

## Travel adventures:

### Hit the road on a scenic drive



- Limestone bluffs rise along the Illinois side of the Great River Road making for fine scenery, especially during the fall. *Courtesy of Illinois Office of Tourism*

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Almost since the first automobiles were sold and the first highways mapped, U.S. motorists have climbed behind the wheel and set off on four-wheel adventures to see different scenery, meet new people, and indulge in unfamiliar foods and cultures.

Many motorists have heard of California Highway 1 meandering along the Pacific Coast, and U.S. Route 66, the nearly century-old (in 2026) road, most of which still winds almost 2,500 miles between Chicago and Santa Monica.

But the U.S. has dozens of scenic drives besides these beaten paths. Among them:

## **The Great River Road**

Following the Mississippi River nearly 2,100 miles along 10 states, this road winds along the waterway between its humble headwaters and the Gulf of Mexico. The sections in Wisconsin and Illinois present some of the best scenery and a slice of life in the Midwest.

Drive along majestic limestone bluffs skirting the Illinois shore, view Native American burial mounds, stop for a cruise on a paddle-wheeler or rent a canoe and dip your paddle into the Mighty Mississippi. A 33-mile section of roadway between Hartford and Grafton, Illinois, is designated the Meeting of the Great Rivers National Scenic Byway. It links Pere Marquette State Park at the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers and the Lewis and Clark State Historic Site near the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers.

Wisconsin has 30 charming river towns along the route with classic Wisconsin supper clubs and tastings on the Great River Road Wine Trail. In La Crosse, sample the craft beer scene and take in the view at Grandad Bluff perched 600 feet above the river. In Prairie du Chien, tour a Victorian mansion with a War of 1812 battlefield and in Pepin see the re-creation of the cabin birthplace of Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the popular "Little House on the Prairie" series of children's books.



**Visitors to Glacier National Park who'd rather not drive the Going-to-the-Sun Road can take a Historic Red Bus Tour in a restored vehicle from the 1930s. - Courtesy of Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development**

## Going-to-the-Sun Road

One of the first National Park Service projects built specifically for auto travel, this road crosses Glacier National Park in northern Montana passing glacier-carved mountains, waterfalls, emerald lakes and lush forests.

For more than 50 miles, the two-lane narrow ribbon of highway snakes around hairpin turns and blind curves as the speed limit drops from 40 mph to 25 mph at the highest elevations. Vehicles must be no more than 21 feet long, 10 feet high and 8 feet wide including mirrors. At the road's highest point, it crosses the Continental Divide at Logan's Pass, 6,466 feet. Here you can hike to Hidden Lake or part of the Highline Trail, a 30-mile rocky path that crosses the border into Canada. Look for mountain goats, deer, marmots and bighorn sheep along the way.

Most of the route traveling from east to west hugs rock walls, but sit on the passenger side when driving the opposite direction and you'll look past the edge of the road into the valley far below. Download an audio tour from the park's website or book a guided tour. Historic Red Bus Tours uses restored vehicles from the 1930s. When the weather cooperates, drivers roll back canvas tops for great views. Summertime Glacier Institute Tours delve into geology, history and wildlife, and the Blackfeet Perspective tour portrays Native American culture. The road takes its name from Going-to-the-Sun Mountain and a Native American legend that a spirit came down from the sun to teach the Blackfeet how to hunt and left its image on the mountain when it returned.

The drive has become so popular the park service in summer limits access to control overcrowding. For details, see [nps.gov/glac/index.htm](https://nps.gov/glac/index.htm). There is a \$35 per vehicle entrance fee good for seven days (winter rate \$25, Nov. 1 through April 30). Portions of the road close in winter but usually remain open from late June to mid-October.





**The Overseas Highway traverses the Florida Keys crossing 42 bridges from Key Largo to Key West.** - Courtesy of Andy Newman, Florida Keys News Bureau

## **The Overseas Highway**

This route through the Florida Keys strings together a necklace of islets with 42 bridges spanning breaks between the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico.

Start your road trip at milepost 106 on U.S. Route 1 in Key Largo and end at zero in Key West. Along the way, you might see key deer beside roadside mangroves, great white herons standing in the shallows and pelicans diving for fish.

The highway, finished in 1938, was built largely on the right of way of the Overseas Railroad, which had been heavily damaged in a hurricane. Large portions of the highway were rebuilt in the 1980s. Some sections of the old roadway, used for fishing and biking, stand alongside the new, and a piece of the old railroad bridge is preserved as a monument in Bahia Honda State Park. Stand on the beach, one of the nicest expanses of sand in the Keys, and you might see boats gliding beneath the bridge's sturdy steel trusses.

Old-style Florida attractions flank the roadway. A former roadside motel in Marathon operates as a Turtle Hospital open for guided tours. In Key Largo, book a cruise on the original African Queen from the Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn movie of the same name. The home where Ernest Hemingway wrote "For Whom the Bell Tolls" welcomes visitors in Key West.



**The highest paved road in North America, Trail Ridge Road, rises above the tree line as it crosses Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado.** - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

## **Trail Ridge Road**

Otherwise known as U.S. Route 34, or Ogden Avenue in Chicago and its western suburbs, this winding highway ranks as the highest major roadway in North America. It climbs to 12,183 feet wrapping around blind curves between the communities of Estes Park and Grand Lake through Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado.

Don't let the elevation gain deter you, you'll encounter grades of only 5% to 7%. If you pull over at scenic overlooks on the 11 miles of 48-mile roadway that's above the tree line you may feel the temperature drop 20 to 30 degrees on a windy alpine tundra. Often snow clings to 12,000-foot peaks as late as July.

When you get out to stretch your legs, stick to the walking paths because tender vegetation at this altitude can take decades to grow. You might catch a glimpse of bighorn sheep on the flanks of the tallest peaks; look for elk and deer at lower elevations. Moose tend to gather along the Colorado River, just a narrow stream winding through meadows below its source at La Poudre Pass. Park at a nearby trailhead for a hike among aspen and ponderosa pine.

Be mindful of snowy weather conditions that may close the road mid-October to late May.

A timed-entry reservation is required to visit Rocky Mountain National Park between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. until Oct. 22 this year, plus a \$30 per vehicle entrance fee charged throughout the year. See [nps.gov/romo/index.htm](https://nps.gov/romo/index.htm).

- Some information for this article was gathered during research trips sponsored by local tourist offices.

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