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## WISCONSIN

*Rediscovering the Heart  
of the Driftless Area*

By Ron Davis #111820

Like many of my baby boomer brethren, most of my efforts during my college days seemed devoted to anything but preparing myself for the world of work. I was free to dabble in all kinds of alternative activities and philosophies and spent some time pouring through Carlos Castaneda's then popular novels. Dog-eared copies of books like *The Teachings of Don Juan*, *A Separate Reality* and *Journey to Ixtlan* poked out of a lot of backpacks in the early '70s, and though I was intrigued with them then, about the only thing that stuck with me was the idea of a "power spot." According to Don Juan, the "Man of Knowledge" in the novels, everyone has a power spot, unique to him or her, and once discovered, it affords a rejuvenation of energy and clarity of vision.

The highlight of my spring semesters back then was escaping the college grind to spend weekends on my sister's farm down in the heart of southwest Wisconsin's Driftless Area. I'd spend foggy mornings down in the hollows, wading one of the countless, cool-running spring creeks to pluck out a few brown trout and some fresh watercress, and later I'd hike (more like "climb") into the lush, near vertically-sloped coulees

searching for morel mushrooms. I remember thinking this just might be my own power spot. Once I had scraped up enough cash for a used, red and white Honda CB350 and began spending afternoons threading my way through the squiggly state, county, and township roads, this new dimension confirmed the mystic power Wisconsin's so-called "Coulee Country" held for me.

Last spring when Editor Bill Wiegand asked me to spend a few days poking around this same area as an advance man for a scheduled weekend Getaway in the Driftless Area, I couldn't load my panniers fast enough.

My first day out, I headed directly to Black River Falls, site of a fall Getaway, September 30 through October 2. The reception Friday evening will be held at the Best Western Arrowhead Lodge and Suites where Sue Rihn, the organizer for the event, will be orienting riders on off-road and pavement riding opportunities and points of interest. (see the list of links at the end of this article for more information about events and places mentioned). In the immediate area, riders might want to visit the award-winning Sand Creek Brewing Company, Wisconsin's third largest craft beer



Sand Creek Brewing.

brewery. Tours start at 3:30 on Friday (tap room open 3-10 p.m.), and the tap room is open noon to 5 p.m. on Saturday. Visitors who are feeling lucky may want to roll the



dice or pull the handle on the one-armed bandits at Ho-Chunk Gaming Black River Falls, which also offers accommodations.

Black River Falls sits near the northeast reaches of the strip of southwest Wisconsin known as the Driftless Area. It's called "Driftless" since it escaped getting mowed down and covered in "drift" by the last glacier, though as the glacier receded, its meltwater carved this area of Wisconsin into a maze of deep valleys, steep coulees and bluffs. This kind of topography has made southwest Wisconsin legendary for motorcyclists seeking endless roller coasters of pavement through spectacular scenery.

Just southwest of Black River Falls is Wisconsin's Cranberry Country. The weekend before the Getaway, something like 120,000 thousand visitors will converge on little Warrens, Wisconsin, for the Cranberry Festival, a three-day gathering for food, music, parades, and over 1,000 craft, food and flea market vendors. If you're curious about the

cranberry culture of Wisconsin, you might like to visit the Cranberry Discovery Center in Warrens, open Monday through Sunday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m..

Just a ways east out of Black River Falls on Hwy 54 is North Settlement Road, one of Wisconsin's "Rustic Roads." Heading south, it meanders for about 12 miles through the Black River State Forest's pine plantations, marshes, and hardwood stands which should be in prime fall color at the time of the Getaway. The road was not in the best shape when I traveled it, with occasional potholes and patches of gravel where culverts had been replaced, but riders are bound to see a variety of wildlife and diverse plant life including sphagnum peat moss beds and native wildflowers.

North Settlement Road ends at County O, and from there, the quickest route to the most popular Driftless Area roads is to take Cty O west to State Hwy 27 south. Hwy 27 passes through Sparta, where tourers may

want to take a break at the Deke Slayton Memorial Space and Bicycle Museum. Slayton, one of our first astronauts, was a member of the Mercury 7 group and part of the crew for the U.S./Russian Apollo-Soyuz docking mission. The bicycle part of the museum has over 80 two-wheelers that span centuries of history. Sparta lays claim to being "the bicycling capital of America," and is the trail head for one of the first "Rails to



The Deke Slayton Memorial Space and Bicycle Museum in Sparta, Wisconsin, features mementos from Slayton's career as an astronaut, bicycles spanning centuries of history, and real-life and model airplanes.

