

Touring Iowa's

GREAT RIVER

ROAD

Join us for a fall road trip down the picturesque East Coast of Iowa.

story and photography by DAN WEEKS

The Mississippi riverbank is our East Coast, where Iowa's modern settlement began. And the Iowa Great River Road runs through it.

It threads 326 miles of some of the state's most spectacular scenery. In some places, you'd swear you were in Switzerland, Germany, Ireland. In others, you can be nowhere else but Iowa.

The route is a favorite touring destination, especially during fall foliage season. Even then, the road is generally uncrowded and the towns and cities welcoming. Stay at local inns, hotels, and B&Bs or choose from dozens of campgrounds en route where you can drift off to the muted thrum of towboats churning past.

In addition to the scenery, the road travels through great walkable small towns and historic cities with lots of antiques, shopping, and dining options. Parks and overlooks with hiking and biking trails. River walks and locks and dams and museums to explore. And festivals, concerts, wineries, and river cruises to enjoy. It's the trip of a lifetime. And it's right on your doorstep, so it's one you can afford to take every year.

That's good, for there's more here than you can experience at one pass. Each stretch of the river has its own landscape, its own culture, its own character — and its own surprises.

Join us for a photographic tour. Then plan your own trip with our detailed map, list of attractions, and Iowa Great River Road resources.

Iowa's Great River Road offers plenty of vistas like these — plus historic river ports, parks and recreation areas, locks and dams, and 326 miles of relaxing touring.



NEW ALBIN TO BALLTOWN

Start your trip in the top right-hand corner of Iowa: the driftless region the glaciers missed. Here the river is entrenched by limestone bluffs riven with steep valleys and box canyons — and topped by hardwood forests and burial mounds of ancient civilizations.

The small river towns here are some of Iowa's best-kept secrets. In these frontier ports, Scandinavians and Europeans stepped off riverboats to make a home in a faraway, yet familiar-looking land. Their farming, logging, stonecutting, and building transformed this stretch of the river into a little Europe.

The towns' wide main streets, elegant riverboat captains' houses, and 19th-century brick and stone buildings often remain remarkably unaltered, just waiting for you to rediscover them.

Take the spectacular **Driftless Area Scenic Byway** (northeastiowarcd.org/driftless-area-scenic-byway) through the fjordlike Upper Iowa River valley to **New Albin** with its picturesque town square, 14-sided barn, 1849 cast-iron obelisk marking the boundary between Iowa and the Minnesota Territory — and delicious smoked meat at **City Meat Market & Grocery** (563-544-4236).

In **Lansing** (mylansingiowa.com, mainstreetlansing.com, 563-538-9229) enjoy the view from 450-foot-tall Mt. Hosmer, tour the historic downtown, bargain-shop at the grottolike



Horsfall's Lansing Variety, rent a kayak or houseboat, and take a sightseeing cruise.

View massive barges at lock and dam #9 and cast for a dozen or so varieties of fish in the river and in 20 stocked trout streams near **Harpers Ferry**.

Scenic hiking trails abound in **Yellow River State Forest** (iowadnr.gov, 563-586-2254) and in nearby **Effigy Mounds National Monument** (nps.gov, 563-873-3491 ext. 202), home to 200 prehistoric mounds.

Marquette and McGregor (mcgreg-marq.org) offer charming, historic downtowns with shops, restaurants, B&Bs, and a casino. Nearby **Pikes Peak State Park** (iowadnr.gov, 563-873-2341) has one of the most spectacular views along the entire Mississippi, plus hiking and camping.

Guttenburg (guttenburgiowa.net, 563-252-2323), named one of America's 20 prettiest towns by *Forbes*, features a mile-long riverfront park, a 15-mile bike trail, lots of mid-19th-century stone architecture, and a museum in the only remaining lockmaster's house on the upper Mississippi.

