



# Midwest Traveler

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## Autumn in Illinois

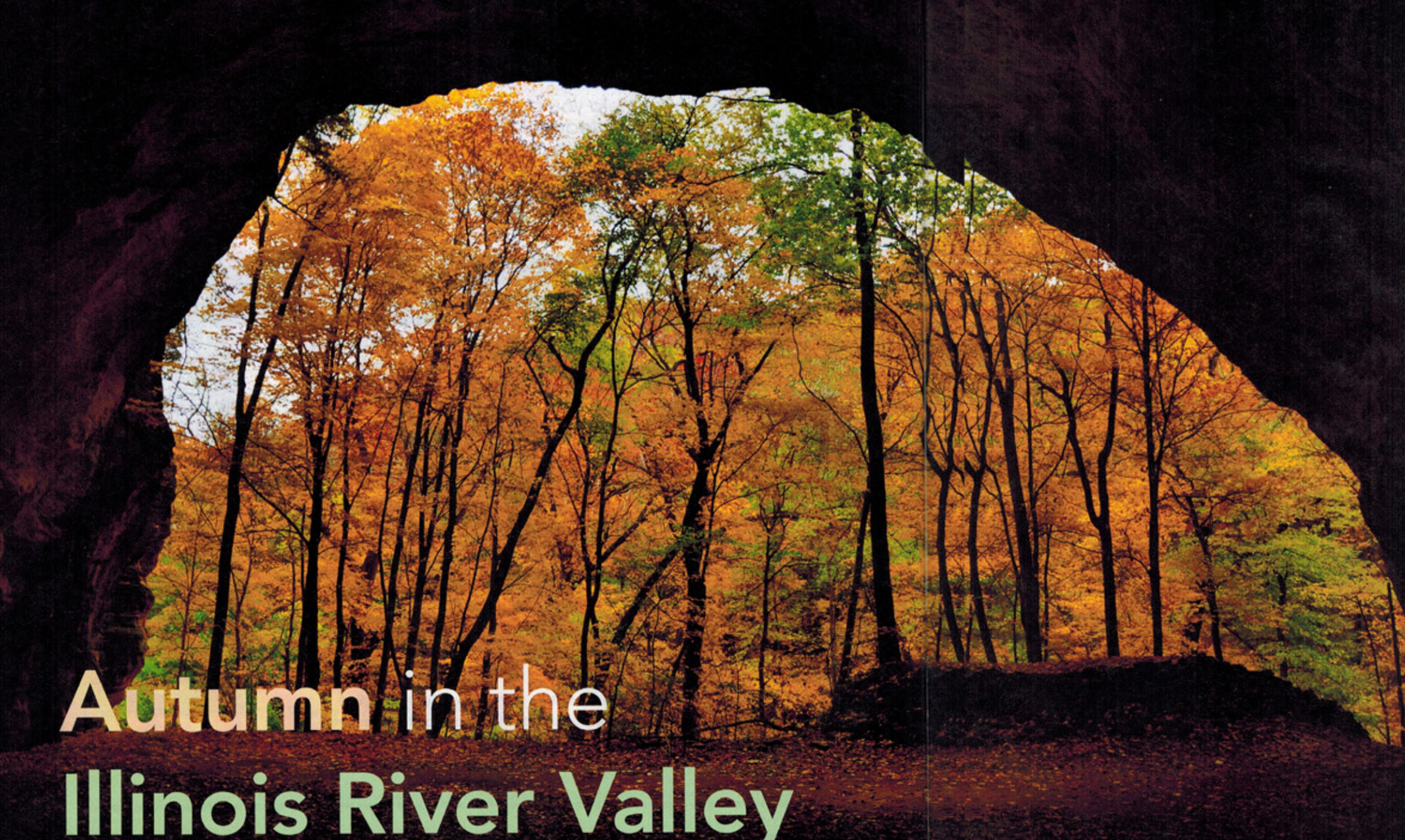
Enjoy fall color, shop for antiques, and ride along a 19<sup>th</sup>-century canal

Musical  
Missouri

Adventures in  
Alaska

Savoring  
Bardstown, Ky.