Trails" programs, the Elroy-Sparta Bike Trail. Called "the Granddaddy of them all," the Elroy-Sparta Trail covers 32 miles through rolling countryside and three tunnels, one of them three-quarters of a mile long (shuttles and bike rentals are available at both ends of the trail). There is also an aviation section of the museum which features dozens of model planes, including a model of the Wright brothers' first plane and a full-size 1932 Pietenpol.

Continue south on Hwy 27 to Cashton, pick up Hwy 33, and you're in for some of the most memorable rides of your life. Taking Hwy 33 east for a few miles will lead you to Wisconsin's answer to The Tail of the Dragon, up and over Wildcat Mountain. Just for the fun of it, I like to turn around and head right back over the mountain and back to Ontario, then turn south on Hwy 131, a favorite of many riders for its pleasant sweepers and gorgeous scenery.

Hwy 131 cuts through the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, 8,569 acres of sandstone cliffs and forested bluffs towering over the sweeping valleys cradling the Kickapoo River.



The "ALMOST World Famous" Rockton Bar on State Highway 131 packs in riders, both motorcyclist and equestrian, on Sunday for its Sunday chicken barbecues.

Recognized as a National Natural Landmark, a State Natural Area, and prime wetland habitat for birds and other wildlife, the Reserve also has a fascinating history. Back in the '60s, in response to periodic flooding problems (probably due in some part to logging and farming activities), a congress-initiated program called for the river to be dammed with the idea of creating a recreational resource and sparing downstream communities from flooding. Over 140 families sold or were forced to sell their homes and businesses. Construction began, but soon budget and environmental concerns halted the project, and though some huge concrete structures eerily still rise from the valley, most of the Reserve has returned to its natural state. A visitor's center for the Kickapoo Valley Reserve is open 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Saturday.

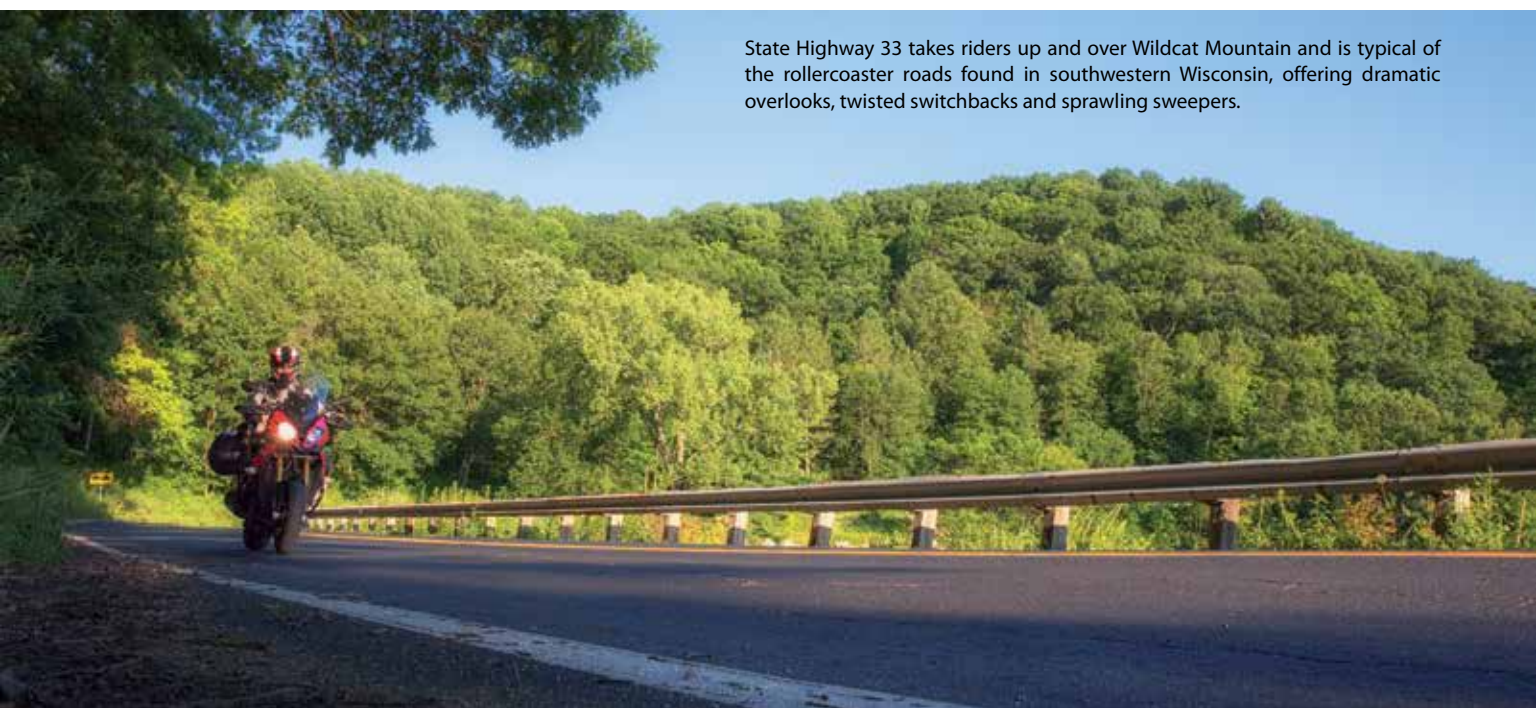
Just before leaving the reserve heading south, on the advice of a local rider I took a