Balltown is a tiny place with two big attractions: a spectacular view (*page 29*) and Iowa's oldest (1852) bar and restaurant, **Breitbach's** (breitbachscountrydining.com, 563-552-2220), continuously owned and operated by six generations of Breitbachs.

Clockwise from opposite top left:

NEW ALBIN: With its blaze of maples and air tinged with freshly sawn oak from Konkel's sawmill, New Albin on the Minnesota border is where Iowa's Great River Road begins. The town hall is now a historical museum.

ATOP MT. HOSMER: Lansing's Mt. Hosmer offers a bird's-eye view of the river — and the 1931 Black Hawk Bridge, the northernmost on Iowa's Great River Road.

WEXFORD CHURCH: Built by refugees from the potato famine just 13 years after their arrival, the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Wexford attests to their faith, craftsmanship, and success. This authentic Irish church overlooks a valley so lush it could well be in Ireland's County Wexford, whence came its builders.

GUTTENBERG HAUS: The Guttenberg Haus in Guttenburg was built of hand-hewn bur oak timbers and native limestone by German immigrants in the manner of a German town house. It is now a bed and breakfast. Blink and you're in Bavaria!

STREETScape: McGregor's Main Street beckons visitors to explore. Antiques shops, eateries, boutiques, and inns abound in Iowa's river towns, offering resort amenities and ambience at small-town-Iowa prices. They fill handsome brick and stone buildings that recall the towns' heydays as busy shipping ports before railway bridges and barge traffic.

SWISS VIEW: Stop to enjoy this vista near Balltown in the heart of Iowa's Little Switzerland region. The Great River Road takes to the ridgetops as well as the riverbank, offering some of Iowa's loftiest views.



DUBUQUE, BELLEVUE, SABULA, AND CLINTON

Midway between the Quad Cities and the Minnesota border, Dubuque was a thriving mining and industrial city that's reimagined itself as a center for technology, culture, education — and a tourist destination. It combines a historic downtown with a brand-new riverfront resort, waterpark, museum, and more.

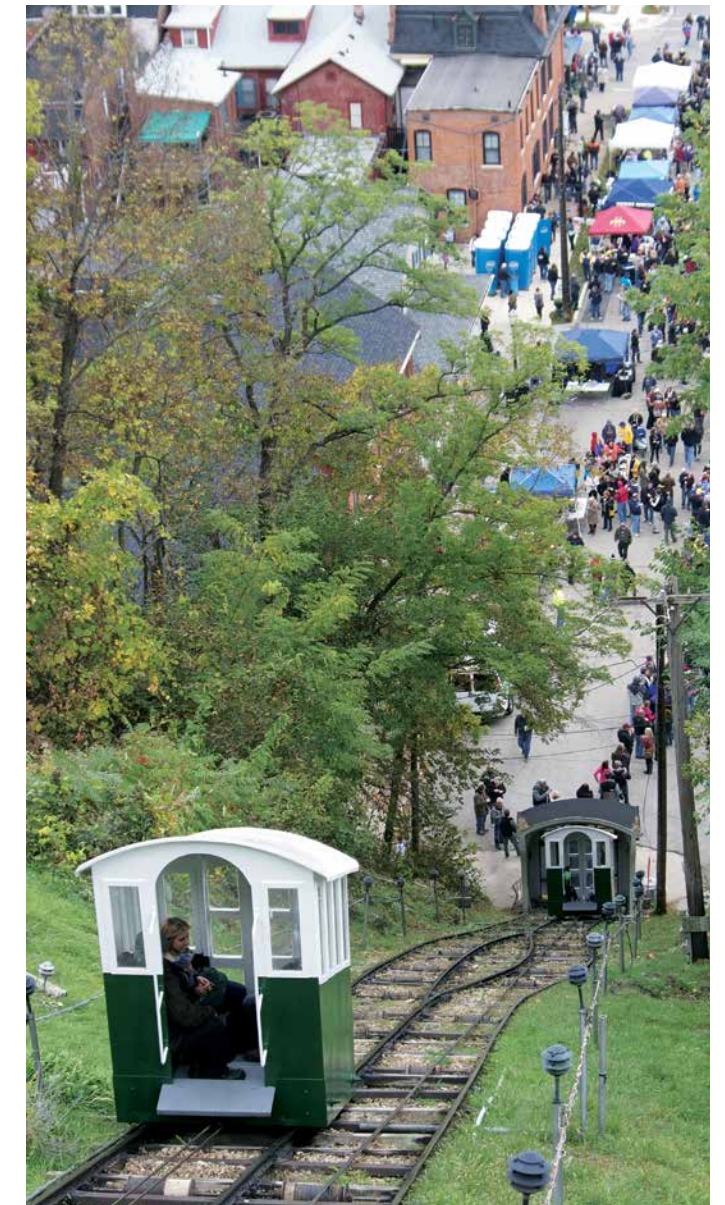
In **Dubuque** (traveldubuque.com) museums, casinos, resorts, dining, and outdoor recreation abound. Must-see attractions include **Fenelon Place Elevator**, **Port of Dubuque and National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium**, the **Dubuque Museum of Art, Mines of Spain Recreation Area**, and 29 miles of paved trails.

