



Midwest Traveler

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Explore Illinois' Great River Road

**Springtime
discoveries in
Alton, Grafton,
and Elsah**

Surprising Southern Illinois



Opposite: The Grafton Sky Tour Aerial Lift provides stunning views of the region.

Left: Lake Lou Yaeger in Litchfield offers a great place for kayaking, fishing, and more.

Below: Trails and a scenic drive showcase the 8,000 picturesque acres of Pere Marquette State Park.

pies, crossed two rope bridges, and enjoyed glorious wooded views. Best of all, a group of strangers became a team, supporting and challenging each other to learn and grow.

Triumphant, exhilarated, and eager to keep two feet solidly on the ground, we headed to the Loading Dock, one of several eateries in Grafton, to celebrate our achievement and toast our new bonds. The surprise bonus was live music, people-watching, and majestic views of the Mississippi River from the restaurant's patio.

Not only is it home to several restaurants and gift shops, including Uncle Andy's Country Market, it now boasts the new Grafton Sky Tour Aerial Lift. Enclosed gondolas and open-air chair lifts take visitors 300 feet up to Aerie's Resort, treating them to 360-degree views of the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, blooming hillsides, and chalky river bluffs. On the ride up to the resort and winery, check out spring redbuds, dogwoods, and tulip trees.

Folks who want to get on the river can hop on the *Hakuna Matata* passenger boat at the Grafton harbor for a Mississippi and Illinois river cruise. Landlubbers might choose to bike along Illinois Route 100 (the Great River Road), stop in at several regional wineries, or explore nearby Pere Marquette State Park, which offers a variety of hiking and biking trails, including a portion of Sam Vadalabene Bike Trail. Named after a state senator, the 20-mile trail connects Alton, Illinois, to the park. One of the largest and most beautiful parks in the bi-state area, be sure to see the historical lodge and restaurant built during the Depression by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

In fact, the entire Great Rivers & Routes region—which encompasses Calhoun, Greene, Jersey, Macoupin, Madison, and Montgomery counties—is rich with activities for people seeking new adventures this spring.

"There's something new every season, and something for every interest," says Stephanie Tate, marketing and communications director with the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau. "What's especially attractive is that this abundance is at the doorstep of so many people in the bi-state area."

JUST OVER THE BRIDGE

Visitors from the St. Louis area should first stop at the Audubon Center at Riverlands, a migratory bird sanctuary,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY MARTY MCKAY; JOHN LOCUS; ANDREW DOBSON/GREAT RIVERS & ROUTES

Plan a spring road trip along the Great River Road and surrounding area to discover an eclectic collection of attractions, activities, and outdoor experiences.

BY BARBARA ANDERSON

On a cool, gray Sunday afternoon, my son's girlfriend and I found ourselves headed toward Grafton, Illinois, just north of St. Louis, propelled by a drive to push the boundaries of my impending 60th birthday to do the unexpected.

A couple of hours later, I was 20 feet in the air, peering over the edge of my newfound resolution toward the treetops below, reminding myself over and over and over again: "Be bold!"

With that, I grabbed the handles of my harness and jumped from the platform. Trees streaked by, but I only had eyes for the landing pad 700 feet away. Seconds later, I was safely on the other side, my first ziplining experience complete and my confidence building.

Buoyed by adrenaline, our group spent the next two hours zipping through the seven cabled pathways that make up Grafton Zipline Adventures at Aerie's Resort. Our guides quieted our qualms, coached and cajoled, and checked and re-checked our safety harnesses. We traveled at speeds up to 45 mph through treetop cano-



just off U.S. Highway 67. If you've crossed over the Clark Bridge, you've missed it. At Riverlands, you can watch white pelicans that migrate to this area in the spring and fall. Hike trails and enjoy indoor exhibits.

Continue into Alton, birthplace of Grammy award-winning jazz musician Miles Davis, to sample its many restaurants and shops. Jazz fans can check out a rare statue of Davis on West Third Street. Other Instagram-worthy sites include Lincoln-Douglas Square at Broadway and Landmarks Boulevard. It pays tribute to the final senatorial debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas held in Alton in 1858.

From Alton, you have a number of great choices to continue your exploration.

Go north along the Illinois Route 100 to step back in time in the historical Village of Elsah. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Elsah, Illinois, is dotted with colorful and beautifully preserved homes that date back to the mid-1800s when the town was the primary shipping point for produce and grains grown in Jersey County. When visiting in April, try to catch the local photo exhibit at the village museum on April 25 and 26.

Pick up U.S. Highway 67 from Alton and drive about six miles north to Godfrey, Illinois. Here you'll find the Nature Institute's Olin Nature Preserve, a 294-acre preserve with native woodlands, prairie grass, streams, and a waterfall. It offers hiking trails and grand views of the Mississippi River. More than 150 species of nesting and migratory birds call the preserve home.



Above left: At Grafton Zipline Adventures, guests fly through the treetop canopy and cross rope bridges.

Above: The Audubon Center at Riverlands features indoor exhibits and outdoor trails to see area wildlife, like white pelicans and a host of other migratory birds.

Left: The 20-mile Sam Vadalabene Bike Trail connects Alton with Pere Marquette State Park.

About an hour's drive northeast of Alton via state Highway 140 and Interstate 55 will bring you to Litchfield, Illinois, home to Lake Lou Yaeger, a 1,300-acre reservoir that offers boating, kayaking, canoeing, and fishing. There is plenty of Route 66 history in this area, so you might prefer to cruise historical Route 66 that passes through town. Stop for sandwiches, steaks, pasta, and other fare at the Ariston Café, one of the oldest Route 66 restaurants in continuous operation. Visit at the Litchfield Museum and Route 66 Welcome Center to learn how this artery helped to shape U.S. history.

In the spirit of exploration, I decided on a whim to take the Brussels Ferry and the Golden Eagle Ferry home to St. Charles, Missouri. Behind us, Grafton and the river shore glowed in the late afternoon sun.

Regardless of the direction you take, you can be certain of one thing: The Great Rivers & Routes region delivers on the eye-opening and the delightful. ●

Barbara Anderson is a contributor from St. Charles, Missouri.

FOR MORE INFO Contact Great Rivers & Routes at (800) 258-6645 or click on riversandroutes.com. The Loading Dock in Grafton is open weekends in March and daily starting in April through October. Another ferry in the area, Grafton Ferry, docks at Portage des Sioux, Missouri, near Missouri Highway 94 in St. Charles County. Your AAA Travel professional can help you plan a day trip or a longer visit to the Alton area. A list of offices to serve you is on page 8 or visit AAA.com/travel for resources such as travel guides and TripTiks.