# Autumn in the Illinois River Valley

Fall is an ideal time for leaf peeping, antiquing, wine tasting, and a ride along a 19<sup>th</sup>-century canal.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER



Above: The archway entry of Council Overhang rock formation frames fall foliage at Starved Rock State Park. Council Overhang is one of the region's most well-known rock formations.

Left: A replica of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century packet boat takes visitors on excursions on the I&M Canal. Excursions on the I&M Canal go as far as the aqueduct over the Little Vermillion River.

## ILLINOIS AND MICHIGAN CANAL

The park also operates a trolley tour that includes a ride on the Illinois and Michigan Canal aboard a replica 19<sup>th</sup>-century packet boat pulled by mules. Anyone wanting to skip the trolley can buy tickets for the 90-minute canal ride at the Lock 16 Visitor Center in LaSalle, Ill.

Costumed guides aboard the boat tell the story of the canal as mules Moe and Larry take turns on the towpath. Twice a week, a guide portraying Mary Todd Lincoln tells riders about her passage with Abe, then a Congressman, and their children.

The 96-mile I&M Canal, which connects Lake Michigan at Chicago with the Illinois River, opened in 1848, linking New York and New Orleans via the Mississippi River. Before the canal, moving cargo from New York as far as St. Louis via the Ohio River took 36 days. The I&M Canal, along with the Erie Canal, shortened the passage to 12 days. Commerce boomed and Chicago became a major inland port.

Visitors hear the history of the I&M as the boat slowly glides to

The road signs read Illinois Route 71, but locals know it as Canyon Drive, a curvy byway through some of the finest fall scenery northern Illinois has to offer. Drivers park and hop out for an easy walk in the woods, the sun filtering through bright leaves, lighting up a well-trod path. In minutes they reach one of the area's most famous rock formations, Council Overhang, and jaws drop.

Rising alongside a canyon, this great dome of St. Peter sandstone forms a natural band shell beckoning everyone who passes to enter. Voices drop to reverent whispers as if inside a cathedral. Eyes scan the soaring walls carved by nature and look back into the canyon where the stone arch frames a forest of golden leaves like a stained glass window.

## STARVED ROCK STATE PARK

Council Overhang sits along one of 18 canyons in Starved Rock State Park about 90 miles southwest of Chicago. With 2.1 million visitors a year, it's one of Illinois' most popular parks and its busiest month, October, brings leaf peepers for fall stays at Starved Rock Lodge. They choose from cozy cabins in the woods to rooms in the lodge, the oldest dating from the Depression when the Civilian Conservation Corps built the historical structure. The lodge observes its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year.

Hiking trails lead into canyons where seasonal waterfalls trickle and children's laughter echoes off stone walls carved millennia ago by melting glaciers. Other trails go to the summits of bluffs overlooking the Illinois River. One such perch is Starved Rock, named after a Native American legend in which one tribe laid siege on another that had taken refuge atop the rock and perished from hunger.

On autumn days, the climb to the top is rewarded when a palette of seasonal hues unfolds. Ash and cottonwoods, white and black oaks, maples, cedars, burr oaks, and hickories turn from deep green to yellows and golds, orange, and bright red.

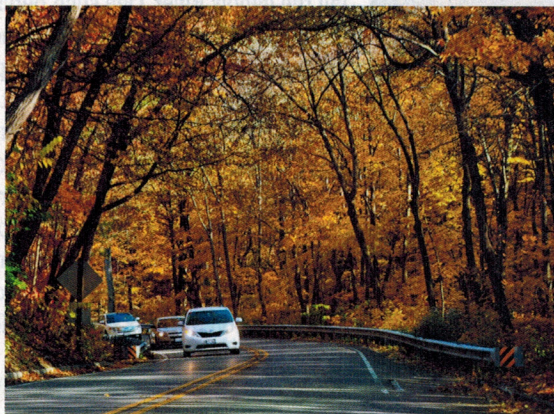
The visitors' center has maps for self-guided hikes of 13.4 miles of trails ranging from under half a mile to almost five and from easy to strenuous. Guided hikes with lunch start from the lodge, as do fall color tours on the park's pair of trolleys.





**Above:** The lodge at Starved Rock State Park was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Depression. Its hotel wing was added in 1989.

