



The Great River Road is a popular scenic drive in autumn. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Leaf-peeping along the Great River Road

Posted September 12, 2025 8:23 am

By Katherine Rodeghier

It happens every year as autumn approaches. When the weather begins to cool, I get itchy feet and a burning desire to travel to see fall foliage. Last year was no exception, but my time was limited. Where to go for a quick trip?

[The Great River Road](#), or at least a piece of it in Northern Illinois and Southern Wisconsin. Running alongside the Mississippi River, this National Scenic Byway winds through 10 states, nearly 3,000 miles, from the river's headwaters in Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. I'd mapped out a sliver of it.

Eschewing the interstate highways, my husband and I drove west on Illinois Route 64, North Avenue in our western suburbs. We reached the river in Savanna and turned north on Illinois Route 84.



At Mississippi Palisades State Park, the Great River Road runs parallel to two sets of railroad tracks. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Mississippi Palisades

It was the third week of October when fall foliage was predicted to be near peak. We soon had a chance to verify that timing three miles north in [Mississippi Palisades State Park](#). The leaves were not as brilliant as I'd hoped, but seeing the golds glitter among the greens along the 2,500-acre park's roadways still brought a smile to my face.

The word palisades refers to the line of cliffs overlooking the river. We had a view from the top at the park's lookout points. Old Man River flowed lazily below, snaking around islands scattered between Illinois and Iowa. [The Great River Road](#) followed the shoreline below, paralleling two sets of railroad tracks.

We didn't take time for a hike, but those who set off on the park's 15 miles of trails might see the Twin Sisters and Indian Head rock formations. Wild turkeys roam the wooded ravines, along

with white-tailed deer, gray and red fox and, on occasion, a badger. A 1930s shelter built by the Civilian Conservation Corps makes a good spot for a picnic.



Overlooks at Mississippi Palisades State Park near Savanna, Ill., offer a view of the Mississippi River with the Iowa shoreline in the distance. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Galena into Wisconsin

Heading north, we were soon in [Galena](#), a town I'd visited many times, enjoying its 1800s architecture from a trolley, sipping wine at one of the local wineries and touring the home of Ulysses S. Grant, a state historic site. We took time to walk along Main Street past some of the shopping district's 200 stores and restaurants before skedaddling to East Dubuque and crossing into Wisconsin.

Here, our navigation skills were challenged by a web of state and county roadways. We learned to keep our eyes peeled for road signs displaying the green pilot's wheel marking the route of the [Great River Road](#). Fall colors brightened two-lane roads lined with ash, oak, hickory and maple trees in a kaleidoscope of reds, oranges and yellows.

In Prairie du Chien, we stopped for lunch at [The Front Porch](#), a relaxed pizza and burger spot, giving in to temptation to sample some of its 24 flavors of ice cream. Two attractions worth exploring in town are [Fort Crawford](#), a 19th-century army outpost, and [Villa Louis](#), a National Historic Landmark on the river with exhibits on early fur traders, the War of 1812 and the splendor of the Victorian era.

Back on the road, we followed Wisconsin Route 35 north toward La Crosse. Farmers worked in rolling fields, depositing rolls of straw dotting hillsides. Migrating birds flew in formation overhead.



The view of fall foliage from the observation platform at Grandad Bluff in La Crosse, Wis., is especially brilliant during the hour before sunset. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Lookout in La Crosse

We saw some of the tallest bluffs along the river as we approached [La Crosse](#), the largest city on Wisconsin's stretch of the Great River Road with a population of about 50,000. It was once a major center for milling lumber to be transported down the Mississippi River. Many buildings downtown date back to the 1800s when La Crosse was one of Wisconsin's most important centers for trade and commerce.

The city's largest annual event, Oktoberfest, draws tens of thousands of people. The longest-running community Oktoberfest in the Midwest began in 1961 as a celebration of German culture through traditional dress, food and drink. Unfortunately for leaf-peepers, it happens weeks before trees show their full fall colors, Sept. 25-28 this year.

The sun was heading toward the horizon when we made the 10-minute drive to the top of the most prominent land feature in La Crosse, Grandad Bluff. Standing 600 feet high, it overlooks the city with views of Iowa and Minnesota across the Mississippi. A metal walkway extending beyond the edge of the bluff gave us the day's best view of fall foliage blazing in that golden hour before sunset.



Walleye served with wild rice is among the entrees at Sullivan's Supper Club in Trempealeau, Wis., north of La Crosse. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Dinner along the river

Wisconsin is known for its supper clubs, so for dinner we followed the Great River Road north to Trempealeau to snag a table at [Sullivan's Supper Club](#). My pan-fried walleye with wild rice was excellent. As with all entrees, it came with the restaurant's Irish Brown Bread Muffins and visits to an abundant soup and salad bar.

Sipping a Brandy Old-fashioned, that Wisconsin classic cocktail, I reflected on a long but pleasant day of leaf-peeping. Sullivan's sits right along the Mississippi and while we were seated at a window, the water was invisible in the pitch dark beyond the glass. Still, I could sense it, and when the friendly din in the restaurant died down, I could almost hear it. Old Man River rolling along. Winter, spring, summer and my favorite, fall.

If you go

The Great River Road: experiencemississippiriver.com/

Great River Road in Illinois: greatriverroad-illinois.org/

Mississippi Palisades State Park: dnr.illinois.gov/parks/park.mississippipalisades.html

Visit Galena: visitgalena.org/

Great River Road in Wisconsin: wigrr.com/

The Front Porch: pdcporch.com/

Fort Crawford: fortcrawfordmuseum.com/

Villa Louis: villalouis.wisconsinhistory.org/

Explore La Crosse: explorelacrosse.com/

Sullivan's Supper Club: sullivanssupperclub.com/

<https://www.dailyherald.com/20250912/travel/leaf-peeping-along-the-great-river-road/>