



Visitors taking a scenic drive through Peninsula State Park in Door County, Wis., often stop at Sven's Bluff to admire the view. Forested bluffs accent 8 miles of shoreline on Green Bay.

Ideal escapes for leaf lovers

Unusual features are tucked among the trees in these Midwest state parks

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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Chicago Tribune

Summer's heat soon will switch to crisp autumn days, when Midwest leaf-peepers go on alert, watching for the first change to fall colors. Why not witness the unfolding display in the region's state parks where tax dollars support the visitor's experience?

Three fine parks come to mind, each with unusual features tucked among the trees. You might happen upon a lighthouse, a pioneer village or a golf course. Take in a play from a professional theater troupe, learn some American Indian lore or hop on a trolley for a tour. One park has a memorial to an astronaut, complete with a space capsule.

All have campsites, and two have Depression-era lodges for overnight stays. Book early. Brilliant fall foliage draws crowds, especially on weekends. Colors at all three parks usually peak around mid-October, though Mother Nature has the final say.

Peninsula State Park

The largest of five state parks in Door County, Wis., combines nautical and woodland characteristics. Forested bluffs accent 8 miles of shoreline on Green Bay with water views framed by fall foliage.

Eagle Bluff Lighthouse, built in 1868, perches on a 180-foot limestone cliff. Maritime history unfolds in exhibits inside the former keeper's house. Take a Door County Historical Society tour through mid-October.

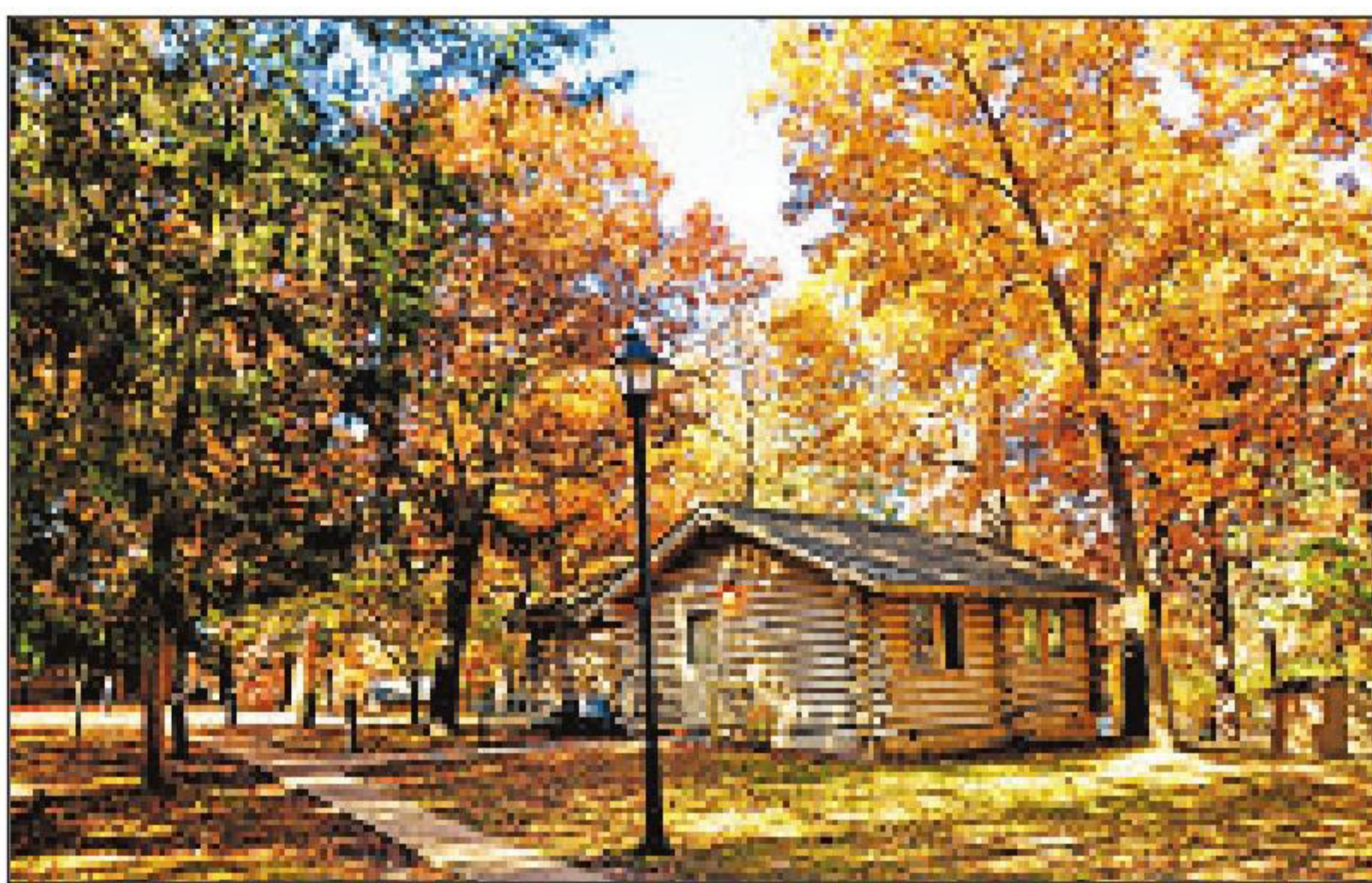
You might be able to squeeze in a few rounds at the park's 18-hole golf course, which is usually open into late October. Hole No. 8 challenges with a 69-foot drive down a 50-foot bluff. Two years ago, a par-3, six-hole Short Course opened for golfers of all ages.