left on Cty P. This little stretch from 131 over to Hwy 82 will give you all the twisties you could ever want. As you round one of the countless bends bordered by rocky outcroppings, you may feel as you've ridden suddenly into the 1800s. Working Amish farms, small bakeries, produce and wood working shops, and quaint cabins speckle this area, but keep an eye out for buggies and of course the occasional horse manure deposit!

If you skip Cty P, leaving the Reserve on south 131 you'll pass Wildthings Fur Company, where you can pick up locally-caught smoked trout and watch hats, caps, mittens, and motorcycle seat covers being made from everything from wolverine to wolf fur. A block down the highway is the "ALMOST world famous" Rockton Bar, where its renowned chicken barbecue packs its parking lot each Sunday with both two-wheeled and four-footed transportation (There are many equestrians in this area).

Another Rustic Road in the area I'd recommend meets Hwy 131 just as you leave the Reserve to the south. The Rustic Roads sign there clearly marks its beginning at Dutch Hollow Road, but watch the signs carefully, as Dutch Hollow magically turns into Sand Hill Road. Turn right at Lower Ridge Road, which will lead you back to Highways 131 and 33 and into Ontario, which is proclaimed by its welcome sign to be "The Canoeing Capital of the World." This side tour has some great elevations providing scenic overlooks and threads its way past Amish farms and horse stables.

Located to the west on Hwy 82 is Hillsboro, a common rallying point for groups riding the Driftless Area. The Hillsboro Brewing Company (est. 1846) in the middle of town offers a scrumptious and varied menu (try the nachos!) and craft beers from their brewery just down the street. As testament to the popularity of the area for motorcyclists, just outside of Hillsboro is

A photograph showing a motorcyclist riding on a paved road that curves through a dense, green forest. The rider is wearing a helmet and gear, and the motorcycle has a red light on the front. The road is bordered by a metal guardrail. The background is filled with tall, leafy trees under a clear blue sky.

State Highway 33 takes riders up and over Wildcat Mountain and is typical of the rollercoaster roads found in southwestern Wisconsin, offering dramatic overlooks, twisted switchbacks and sprawling sweepers.

the Blue Highway Motorcycle Lodge. The six, elegantly crafted cabins there are only available to motorcyclists, and though they are situated on 40 secluded acres of a forested bluff, each cabin boasts four-star accommodations. The night I was lucky to stay there I was pleasantly surprised by all the special touches owners Dan and Brandy have included at each cabin. Besides the paved paths leading to each cabin, fresh fruit, whirlpool tubs, boot dryers, gas fireplaces, kitchenettes, screened porches, and even motorcycle ports to keep bikes out of the elements make this stop tailor-made for riders. The Blue Highway Motorcycle lodge offers MOA members a five percent discount.

