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Visiting Wisconsin

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Introduction

Welcome to Wisconsin, a state brimming with diverse landscapes, vibrant cities, rich history, and warm hospitality. Located in the upper Midwest of the United States, Wisconsin offers a unique blend of natural beauty and cultural attractions. From the shores of two Great Lakes (Michigan and Superior) to the rolling hills of the Driftless Area, and from the bustling streets of Milwaukee to the tranquil Northwoods, Wisconsin provides a memorable experience for every type of traveler.

Known as "America's Dairyland," the state takes pride in its agricultural heritage, particularly its cheese and dairy products, but it also boasts a strong brewing tradition, deep indigenous roots, and thriving arts scenes. Whether you're seeking outdoor adventures in breathtaking natural settings or indulging in culinary delights at local eateries, Wisconsin promises an unforgettable journey.

For those with a penchant for history and culture, Wisconsin offers a tapestry of museums, historical sites, and vibrant festivals that honor its past and celebrate its community spirit. You can explore architectural wonders, from Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpieces to charming small-town buildings, each telling a unique story.

The state's welcoming nature is not just confined to its landscapes but radiates through its resident's warmth and friendliness. From bustling cities with exciting attractions to the peace and serenity of nature reserves, Wisconsin encourages you to pause, absorb, and cherish the moments spent here.

In this guide, we delve into the heart of each region, highlighting the unique aspects that make Wisconsin a top choice for visitors. We'll guide you through the best times to visit, how to get here and get around, and where to stay, ensuring your adventure is as seamless as it is memorable.

So whether you're planning to hike through picturesque trails, enjoy world-class cheese, or immerse yourself in local arts and culture, Wisconsin invites you with open arms to explore and discover. This guide is your companion as you embark on an enriching journey through the Badger State.

CHAPTER ONE: Getting to Wisconsin

Nestled in the heart of the upper Midwest, Wisconsin presents a welcoming face to visitors, accessible through a well-developed network of air, road, and rail connections. Its position, bordered by two Great Lakes and neighboring states like Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Michigan, makes it a reachable destination whether you're coming from across the country or just over the state line. Choosing how you arrive often depends on where you're coming from, where specifically in Wisconsin you plan to visit, and your preferred balance of speed, cost, and convenience. Fortunately, the options are plentiful, ensuring your journey to the Badger State can be tailored to your needs.

For many travelers, particularly those coming from farther afield, flying is the most practical starting point. Wisconsin is served by a collection of airports ranging from a major international gateway in the southeast to smaller regional hubs providing vital links to other parts of the state. The primary air hub is Milwaukee Mitchell International Airport (MKE), situated just south of the state's largest city. MKE offers a significant number of domestic flights from destinations across the United States, served by all major carriers as well as several budget airlines. Its convenient location makes it the primary choice for visitors heading to Milwaukee itself, the surrounding southeastern Wisconsin region including Racine and Kenosha, or even parts of northern Illinois. The airport is modern, easy to navigate compared to some mega-hubs, and offers good ground transportation links into downtown Milwaukee.

While not as large as Milwaukee's airport, Dane County Regional Airport (MSN) in Madison plays a crucial role, serving the state capital and the south-central region. Hosting flights from numerous major hubs like Chicago, Denver, Atlanta, and Minneapolis, MSN is particularly convenient for those visiting Madison for government business, University of Wisconsin events, or exploring the unique Driftless Area to the west. Its manageable size means quicker passage through security and baggage claim, often making it a preferred choice for travelers whose final destination is closer to Madison than Milwaukee. Airlines serving MSN include major players, offering connectivity across the country.

Further north, Green Bay Austin Straubel International Airport (GRB) serves as the gateway to Northeast Wisconsin. Its most famous association is, of course, with the Green Bay Packers, and the airport sees significant traffic related to game days. Beyond football, GRB is a convenient entry point for visitors heading to the scenic Door County peninsula or exploring the Fox Valley cities like Appleton and Oshkosh. While it primarily offers connections through larger hubs like Chicago, Minneapolis, and Detroit, its strategic location makes it invaluable for accessing this distinct region

of Wisconsin without a lengthy drive from the south.

Beyond these three main airports, several other regional airports dot the Wisconsin map, providing crucial links for smaller cities and specific regions. Appleton International Airport (ATW) directly serves the Fox Cities, a vibrant area known for its paper industry history and events like the EAA AirVenture Oshkosh fly-in. Central Wisconsin Airport (CWA), located between Wausau and Stevens Point, is the key air portal for the central and north-central parts of the state, offering access towards the Wisconsin River Valley and parts of the Northwoods. In the west, La Crosse Regional Airport (LSE) sits picturesquely along the Mississippi River, serving the Coulee Region and providing access to the scenic Great River Road. Chippewa Valley Regional Airport (EAU) in Eau Claire connects the west-central part of the state, a region growing in popularity for its arts scene and outdoor recreation. Finally, for those seeking the deep forests and myriad lakes of the true Northwoods, Rhinelander-Oneida County Airport (RHI) offers essential, albeit often seasonal or limited, service directly into the heart of vacationland. Flying into these smaller airports typically involves a connection through a larger hub but can save significant driving time if your destination lies far from Milwaukee or Madison. When booking flights, always compare the total cost and travel time, factoring in potential drives from larger airports versus the convenience of landing closer to your final stop.