Bellevue (bellevueia.com, 563-872-5830) is a beautiful port turned low-key resort with lots of dining, lodging,

camping, and recreation options. Don't miss the view from **Bellevue State Park** (iowadnr.gov).

Sabula gives you an island vacation without leaving the state. Camp, boat, and swim at **South Sabula Lake Park** (mycountyparks.com), get a superb wood-fired pizza with a big helping of character at **Bombfire Pizza** (bombfirepizza.com, 563-249-8688), and relax and enjoy the view at quaint **Castle B&B** (sabulacastle.com, 563-357-5467).

In **Clinton** (clintoniowatourism.com, 563-242-5702) you can view live theater on an authentic sternwheeler, watch logs get ripped into boards at a working sawmill museum, tour a lumber baron's mansion, see more than 20 exhibits at the **Felix Adler Children's Discovery Center** — and enjoy lots of parks, trails, and other outdoor amenities.



PORT CITY: Nestled in the elbow of a river bend (*above top*), Dubuque has quietly won dozens of national quality-of-life awards and is one of North America's least-known best small cities.

RIVER OVERLOOK: The Mines of Spain Recreation Area (*above bottom*) is now a picturesque park — one of many in a city that likes to hike, bike, ski, and enjoy watersports. Spain really did own these lead-rich limestone bluffs before the Louisiana Purchase.

Clockwise from top left:

RIVER MUSEUM: Dubuque — not Minneapolis, St. Louis, or New Orleans — is the site of the world-class National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium, which interprets the natural history and culture of the river.

RIVER WALK: It ties together the River Museum, Grand Harbor Resort and Waterpark, Grand River Event Center, and other riverfront attractions. The sparkling-new river-facing redevelopment is called the Port of Dubuque. Last year Dubuque's was named the number 4 Best American Riverfront.

FENELON PLACE ELEVATOR: Much of Dubuque retains its 19th-century charm, with lots of elaborate brick homes, row houses, churches, and commercial buildings. The 1882 Fenelon Place Elevator was built to take wealthy residents from their work in the city to their mansions on the bluff. It remains a fun way to gain a great view. The elevator is the shortest, steepest railroad in the world.

BOMBFIRE PIZZA: The driftless region ends at Sabula, Iowa's only island city. Sabula's Bombfire Pizza offers perhaps the best wood-fired pies we've ever encountered. A mellow, friendly, retro-hippie vibe draws diners of all ages and types. One diner says he detours up from I-80 "every time I cross Iowa."