After another day crisscrossing the area I stayed for a night at the Blakely Hobbit, near Viola (home to the internationally known S&S Cycle, call ahead for tours). It's been said you can't turn around in the Driftless area without stepping into a trout stream, and the Hobbit cabins overlook one of the most famous of these, the West Fork of the Kickapoo River. Like many bed and breakfasts and cabins in the area catering to anglers, the Hobbit may be a little rustic for some; however, the unspoiled views, the quiet serenity, and the personal attention from Eddie, the owner for over 30 years, made this a great, restful spot for me. The Hobbit offers two cabins, tent camping, and RV parking, all on the banks of the gently bubbling West Fork.

Heading south on State Highway 82/56 led me to Viroqua, a small town with a large number of unique attractions. The Saturday Farm Market features many booths offering locally grown, organic produce, Amish baked goods, pastured meats and preserves, as well as handmade crafts and furniture. Visitors also enjoy taking the walking or

driving tours of local vineyards and the unique round barns that dot the area. Other unique attractions include the Fourtney Underground Theater and the Viroqua Food Cooperative, which serves three meals a day made from local and organic foods and is popular for its soup and salad bar. I can vouch for their paninis!

From Viroqua, it's a short run west on State Hwy 14 to the Mississippi, the western boundary of the Wisconsin portion of the Driftless Area, and Hwy 35, The Great River Road. This route, traveling both north and south, is nationally known by motorcyclists for its majestic views of the Mississippi river and the bluffs that bracket it, especially in the fall when colors peak and clouds of migrating wildfowl use this flyway. Visitors to the Getaway in September should be aware however, that La Crosse will be holding its Oktoberfest celebration during the same weekend, so expect heavier than normal traffic. Depending on how you feel about crowds, Oktoberfest features three days of fun activities, including parades, music, a craft beer night, countless food vendors, contests, and as much lederhosen as you'd ever care to see.

Northeast of La Crosse, many riders make a pilgrimage of sorts to the Mindoro Cut. At the summit of a cavalcade of twisties and switchbacks, County Trunk C (formerly State Hwy 108) slashes down through 74 feet of solid dolomite and sandstone, earning it the title as the second deepest hand-hewn cut in the western hemisphere and a place on the National Register of Historic Places. Visitors can pick up County C north in West Salem, just east of La Crosse, and after traversing the cut, motorcyclists are often drawn to Top Dawgs Pub and Grub in Mindoro. Though it might look a little shabby from the outside, Top Dawgs is

known for offering 108 different hamburgers, not to mention locally made, fresh bleu cheese that is to die for. Each time you sample one of the burgers, your ticket is punched, and after trying the full menu, you earn a free steak dinner. Paul, the owner, told me Top Dawgs has served riders from all over the world, and, get this, he claims he opens at 4:30 a.m. and closes the place sometimes as late as 2 a.m.!

It's impossible to do more than just scratch the surface of riding and touring opportunities in southwestern Wisconsin; in fact, once you're in the Driftless area, it's a challenge to find a route you won't enjoy. However, remember much of this area is rural, and this means deer, buggies, bicyclists, and a bunch more things to stay alert for. Coming around one sweeper near Hillsboro, I was even confronted with a recalcitrant cow, and another rider told me she had just had a face-off with a donkey. So, take your time, and enjoy this wonderful resource for motorcycling adventure. In addition to the links below, many of the routes I've mentioned can be viewed on YouTube, but for a comprehensive look at maps of six suggested motor routes and 88 attractions, visit [DriftlessDestinations.com](http://DriftlessDestinations.com) or pick up one of their free brochures available at restaurants, hotels, and convenience stores in the area.

Whether or not the southwestern Wisconsin Driftless Area becomes your "power spot" as it has for me, its exciting roads are what Castenada might have called "paths with heart," and, if I can borrow one more quote from him, "...there I travel looking, looking breathlessly." ☺



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