For many visitors, particularly those from neighboring states or seeking the flexibility to explore Wisconsin's diverse landscapes fully, arriving by car is the most appealing option. The state is crisscrossed by a robust Interstate highway system that integrates seamlessly with the national network. The workhorse route is undoubtedly Interstate 94, which slices diagonally across the southern part of the state. Entering from Illinois near Kenosha, I-94 passes directly through Milwaukee and then heads west through Madison before continuing towards Minneapolis-St. Paul in Minnesota. This corridor connects Wisconsin's two largest cities and carries a massive volume of traffic, ranging from commuters near the urban centers to long-distance travelers. The drive offers varied scenery, from the lakefront glimpses near Milwaukee to the rolling agricultural land further west.

Running concurrently with I-94 for a significant stretch between the Illinois border and Madison is Interstate 90. West of Madison, I-90 splits off, angling northwest towards La Crosse and the Minnesota border, eventually heading towards the Pacific Northwest as part of its cross-country route. Southbound from Wisconsin, I-90 provides a direct link towards Chicago and points east. This pair of Interstates, I-94 and I-90, forms the backbone of southern Wisconsin's road network, providing efficient travel across the most populated region.

Connecting Milwaukee northward is Interstate 43. This route begins near Beloit, runs northeast through the Milwaukee metropolitan area, and then follows the Lake Michigan shoreline up to Green Bay. It's a key artery for travel between southeastern

Wisconsin and the Fox Valley/Green Bay area, offering some pleasant stretches with views towards the lake, particularly north of Sheboygan. It provides the most direct freeway link from Milwaukee to the doorstep of Door County.

Traversing the state's central belt from north to south is Interstate 39. Starting near Wausau, it heads south, passing through Stevens Point and Portage before merging with I-90/I-94 near Madison and continuing south towards Rockford, Illinois. I-39 is essential for accessing central Wisconsin destinations and serves as a major route for traffic moving between the upper Midwest and states further south. While perhaps less traveled by tourists than I-94, it opens up the heart of the state, passing through agricultural land and areas bordering the Wisconsin River.

Beyond the Interstates, numerous US Highways and State Trunk Highways provide vital connections into and across Wisconsin. US Highway 51 runs nearly the entire length of the state north-to-south, paralleling I-39 in the south but continuing much further north, deep into the Northwoods, eventually reaching the Michigan border near Hurley. US Highway 41 (much of which is designated as Interstate 41) is the major north-south freeway route through the Fox Valley, connecting Milwaukee through Oshkosh, Appleton, and Green Bay, eventually heading towards Michigan's Upper Peninsula. US Highway 151 offers a diagonal route across the southwest, connecting Dubuque, Iowa, with Madison and Fond du Lac, passing through the heart of the scenic Driftless Area. Driving these routes often offers a more intimate glimpse of the Wisconsin landscape than sticking solely to the Interstates.

Entering Wisconsin by car is generally straightforward. Official Wisconsin Welcome Centers are strategically located on major entry routes, such as I-94 near Kenosha (from Illinois), I-90 near Beloit (from Illinois), I-94 near Hudson (from Minnesota), and US Highway 53 near Superior (from Minnesota). These centers are excellent places to stop for free maps, brochures, travel advice, and restrooms. Unlike some eastern states, Wisconsin does not have a widespread system of toll roads; travel on the Interstates and state highways is typically toll-free. The main exception drivers might encounter involves tollways in neighboring Illinois, particularly when approaching Wisconsin from the Chicago area. Be prepared for potential tolls on the approach, but once you cross the state line, your wallet can generally relax regarding road fees.

Driving in Wisconsin during winter requires special consideration. Snowfall, freezing rain, and ice are common occurrences from November through March, and sometimes even into April. Road conditions can change rapidly. If planning a winter road trip, ensure your vehicle is prepared with appropriate tires, an emergency kit, and check road condition reports before and during your journey. The state's Department of Transportation provides excellent, up-to-date information online and via phone apps regarding road closures, incidents, and weather-related advisories. While road crews are efficient at clearing major highways, winter driving demands extra caution and potentially slower travel times.

For a more relaxed and historically resonant way to arrive, consider traveling by train. Amtrak, the national passenger rail service, operates two key routes through Wisconsin. The most frequently used is the Hiawatha Service, which provides multiple daily round trips between downtown Chicago's Union Station and the Milwaukee Intermodal Station. This route is immensely popular for its convenience, bypassing Chicagoland traffic and offering a comfortable journey of roughly 90 minutes. It's ideal for travelers heading specifically to Milwaukee or connecting from flights into Chicago's O'Hare or Midway airports (requiring a transfer to Union Station). The Milwaukee Intermodal Station is centrally located, offering easy access to downtown hotels, the convention center, and local transit.

