

Full Throttle on a Motor-Themed Road Trip From Detroit to Milwaukee

Bekah Wright | November 21, 2014



A 1957 DeSoto Fireflite at the Henry Ford Museum in Detroit (Courtesy: The Henry Ford Museum)

Sometimes the call to hit the open road can't be denied. When it struck me, I thought: Where better to heed the siren song than cities known for automobiles and motorcycles? That's how I landed at the Detroit Metropolitan Airport with three days ahead of me and 370 miles to conquer en route to Milwaukee.

Detroit

Stepping off the plane, my excitement intermingled with what felt like Detroit's pulse, beating with a steady and growing momentum. I was pumped to explore Motor City, the birthplace of the automobile, from behind the wheel. Rubber hit the asphalt, and my road trip began, as I drove off the rental car lot... in an eggplant-colored Nissan.

Bird's-eye-view accommodations at the Westin Book Cadillac allowed for taking in downtown Detroit. The 1924-built, Italian Renaissance-style skyscraper is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but its sleek interiors reflect a modern touch.



The accommodations in Detroit (Courtesy: The Westin Book Cadillac)

Housed within the Westin are several restaurants worthy of reservations, including the 1924 Grille and, most fitting for carnivores, Michael Symon's ROAST. Just across the street are competing local faves, American and Lafayette Coney Islands. There are no amusement park rides to be found here. Instead, chilidogs at cut-rate prices are served up with a local staple, Better Made potato chips (bring along a Faygo pop for a complete Detroit foodie experience).

Just around the corner are two other hot spots, Ink Detroit and Skybar. Love for the city is obvious at the two venues, which recently co-sponsored one of Detroit's weekly, Monday night, Slow Roll bicycle rides. Where better to don oneself in Ink Detroit's city-centric apparel and celebrate post-cycling over cocktails? More of downtown Detroit beckoned, but it would have to wait. On the following day's itinerary — checking out the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn.

Downtown Detroit gave way to Dearborn suburbs, which were ablaze in fall foliage. I joined throngs of school children field tripping at The Henry Ford Museum's five attractions. I'd expected a car-centric experience relating the Ford family's story. Instead, I was immersed in 300 years of American ingenuity via pioneers like Thomas Edison, the Wright Brothers, Charles Lindbergh, Abraham Lincoln, and Rosa Parks.





Back when McDonald's hadn't served as many (Courtesy: The Henry Ford Museum)

Speaking to my own quest was the Driving America exhibition. Bringing on a rush of nostalgia were vintage, neon McDonald's and White Castle signs. Jubilation over the Oscar Mayer Wienermobile in another exhibit left me in a state of wonder about my fast-food fixation.

Related: 5 National Parks in 7 Days: The Ultimate U.S. Road Trip

Childhood dreams reawakened upon passing Charles Kuralt's RV from the CBS On the Road series. Yearning for a writer's retreat in a camper struck when happening upon a tricked out 1959 VW Westfalia Camper, whereas a replica of a Holiday Inn room circa 1960 made me grateful about the demise of shag carpeting.



A 1959 VW Westfalia Camper (Courtesy: The Henry Ford Museum)

Other modes of transportation also got their due at The Henry Ford, including a 40-year aviation retrospective and a gulp-worthy, 600-ton Allegheny locomotive built in 1941. I lingered onboard the city bus where Rosa Parks's brave actions sparked the Civil Rights Movement.

Two hours later, a Model T delivered me to the living history museum of Greenfield Village. Time had stood still at the 1831-built Eagle Tavern, where I lunched on authentic fare from the era. Afterward, visits followed to Thomas Edison's Menlo Park laboratory, the Wright Brothers' workshop, Firestone Farm, and Henry Ford's childhood home. Had there been more time, I would have ducked into Liberty

Craftworks and visited the IMAX Theatre. The Ford Rouge Factory Tour was closed for renovations, though it is scheduled to reopen on Nov 22.



A Model T takes you to Greenfield Village. (Bill Bowen)

With daylight waning, I headed back to downtown Detroit. On my wish list: seeing the newest project by HGTV's *Rehab Addict* Nicole Curtis on East Grand Boulevard. A thrill went up my spine upon spying a telltale American flag hung by Curtis from the porch. Yes, there are vacant homes in the city. Folks like Curtis, and movements like Write a House, though, are finding ways to bring these architectural gems back to life in meaningful ways.

An unexpected turn landed me on the two-block art

installation known as the Heidelberg Project, the brainchild of Tyree Guyton, who grew up in the neighborhood. The open-air exhibition of found objects has been contributed to by myriad local artisans. It's hard not to be fascinated by the mounds of what many might consider junk. Sadly, some of the exhibits have fallen victim to arson.

Related: A Perfect Day of Shopping in Detroit. Yes, Detroit

My swan song in Detroit concluded 25 stories above the city with dinner at Top of the Pontch. There, I watched the Detroit Princess Riverboat make its way down the revitalized waterfront as Detroit daughter Aretha Franklin's music played in the background.

Ann Arbor

Though I wanted to spend more time in Detroit, the rumble of Milwaukee's Harley-Davidson bikes was calling. The eggplant Nissan set a course on M-14 to I-96 with a stop planned in Ann Arbor.