COURTESY OF THE QUAD CITIES CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

DAVENPORT RIVERFRONT: Davenport's riverside parks are the city's front porch. Residents and visitors gather by the thousands for a steady stream of music and river festivals, baseball games, and other events throughout the year.

THE QUAD CITIES REGION

Le Claire (visitleclaire.com, 563-289-4242 ext. 61135) is not officially one of the Quad Cities, but this small town just north of Bettendorf is where the region begins. Formerly a shipping port and home to riverboat pilots, Le Claire is now known for fine locally made wine and spirits; boutique shopping, dining, and lodging; riverboat cruises and soaring pelicans; and as the home of the American Pickers — and the **Buffalo Bill Museum**, where you can explore the last paddle-wheel steamer to navigate the Mississippi and the history of local boy Buffalo Bill.

Start your visit to the **Quad Cities** proper (visitquadcities.com, 800-747-7800) at the **Union Station Visitor Center**. This beautiful restored train station is



also where you can rent bicycles to tour the cities' miles of riverfront and other bike paths; get information on watercraft rentals, cruises, and the cities' water taxi; and take a Segway scooter tour.

Adjacent **Le Claire Park** on the riverfront is the site of nearly nonstop festivals and events. Fall is a great time to visit because the world-famous **Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Jazz Festival** has been rescheduled this year to Labor Day weekend, and the **Quad City Riverfront Pops** follows on September 6. **East-West Riverfest**, a 15-day celebration of arts, cultural and heritage organizations, and events and businesses also kicks off in September; toward the end of the month, don't miss the juried **Riverssance Festival of Fine Arts** amid the shops and restaurants of the picturesque village of **East Davenport**.

Also downtown on the river, the 1931 **Modern Woodmen Park** is the first minor league ballpark to feature its own 105-foot-tall Ferris wheel and a 300-foot-long zip line. The **Rhythm City Casino** is right next door. From there you can walk the **Sky Bridge** to downtown to enjoy a 360-degree view of the riverfront and skyline.

Downtown attractions include the century-old **Figge Art Museum**, the **Putnam Museum/National Geographic Giant Screen Theater**, **Bucktown Center for the Arts**, the **German-American Heritage Center**, and more.

Wildcat Den State Park (iowadnr.gov, 563-263-4337) about 20 miles southwest of Davenport makes a great base camp for enjoying the Quads or a restful stop on the way out of town. There you can tour an 1800s grist mill and schoolhouse and enjoy hiking and primitive camping.



COURTESY OF THE QUAD CITIES CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

Clockwise from top left:

SKYBRIDGE AND CASINO: The Davenport Skybridge offers control tower-like views of the river and skyline — and access between the Figge Art Museum and downtown and the neon-lit Rhythm City Casino and Modern Woodmen Park baseball stadium on the riverfront.

PLEASURE BOATS: From cabin cruisers to kayaks, the river is home to thousands of Iowa pleasure craft. These are out for an early-morning paddle through the heart of the Quad Cities. Visitors can rent everything from houseboats to fishing skiffs to paddlecraft at many locations along the river — or take a sightseeing cruise or river taxi ride.

STEAMBOAT PILOTHOUSE: This is the pilothouse of *Lone Star*, built in 1868 and the only surviving example of a wooden-hulled, western rivers steamboat. It retired in 1967 after 99 years of service and is on display at the Buffalo Bill Museum in Le Claire. The town is past home to pilots who navigated steamers through treacherous rock rapids (now submerged) just downstream.

BARGE TOW: Towboats and their barges offer a never-ending display of power and skill as they maneuver through Iowa's locks. Overlooks such as this one near Davenport let you watch the multiton ballet. Each 15-barge tow is a quarter mile long and carries more than 225 train cars' — or 870 semi trucks' — worth of cargo, mostly food and farm products bound for worldwide markets.



