

Midwest's Tuscany: Overview of Four GoDrivePAKs

A GoDrivePAK is for people looking for a vacation which is active yet low-key, inexpensive yet very satisfying. Take a few days to a few weeks exploring close-to-home regions that are surprisingly pretty. GoDrivePAKs use mostly two-lane roads to reconnect with small-town America where people are still friendly and polite. Why go thousands of miles where the “beautiful people” congregate presumably for the ill-defined “action”? Relax. Slow down. Get out and get some exercise. Have a satisfying vacation close to home all laid out for you by the four Midwest Tuscany GoDrivePAKs.

How is the Midwest's Tuscany like the real one in Italy? Your author spent three weeks in Italy finding out. You can learn more yourself by reading the GoDrivePAK by that name “Tuscany (Italy).” Italy's Tuscany is a very hilly region with beautiful views and, as long as the tourist traps are avoided, a laid-back culture.

The first similarity between Tuscany and the Midwest's Tuscany has to do with terrain. The Midwest's last glacier was about 12,000 years ago. Those massive sheets of ice knocked off the tops of hills and left behind the debris to create the flat landscape one sees elsewhere. But some strange quirk of nature caused the four named glaciers of the time to skip this part of the Midwest. The hills still have their tops. Caves, caverns and rocky outcroppings still can be found in this part whereas in the glaciated areas, they are quite rare.

The glaciers missed a little less than 20,000 square miles area of southeastern Minnesota, northeastern Iowa, western Wisconsin, and northwestern Illinois. This is often called the “driftless” region because no vegetation, rock, or dirt was moved into this area by the glacier. Nothing was crushed. The valleys were not filled. No debris “drifted” in.

Driving here, a visitor will be surprised by the rugged terrain. That terrain is generally characterized by beautiful limestone and sandstone bluffs, deeply carved valleys, numerous caves, and rich springs that supply productive trout streams. No golf course designer had to move thousands of cubic yards of dirt to create hills here. Those hilly fairways have been there for a quarter of a million years!

The second reason has to do with the people and the culture. For a traveler to Italy's Tuscany who avoids the “must-see” places overrun with U.S. tourists and sticks to the smaller, quieter regions, the people, the laid-back pace of life, and the almost-shocking bargains for food, drink, and activities are similar in the both the Midwest's Tuscany and Italy's Tuscany.

All right. The wine and cuisine of Tuscany, Italy are a little more famous. Remember, though, that in 10,000 B.C. Etruscan civilization in the Tuscany region

already had a religion, had writing, traded goods using currency, made wine, and had already started working on their cuisine. At that same time, the very first Native Americans had followed along the south end of the last glacier and made their way south end of the glacier and were just arriving in places like Dubuque and La Crosse. The Italians got a heck of a head start! Give these local folks a little more time.

Here are overviews of the four Midwest's Tuscany GoDrivePAKs:

Midwest's Tuscany: Southwest

Overview: The GoDrivePAC for the southwest corner of the Midwest's Tuscany begins north of Dixon, Illinois on Highway 2. Highway 2 hugs the pretty Rock River through Dixon to the first stop at Rock Falls for biking, walking, canoeing, golfing and fishing. From Rock Falls, the next suggested stop is in the Mississippi River valley at Fulton, Illinois or Clinton, Iowa. The path then follows the surprisingly pretty west side of the Mississippi up to Dubuque, Iowa. After a stop at the Illinois tourist town of Galena, the path goes to arguably the prettiest state park in Illinois, the Mississippi Palisades Park. After a stop in Savannah, near the park, the route takes Highway 52 back to Dixon, providing an opportunity to clearly and distinctly see the difference between the Driftless Region, just visited, and the part of northern Illinois impacted by the glaciers.

Midwest's Tuscany: Northeast

Overview: The GoDrivePAC for the northeast corner of the Midwest's Tuscany begins by driving past Madison, Wisconsin to Reedsburg. After Reedsburg, the next stop is the rugged Wildcat Mountain State Park on the Kickapoo River then north up to Sparta, Wisconsin. From Sparta, the path over to the Mississippi River stays north of Interstate 90 through some pretty country very few people see, ending at Perrot State Park and Brady's Bluff and from there the short trip down to La Crosse, Wisconsin. From La Crosse, path takes a beautiful drive on the east side of the Mississippi River down to Highway 56 to Viroqua and La Farge then continuing on back to Reedsburg to make the loop.

Midwest's Tuscany: Northwest

Overview: The GoDrivePAC for the northwest corner of the Midwest's Tuscany begins south of Prairie du Chien at the ferry crossing at Cassville, Wisconsin. From Prairie du Chien, the trip reaches west for the beautiful Root River and Root River bike trails to Lanesboro, then across the river to Winona, Minnesota. The return trip then hugs the west side of the Big River on a past LaCrosse on a very pretty ride back to Prairie du Chien and then back down to Cassville.

Midwest's Tuscany: Southeast

Overview: The GoDrivePAC for the southeast corner of the Midwest's Tuscany begins in Monroe, Wisconsin. The trip suggests stops in New Glarus (biking, walking, touring, and golfing) then onto Mt. Horeb to see the trolls and the town before moving onto the next suggested stop at Barneveld (biking, walking, and golfing.) The trip moves up to Spring Green and onto Fort Dodge with a stop either at Spring Green or five miles north of Fort Dodge (biking, walking, and touring.) The last stop would be at Mineral Point, a cute place for touring, walking, and golfing, and from there back to the start in Monroe.