The second Amtrak route serving Wisconsin is the long-distance Empire Builder. This legendary train travels daily between Chicago and Seattle/Portland, crossing Wisconsin during its journey. Westbound from Chicago, it stops in Milwaukee, Columbus, Portage, Wisconsin Dells, Tomah, and La Crosse before crossing the Mississippi River into Minnesota. Eastbound trains follow the same route in reverse. The Empire Builder offers a classic train travel experience, complete with sleeper cars and dining options for longer journeys, though the Wisconsin portion is relatively short. It provides a unique way to reach cities like Wisconsin Dells, known for its waterparks, or La Crosse, nestled along the Mississippi. The stretch between Portage and La Crosse offers particularly scenic views as the train follows the Wisconsin River valley and then skirts the majestic bluffs lining the Mississippi. Booking in advance is highly recommended for the Empire Builder, especially during peak travel seasons.

While train service primarily connects larger towns along these specific corridors, it can be effectively combined with other forms of transport. For example, one might take the Hiawatha to Milwaukee and then rent a car to explore further afield, or use the Empire Builder to reach Wisconsin Dells and rely on local shuttles or ride-sharing to access attractions. Train travel offers a different pace, allowing passengers to relax, watch the landscape unfold, and avoid the stresses of driving or airport security.

Budget-conscious travelers might find intercity bus services to be an attractive option for reaching Wisconsin. Companies like Greyhound, Megabus, and regional carriers connect many Wisconsin cities, both large and small, to destinations across the Midwest and the nation. Major hubs for bus services include Milwaukee (often sharing the Intermodal Station with Amtrak), Madison (typically near the university or downtown), Green Bay, Eau Claire, and La Crosse. Bus travel is generally the most economical way to cover long distances, though it often involves longer travel times compared to flying or driving. Schedules and routes vary, with more frequent service along major corridors like the Chicago-Milwaukee-Madison-Minneapolis axis. Buses can reach some smaller towns not served by air or rail, providing a lifeline connection for certain communities. Booking tickets online in advance usually secures the best fares. While onboard amenities have improved over the years, bus travel remains a

functional rather than luxurious way to arrive, best suited for those prioritizing cost savings.

A unique and decidedly scenic way to enter Wisconsin, particularly for those journeying from Michigan, is via the S.S. Badger car ferry. This historic vessel operates seasonally, typically from May to October, sailing across Lake Michigan between Ludington, Michigan, and Manitowoc, Wisconsin. The four-hour cruise is an experience in itself, allowing passengers to bring their cars, RVs, or motorcycles while enjoying views of the vast lake, onboard entertainment, food service, and relaxation. Arriving in Manitowoc places travelers on Wisconsin's eastern shore, well-positioned to explore the Lake Michigan coastline, head towards Green Bay and Door County, or travel inland towards the Fox Valley or central Wisconsin. It bypasses the need to drive around the lake through the congested Chicago area and offers a memorable start or end to a trip. Booking is essential, especially during peak summer months.

For visitors arriving from outside North America, the journey to Wisconsin typically involves flying into a major international gateway first. While Milwaukee Mitchell International (MKE) handles some direct international flights, predominantly from Canada, Mexico, and Caribbean destinations, the vast majority of overseas travelers arrive via larger hubs like Chicago O'Hare (ORD), Minneapolis-St. Paul (MSP), or Detroit (DTW). Chicago O'Hare is particularly significant due to its proximity and the sheer volume of international flights it receives. From ORD, travelers have several options for reaching Wisconsin: connecting to a short domestic flight to MKE, MSN, or another regional airport; taking the Amtrak Hiawatha from Chicago Union Station (requires transit from O'Hare to downtown); utilizing airport shuttle services that run directly to cities like Milwaukee and Madison; or renting a car at O'Hare and driving north, a journey of roughly 1.5 to 2 hours to the Wisconsin border, depending on traffic. Clearing customs and immigration will occur at the first point of entry into the United States, so factor in that time when planning connections.

Choosing the best way to get to Wisconsin ultimately hinges on your starting point, budget, time constraints, and itinerary within the state. Flying offers speed for long distances, landing you directly in or near major population centers. Driving provides unparalleled flexibility for exploring diverse regions at your own pace, especially rural areas, and allows you to bring more luggage or gear. Train travel offers a comfortable and potentially scenic alternative for specific corridors, particularly the busy Chicago-Milwaukee route. Bus travel remains the go-to for maximizing savings, while the Lake Michigan ferry presents a unique, leisurely option from the east. Weighing these factors carefully will help ensure your journey to Wisconsin begins smoothly, setting the stage for an enjoyable visit to the Badger State.

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