**Right:** Canyon Drive, officially Illinois Route 71, winds through the forests in Starved Rock State Park.



**Below:** Hikers have a view of the Illinois River and Starved Rock Dam from atop Starved Rock. The bluff is named for a Native American legend about a tribe that perished there.



**Opposite:** Sarah Hall pours tastings of wine for visitors at August Hill Winery in downtown Utica.

the Little Vermilion River aqueduct, one of five on the canal. The I&M Canal was dug by hand using picks, shovels, and black powder to open a passage six feet deep and 60 feet wide. The unearthed limestone was used to build the historical Chicago Water Tower.

Most of the laborers were Irish, Scandinavian, and German immigrants who were paid a dollar and four ounces of whiskey a day. When the job was done, some moved out West, a region that was caught up in the Gold Rush. Others settled in towns that sprang up along the canal and its 15 locks.

In addition to cargo, passengers journeyed on the I&M Canal aboard packet boats similar to the one used for excursions today. They lay in hammocks stacked three high. Small children were tied to the deck. Clouds of tobacco smoke filled the boats and on hot, humid days, the smell of whiskey and sweat made the 22- to 26-hour journey a long one. Muleskinners handling the animals were to be avoided. Coarse and rowdy men, they were especially surly when two boats passed and towropes tangled. One, James Butler Hickok, left for a career out West as lawman "Wild Bill" Hickok.

When the railroad came along just five years after the I&M Canal opened, it cut the travel time to three hours. Passenger traffic dried up, but the canal continued to haul cargo. In 1933, it was replaced by the Illinois Waterway. In the 1950s, part of the canal was buried under Interstate 55, the Stevenson Expressway, in Chicago. Preservationists helped to create the I&M Canal Heritage Corridor to preserve the canal's history. Its towpath remains as a hiking and biking trail.

## SMALL-TOWN TREASURES IN NORTH UTICA

The canal passes through Utica (formally known as North Utica), a village of 1,000 where the LaSalle County Historical Society Museum occupies the only grain warehouse still standing on the I&M. Inside, visitors find exhibits of canal history, war memorabilia, and Lincoln artifacts, including casts of the president's face and hands.

As the gateway to Starved Rock State Park, Utica's small downtown shops and restaurants welcome visitors. Antiquing is big here. Clark's Run, the largest antique shop at 5,000 square feet, displays Belleek china, collector plates, turquoise jewel-



ry, Hummel figurines, coins, and Fenton glassware among its wares. Collectors of duck decoys, fossils, and Native American items find them at Towpath Collectibles. Treasure hunters at Second Look browse through vintage clothing, hats and shoes, glass, and jewelry.

Two wineries offer tastings. Illinois River Winery has more than 40 wines and prides itself on seasonal wines it releases every eight weeks. August Hill Winery is named for August Engelhaupt, who farmed nearby. In addition to white and red varieties, it pours sparkling wines at its tasting room with a gallery showcasing the work of Illinois artists.

Purchase flavored popcorn to take home (there are 45 varieties) at Flutterfly. Banana cream pie or white chocolate popcorn anyone?

But Utica's most famous food can't be found in a store. It's served only once a



year during the Burgoo Festival, which is planned for Oct. 12 this year. This hearty pioneer stew is cooked outdoors on wood fires while a craft show, flea market, music, and family fun entertain the crowd waiting for a taste.

Unwind this fall in northern Illinois as you take in the region's attractions, history, and remarkable natural beauty. •

*Katherine Rodeghier is a contributor from Western Springs, Ill.*

## BEFORE YOU GO

Annual autumn events include the Fall Colors Weekend at Starved Rock State Park, Oct. 18 and 19.

Visitor information can be found through the I&M Canal Heritage Corridor, [www.heritagecorridorcvb.com](http://www.heritagecorridorcvb.com), (800) 926-2262; or Starved Rock State Park, [www.starvedrockstatepark.org](http://www.starvedrockstatepark.org), (800) 868-7625.

To visit the Starved Rock State Park and Utica, first stop by your nearest AAA service office for maps, reservations, TripTiks® and TourBook® guides. A list of offices to serve you is on page 6 in this issue or visit [AAA.com](http://AAA.com). Order free information about Illinois through the Free Travel Information Card found in this issue at page 44 or online at [AAA.com/Traveler](http://AAA.com/Traveler).