount a failed 1973 citizen proposal to name the wood tick the state animal (since the loon was already the state bird, Minnesota would have become the loon-and-tick state).

The Upper Midwest's reputation as America's drowsy, staid breadbasket exists for a reason, although rumors of a quiet revolution amid the cornfields and GMO soybeans have begun to burble. Hearing whispers of a small militia of third-wave Laura Ingalls Wilders growing papayas in retrofitted barns, building straw-bale outhouses, and using wind turbines to power their homes, my partner in crime and I judged a recon mission appropriate. Perhaps a Lexus GS 450h hybrid would help us blend right in.

Day 1: Browntown to Bayfield, Wisconsin (395 mi.)

The best way to digest sustainability, as innkeeper John Ivanko makes clear on our trip's first morning, is to toss it in dill, douse it in yogurt and berries, or slather it in creamy butter and eat it, still warm. Eleven years ago, John and his partner, Lisa Kivirist, embarked on second careers as "eco-preneurs," setting up their 100 percent off-grid B&B—the Inn Serendipity, in Browntown—as far from the corporate world as state borders would allow. Now, they grow so much of their food that their largest annual edible expense is coffee. On glimpsing our muscular, high-performing vehicle parked in front of the farm's wind turbine, John cocks an eyebrow. It need not be said that the only ecologically friendly way to cover 900 miles in three days would be to sprout zero-emission wings from our shoulders, but, hey, at least it's a hybrid...right? John's eyebrow stays cocked; his electric car plugs into a solar panel.

Heading north on Highway 69 in our sleek sedan, slipping over hillocks and through gnarled wood dells, we whip past squat red barns and black-and-white cows. The corn has been planted nearly to the road, but where it hasn't, spiky violet asters, canary yarrow, and Queen Anne's lace reach up toward the seemingly infinite sky. Stopping in Madison—a town whose Saturday farmers' market, food co-op, and upscale restaurants (l'Etoile, Harvest, the Old Fashioned) put, from a sustainability perspective, most major American cities to shame—it becomes obvious that the Middle is much more progressive than people on the coasts might think.

Once past Madison, we join Highway 51, the less harried adjunct to I-94. Construction works have obfuscated road signage, so we rocket eight miles past our next stop, the Midwest Renewable Energy



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Association in Custer, before pulling over for directions. In a Western-boot shop next to a bar advertising happy hour from 3 to 6 P.M., a pretty girl in high-waisted jeans and a cowboy hat greets us, snapping her gum. “Oh, the MREA!” she exclaims. “My mom teaches there.” We must look surprised. “She’s a carpenter who specializes in straw-baling and cold-bin composting,” the girl explains.

Right.

Stevens Point sees us head west on Highway 10 and then north on 13. We zip past Milladore’s postmaster carefully lowering an American flag. An ethanol train as long as time chugs east, so we buy bratwurst and a bag of chips from a fund-raising Girl Scout whose broad vowels congeal when she speaks. “Don’t make a deer your hood ornament,” she drawls by way of good-bye. Just before the town of Phillips, on Route 13, is the extraordinary Concrete Park, Fred Smith’s folk art museum, home to 200 life-size figures—teams of oxen, Ben Hur, an angel—made out of concrete and glass bottles. We seem to be wandering through an entire landscape of stone eccentrics. Descendants of pioneers now dot their yards with whimsical post-agrarian lawn ornaments like fake sheep or mailboxes shaped like windmills and U.S. mail trucks. Other roads in Wisconsin lead to a water tower shaped like a giant apple, or the world’s biggest penny, badger, grandfather clock, and Hormel chili can. It’s a land of dubious honors. There’s Butternut, a past winner of the state’s best-tasting water award; Park Falls, the self-described ruffed grouse capital of the world; and Lake Nebagamon, which boasts a 20,000-pound hand-rolled ball of twine made by a man whom God instructed in 1975 to stop drinking. Imagine what kind of drunk he must have been.

Two girls on the side of the road yell, “Nice wheels!” Our reply is lost to the wind. We’re in the Northwoods now, with the option of one country music station or silence, and a cool dusk slowly emulsifying into night. Flashes of the Great Lake are visible amid the trees, and the water’s deep indigo matches the sky’s.