THE SOUTHERN CITIES

Downstream from Davenport, the character of the drive changes. The road generally flattens, sometimes running straight down the floodplain, sometimes skirting the base of the bluffs at its western edge. And the sprinkling of northern port towns yields to long runs of fields punctuated by Iowa's southeastern cities. Each city has its own monuments to a boomtown past — and lots going on in the present.

Muscatine's (visitmuscatine.com, 563-272-2534) colorful Victorian downtown includes the excellent **Muscatine History and Industry Center** that highlights the history of pearl button manufacturing in the former "button capital of the world." At night the only LED-lit bridge on the river competes with the Mississippi Mist waterfront fountain for the best light show in town. Don't miss the **Biannual Boat Show** (muscatineboatshow.com) September 4–6, which features vintage, antique, and new watercraft of all kinds — including some hovercraft that can skim over water or land on a cushion of air and soar, bank, and turn like aircraft in low, ground-effect flight.

In **Burlington** (greaterburlington.com, 319-752-6365) stop at the **Port of Burlington Welcome Center** on the riverfront for the complete scoop on area attractions; admire (or cross) the graceful new cable-stayed **Great River Bridge**; drive down **Snake Alley**, the crookedest street in the world; and take in a riverfront festival or farmers market.

Fort Madison (fortmadison.com, 319-372-5471) is where you can visit the **Sheaffer Pen Museum** (sheafferpenmuseum.org, 319-372-1674), see the largest swing-span double-decker bridge in the world, go on a self-guided architectural walk of some of the city's impressive 19th-century homes, and take a weekend tour of a reconstructed 1808 frontier fort.

Keokuk (keokukiowatourism.org, 319-524-5599) turned an old bridge deck into an observation platform — a brilliant idea. It overlooks the **1927 George M. Verity Riverboat and Museum** at its permanent berth on the river front. From the observation platform you can also marvel at the mammoth and handsome **1913 Lock and Dam 19** and powerhouse — the largest in the world at the time it was built and just as impressive today. Here in Iowa's southernmost city you can walk down Grand Avenue and ogle the mansions built by 19th-century industrialists and hunt for the world's finest geodes at various nearby shops and mining locations. **I**

Dan Weeks is editor of The Iowan.



Before You Go

CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES:

For an interactive map, printable guide, and lists of interpretive centers, communities, cruises, restaurants, and overlooks: traveliowa.com/asp/lifestyles.aspx?id=23

For a map of recreation, culture, and scenic view attractions: experiencemississippiriver.com/states/iowa

For a 15-stop, 3-day self-guided tour: traveliowa.com/getaways?id=5

For detailed information on the New Albin to Dubuque section of the Iowa Great River Road: riverroads.com

For a guide to Army Corps of Engineers recreation and other river facilities: missriver.org.



Clockwise from top left:

MUSCATINE STREETSCAPE: These brightly painted Victorian buildings look almost San Franciscan in the slanting fall sunshine.

SHELLS AND BUTTONS: Muscatine was once home to a thriving industry that mined the river's vast supply of freshwater clams and cut and drilled the shells to form mother-of-pearl buttons. Plastics and zippers replaced them in the mid-20th century. The Muscatine History and Industry Center downtown tells the fascinating story.

BURLINGTON'S SNAKE ALLEY: You can drive down the crookedest street in the world in Burlington, according to *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. Like Dubuque's Fenelon Place Elevator, Snake Alley was created to speed access to bluff-top mansions. It ascends a hill too steep for horses to traverse in a straight line. Bricks set at an angle increase traction.

CHIEF KEOKUK: A statue of the Chief surveys the Mississippi from atop a bluff in Rand Park in the city that bears his name. Perhaps he's watching the bald eagles that make Keokuk their seasonal home.

CITY GARDENS: Keokuk calls Rand Park "the city's front yard." Its elegant gazebo and formal plantings recall Keokuk's boom days in the late 19th century, when millionaires outdid themselves building grand mansions on the river bluff, many of which still stand. A self-guided walking tour offers one jaw-dropper after another.