Buy tickets for performances through Oct. 16 at Northern Sky Theater. The professional troupe of actors commands the outdoor stage in the park's amphitheater.

Several of the park's 20 miles of hiking and biking trails skirt the shoreline. The challenging Eagle Trail passes 150-foot limestone



Steve Speak is the broom-maker in Pioneer Village at Spring Mill State Park in Indiana's Limestone Country.



In addition to the lodge at Illinois' Starved Rock State Park, guests can choose a cabin for an overnight stay.

cliffs, part of the Niagara Escarpment ridge of bedrock that extends east to Niagara Falls. For an easier hike, take the Minnehaha Trail along the lakeshore. The 10-mile Sunset bike route winds through forests with a fine view from Sven's Bluff. Bikes can be rented in Door County communities.

Whether you're on foot, a bike or driving the scenic Skyline Road or Shore Road, keep an eye out for wild turkeys reintroduced in the 1990s. The second-growth forest, mostly maple and beech trees and a few 500-year-old northern white cedars, also provides a habitat for bald eagles, barred owls, porcupines and opossums.

You won't find lodging within the park, but Door County has a big selection of accommodations from country inns and bed-and-breakfasts to large condo resorts.

9462 Shore Road, Fish Creek, Wis., 920-868-3258, www.dnr.wi.gov/topic/parks/name/peninsula. Daily entry fee for vehicles with out-of-state license plates \$11, with Wisconsin plates \$8 or \$3 age 65 and up.

Door County Visitor Bureau, 800-527-3529, www.doorcounty.com

Starved Rock State Park

One of the busiest state parks in Illinois lies about 90 miles southwest of Chicago. Last year, 2.5 million visitors came to hike on trails leading into 18 canyons carved by glaciers from soft St. Peter sandstone. Other paths rise to bluffs overlooking the Illinois River.

The park takes its name from one such summit where, according to Native American legend, one warring tribe laid siege to another perched atop Starved Rock, causing its members to die from hunger. Autumn visitors who scale a wooden staircase up this 125-foot butte can feast their eyes on a rich panorama of fall colors on headlands fronting the river and can also observe barge traffic flowing at a lazy pace through one of the river's locks and dams.

Pick up a map at the visitors center to take a self-guided hike on nearly 13 miles of trails. One of the shortest, leading to Council Overhang, ranks among the most scenic. The great sandstone dome frames fall colors dappled with sunlight filtering into the canyon at its entrance. It's one of 14 canyons with water-



Soft St. Peter sandstone is etched by nature inside the Council Overhang rock formation in Starved Rock State Park. The park's trolley offers history tours and fall color tours.

falls that swell with ample rainfall and shrink to a trickle when the weather turns dry.

A park naturalist leads guided hikes, and the park's trolley offers history tours and fall color tours. Trolley tours depart from Starved Rock Lodge, built during the Depression by the Civilian Conservation Corps. The log lodge, a National Historic Landmark, has a dining room and cafe, indoor pool, rustic lodge rooms and a newer hotel wing. Get comfy in the Great Hall next to a double limestone fireplace. Want some alone time? Reserve one of the lodge's stand-alone cabins tucked into the woods nearby.

2668 East 873 Road, Oglesby, Ill., 815-667-4726, www.dnr.illinois.gov/parks/pages/StarvedRock.aspx. No charge for entry or parking; lodge 800-868-7625, www.starvedrockstatepark.org. October rates from \$135.

I&M Canal Heritage Corridor Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800-926-2262, www.heritagecorridorcvb.com

Spring Mill State Park

Mitchell, Ind., honors its hometown hero, astronaut

Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom, with pride of place in a museum at the entrance to the state park. Artifacts from the life of the man who would orbit the Earth three times as commander of Gemini III include his spacesuit and the mission's "Molly Brown" space capsule. They also tell of the sad ending to Grissom's Apollo I mission, when he and his fellow astronauts perished in 1967 during a test launch.

A wheelchair-accessible boardwalk leads from the Grissom Memorial into the forest. Hiking trails inside the park set off for Donaldson Cave, ring Spring Mill Lake and skirt a pioneer cemetery with headstones chiseled from local limestone. Until mid-October, naturalists lead hikes from the park's Nature Center, and on weekends, you can take the Twin Caves Boat Tour 500 feet inside a spooky cave.

A working gristmill, dating from 1817, serves as the focal point of the park's Pioneer Village, occupying the spot where settlers put down roots around springs flowing from caves here in the heart of Indiana's Limestone Country. More than

20 structures in the village include a tavern, weaver's cabin, apothecary and leather workshop. Several remain open to visitors through mid-October, and on some weekends, costumed docents demonstrate crafts from the era.

The Civilian Conservation Corps restored several Pioneer Village structures during the Depression and built Spring Mill Inn. The solid limestone building has an indoor/outdoor swimming pool, game room and the Millrose Dining Room. Try some cornbread made from cornmeal straight from the gristmill.

3333 Highway 60 East, Mitchell, Ind., 812-849-3534, www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/2968.htm#. Daily entry fee for vehicles with out-of-state license plates \$9, with Indiana plates \$7. Free entry to Grissom Memorial; inn 877-563-4371, www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/inns/springmill. October rates from \$91.

Lawrence County Tourism, 800-798-0769, www.limestonecountry.com

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