Once past Northland College, an environmental liberal arts school that offers courses in limnology (lakes and rivers), pollution biology, the politics of global resources, and wolf monitoring, we arrive in Bayfield, dubbed the “Best Little Town in the Midwest” by the Chicago Tribune. It’s also the most ardent of the four pilot towns participating in Travel Green Wisconsin, a program that promotes ecotourism by recognizing businesses which keep their environmental impact minimal. We wander into a local coffee shop to see what this means. The to-go coffee cups at Burt & Francie’s are biodegradable; their tables are fashioned by a local craftsman out of sustainably harvested wood; food waste is composted. Best of all, the beer comes from excellent local microbreweries and there’s a glass case full of Wisconsin farmstead cheese, carefully selected by the owners, Jon and Danielle Ewalt, both in their mid-twenties, for whom two years in the corporate world were enough to want out. Like all new business owners, they’re nearly cross-eyed with sleep deprivation, but their pride in the budding eco-municipality colors their speech with pleasure.

The local specialty, whitefish liver, is quaint but revolting. Not all traditions are worth keeping.



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Do we wake up exultant because the sun is shining and we have a sweet prototype hybrid to drive, with miles of open road ahead? No. We wake up smiling because nothing is better in the morning than cracking open a sandy eyelid and smelling bacon. Steve and Nancy Sandstrom, the beatific administrators of our felicity, give us a tour of their carbon-neutral, solar-heated bed-and-breakfast, complete with a biodiesel converter in the garage, an aerobically aerated septic system, and native-plant landscaping. Aside from the solar panel in the garden, all of these attributes blend seamlessly into the swank trappings of their classy B&B, the Pinehurst Inn. “We judge our success not only by our financial bottom line but by our environmental health and social equity as well,” says Steve, the kind of guy you’d assume, purely on looks, cares more about Monday Night Football than offsetting his carbon debt. Happily, few of the Midwesterners we’re meeting see these interests as mutually exclusive.

The road beckons, so we heed its call and peel out. The radio’s playing a song with a gravelly refrain that goes “Minnesota . . . we got pride, pride, pride!” Motorcycle gangs, all bandannas and flapping leather fringe, thrum down the asphalt. A crust of butterflies forms on the front bumper. We slow down to let wild horses cross, and I wrestle splinters of beef jerky out of my molars. We tear through towns with lush, satisfying names—Cornucopia, Blueberry, Maple—and a faint smell of smokehouse. Just past Duluth, Route 61 occupies an ample balcony where the sapphire-hued lake begins. The road shapes itself into a long shelf along the lake, like a promenade, and goes on to Canada.

Until about ten years ago, Grand Marais, Minnesota, was just a sleepy little town 40 miles from the border. A sociologist wanting to get a read on the community might have found the supermarkets useful territory for fieldwork: The Norwegian Lutherans shopped at Johnson’s Foods, the Polish Catholics congregated at Gene’s IGA, and the hippies communed at the co-op. Now, due in large part to the North House Folk School, inspired by the nineteenth-century Nordic movement to preserve traditional craft and lore, summers can increase the town’s population to 5,000 people. Students stitch moose-hide mukluks, make Swedish potato sausage, carve birch skis, and even build their own casket during a four-day workshop called Bury Yourself in Your Work. While some of them might fall into the same category as historical re-enactors, a surprising number come from the swelling circle of (often urban) people newly interested in tradition, locality, and the handmade.

Dinner at the Angry Trout, right behind the school, reflects a similar ethic. Sustainability there is a lifestyle, not just a buzzword at the apex of its 15 minutes. Food isn’t the only locally sourced ingredient: The flowers, plates, stained glass windows, credit card trays, timber-frame entryway, and salt-and-pepper shakers are all made by different local artisans. Their philosophy is panoptic: Napkins are woven from organic cotton, beer flows from taps rather than bottles, and takeout containers must be signed out and returned within four days. It seems joyless on paper, but the young, collegial staff bring their convictions vivaciously to life.

The twilight drive to Silver Bay consists of 55 miles of lake-fringed road. It’s magical. Flat-bottomed



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clouds above us look like the underbellies of boats, giving the impression of being at the bottom of a sea as well as next to one.

Day 3: Silver Bay to Montevideo, Minnesota (299 mi.)