Just 45 minutes outside of downtown Detroit, the city of Ann Arbor is known as home to the University of Michigan, which has the largest football stadium in the United States. The college town also has definite street cred for its culinary and music scene. I decided to take a snack-sized visit en route to Wisconsin.

With limited time, I pinpointed the downtown area. What caught my eye right away was Literati Bookstore on Washington Street. The smell and feel of books elicited a wave of nostalgia of a time before digital books existed. A stroll down ginkgo-tree-lined sidewalks led to Main Street's plethora of shops and galleries; many, like Pangborn Collection and iT, the boutique, are owned by or showcase local artisans.



*The Ark in Ann Arbor gets a flood of local musicians.
(Courtesy: Ann Arbor Convention and Visitors Bureau)*

A moment of reverence occurred outside The Ark, a hotbed for live music from locals such as Laith Al-Saadi, Dragon Wagon, and Joe Hertler & The Rainbow Seekers. Also frequenting the city's music scene are headliners like B.B. King, Elvis Costello, Jeff Daniels, and Lyle Lovett. Catching

my eye was a fairy-sized replica of the venue's human-sized entrance. Once I noticed this, I saw those fairy and goblin doors throughout the town. Yes, there was magic afoot in Ann Arbor.

Exploring Ann Arbor's much-touted food scene, I decided to bypass the famous Zingerman's Delicatessen in lieu of lunch at Frita Batidos. Word was the Cuban burgers and *batidos* (tropical milkshakes) are out of this world. I can confirm this, along with my own thumbs up for the twice-fried, loaded plantains.



Frita Batidos is famous for its Cuban burgers. (Courtesy: Ann Arbor Area Convention and Visitors Bureau)

A Rider's Guide at The Ann Arbor Area Convention and Visitors Bureau had me itching to go off-map for another

detour. Alas, I had a ferry to catch.

Milwaukee



The Lake Express ferry (Courtesy: Lake Express)

Perhaps it seems counterintuitive to take a ferry ride when road tripping. How better to experience Lake Michigan, though, than by motoring across it? After spending two and a half hours on I-96 and I-94, I found myself doing just that from Lake Express's Muskegon Terminal. The weather was a bit too brisk to take in above-board, so I joined in-the-know locals indoors, where card games and rounds of singing ensued.

Another two and half hours later, the eggplant Nissan rolled off the ferry and into Milwaukee. My ear immediately tuned

in for sounds of Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Following the rumble, I soon found myself at the night's lodgings, the apropos Iron Horse Hotel. The 100-year-old warehouse has seen many incarnations. As a hotel, its name pays homage to the trains that run alongside it (The Native Americans once referred to these as iron horses.) and the motorcycle culture that has arisen from Harley-Davidson, for which the museum is just across the Sixth Street Viaduct.

Related: A Motorcycle Fueled By Bacon Sizzles Across America



The Iron Horse Hotel pays tribute to its city's motorcycle heritage. (Courtesy: The Iron Horse Hotel)

The place to mingle with other guests — an eclectic mix of everyone from business travelers and local 20-somethings to

motorcycle enthusiasts — was over dinner at Smyth. Mulling over a robust beer menu, I settled on a Polish Moon from the Milwaukee Brewing Company paired with bison tartare and goat cheese curds. Happily, one of The Iron Horse's loft guest rooms was just a few floors up when exhaustion set in.



The writer gets a tutorial on how to work a motorcycle at the Harley-Davidson Museum. (Bekah Wright)

The following morning, it was Harley time! Patience not being a virtue, my first order of business was to hop on a motorcycle for a high-speed “ride” via the museum’s Jumpstart Experience Gallery. A staff member talked me through the changing of gears, as I revved the motorcycle to high speed. The roaring sound of the engine was permanently imprinting itself in my memory, while adrenaline coursed

through my veins. Yep, I momentarily got the thrill of being in the saddle.

Undertaking the Back Roads Tour gave me a look into the 111-year odyssey of Harley-Davidson. The Steel Toe portion of the tour, with its robotic arms and high-tech machinery, gave insight into how the brand has evolved from its origins in a meager shack to today's Pilgrim Road Powertrain Operations facility.



A Tsunami motorcycle on display (Courtesy: Harley-Davidson Museum)

Back at the museum, a behind-the-scenes look into the archives included several rolling racks of historically

significant Harleys being stored, or in the process of being restored. In the museum proper, two floors of Harleys captivated. Several I'd been looking forward to seeing – one from the film *Terminator 2*, the other a Tsunami survivor – didn't disappoint. Later, at Motor Bar & Restaurant, heady conversations about motorcycles were underway. All too soon, the day had faded.



The motorcycle used in Terminator 2 (Courtesy: Harley-Davidson Museum)

My road trip ended with penthouse views above Milwaukee from the Potawatomi Hotel & Casino. From the 19th floor, it was possible to see the headlights of vehicles making their way to the Historic Third Ward's Art Walk. And there it was, that siren song of the highway that made me head down to the valet, retrieve the eggplant Nissan, and hit the road again.

Let Yahoo Travel inspire you every day. Hang out with us on Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest.

SEARCH AND SAVE

HOTELS

FLIGHTS

Search over 1,000,000 properties

City

06/12/20

06/14/20

Guests (2)
▼