Silver Bay, an iron-mining town, is as antithetical to groovy Grand Marais as you'd imagine. Nevertheless, at the Baptism River B&B, our innkeeper greets us with steaming coffee, cinnamon bread pudding, a GOT JESUS? T-shirt—and an electric tirade against, among other things, peak oil, recreational snowmobilers, and the war in Iraq. Soberly, we climb back into what, we are increasingly realizing, is an unquestionably sexy, fun, and fast car that we'd be patent hypocrites to consider fuel-efficient. The car, perhaps sensing our skepticism, retaliates by refusing to let the sunroof slide shut just as rain begins to close in. Our helpful Lexus roadside-assistance operator recommends, deadpan, that we tape some Hefty bags to the roof, so we hightail it to a gas station and blow through \$40 worth of duct tape. Who's sexy, fun, and fast now?

Past Duluth, Route 23 takes a turn for the ugly (“Ooh, gelato!” “No, that says G&L Auto”), but after a few miles the gun emporiums and taxidermists dissolve into prairie—of a kind. The prairie here is different from Wisconsin's, which still involves vast patches of growing grass. In Minnesota, especially traveling west, the land has been thoroughly colonized by corn, soybeans, and, increasingly, ethanol plants, which require a hefty diet of government subsidies to bear fruit. The rain stops, so we strip off the feeble cantlets of plastic still taped to the car and sail onward. We veer south off Route 23 and make right angles around cornfields, following roads with names like 625th Street and 540th Avenue. The paths carved out by the rows of corn, now at shoulder height, have names too: 38H65, 37Y17, or sometimes just “Experimental.” They form a textured, regimented sea, tassels glinting in the sun like white-caps. Cargill has superseded the Good Witch of the North on the adopt-a-highway signs. The Midwest's desperate mining of its own resources may be what makes finding exceptions to the rule so special.

Blessedly, this monotonous ocean is spattered with deviant islands. Driving through Cosmos, we happen, at the intersection of West Astro Boulevard and North Milky Way, upon the town's annual Space Fest, and stop to observe road-trip rule No. 764: When you see a man on a crepe-paper bandstand play two trumpets at once, you pause for rhubarb pie. South of Sacred Heart, we discover the Rudi Memorial, a dovetailed log cabin built in 1868 that has been converted into a tiny unlocked museum, complete with a dusty guest book whose entries date back to 1954. In Montevideo, Andy Kahmann is busy printing posters on a century-old letterpress for the region's annual Arts Meander. At her knitting supply shop a few doors down, Donna Bevelhymer sits purling a sweater with yarn woven from her own flock's wool. It's comforting to know that these places exist. Devotion, competence, and goodwill all facilitate sustainability, whether economic or environmental.

Our last oasis amid the cornfields is the bed-and-bagel at Moonstone Farm, where Richard Handeen and Audrey Arner grow grass-finished beef on Richard's grandfather's homestead. They may not be corpo-



rate burnouts or youthful idealists, but Richard and Audrey, too, believe in giving the quotidian some consideration. We swim in the creek and use the garden hose as a shower. The dog pees on our silly, gorgeous car. Dinner comes from the field, garden, and neighboring farm. The stars come out, and—what do you know—they’re way brighter out here than in New York City.

Bayfield, Wisconsin

Proving that sustainability isn’t necessarily at odds with luxury, Pinehurst Inn owners Steve and Nancy Sandstrom run their cars on biodiesel or veggie oil and compost their food—and have outfitted their elegant, com-fortable bedrooms with fireplaces and whirlpool baths (877-499-7651; pinehurstinn.com; doubles, \$99–\$190).

Browntown, Wisconsin

At the Inn Serendipity, “eco-preneurs” Lisa Kivirist and John Ivanko manage to feed guests just-picked produce, use wind and solar energy to supply 100 percent of the farm’s power, and grow tropical vegetables in a retrofitted straw-bale barn—without being sanctimonious about it (608-329-7056; innserendipity.com; doubles, \$105–\$120).

Grand Marais, Minnesota

The North House Folk School offers multiday classes in quirky traditional arts and crafts, like boat-building, blacksmithing, mushrooming, Scandinavian spoon carving, home -brewing, and hundreds of others (219-387-9762; northhousefolkschool.com; two-day courses, \$130–\$150). Nearby, the Angry Trout is a funky waterside restaurant specializing in lake fish, wild rice, and local beer (505 E. Bayview Dr.; 218-387-1265; dinner for two, \$50). Near Montevideo, guests at Moonstone Farm overnight in a cheery chicken brooder cum cottage (320-269-8971; moonstonefarm.net; doubles, \$75).

Online Resources

Green Routes is a great Web site for unearthing eco-friendly pit stops in the Upper Midwest (greenroutes.org). Or plug your zip code into the Eat Well Guide to find sustainable eating in your area (eatwellguide.org).