

Rockford, Illinois, Is an Outdoor Haven Perfect for a Weekend Escape From Chicago

TRAVEL ILLINOIS, UNITED STATES

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The largest city in Illinois outside of the Chicagoland area, Rockford offers beautiful landscapes and plenty of family-friendly adventures that make it a great destination for people who love the outdoors. The city and Winnebago County have more than 10,000 acres of protected recreational land, as well as 42 forest preserves for hiking, camping, fishing, and kayaking. It's no wonder Rockford's nicknames are Forest City and City of Gardens.

If you're looking for a Midwest vacation where you can immerse yourself in the great outdoors, here's how to make the most of Rockford, Illinois.

What to do in Rockford



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Anderson Japanese Gardens: What started as a backyard project for the Anderson family is now one of the top Japanese gardens in the United States. It's tucked into a hillside near the Rock River, and offers 12 acres of stunning landscape to take in. There are streams, waterfalls, trees, shrubs, flowers, and winding pathways to explore. Don't forget to snag a bag of fish food

before heading out on your garden walk — the koi in both of the property’s ponds are eager to greet you while they snack.

This is also a great spot for brunch with a lovely view overlooking the property. Fresco in the Garden has a brunch menu with options like chorizo and egg hash, salmon Oscar, and a fruit and yogurt parfait served in half of a pineapple.

Rock River Recreation Path: This 10-mile trail runs along the Rock River. It’s a community hub for outdoor recreation, whether you’re walking a dog, going for a jog, or teaching your kiddo how to ride a bike. The path runs from downtown Rockford north to the MercyRockford SportsCore 1 at Loves Park. The grounds just outside of the Nicholas Conservatory are particularly lovely as you can make a pit stop to wander through the stunning rose garden. There are several other spots to stop and play along the way, along with local food trucks.



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Nicholas Conservatory and Gardens: The conservatory is located right next to the Rock River, but one foot inside and you’ll be transported to the tropics. The 11,000-square-foot space is filled with an impressive variety of vegetation that towers to the ceiling. There are orchids, palms, lipstick plants, papaya trees, and elephant ears bigger than a child. There are also relaxing water features, benches, and sculptures, making it a wonderful spot for quiet reflection. The eclipse lagoon outside (keep your eyes out for the resident swans) connects the conservatory to the nearby Sinnissippi Rose Garden.

Atwood Park Silent Sports Trail System: Several years in the making, this trail system will feature some 20 miles of interconnected trails on both the north and south sides of the Kishwaukee River when fully complete. The trails are multi-use (hiking, biking, and cross-country skiing) but are perhaps best loved by bikers — especially those with fat tire bikes. The trails weave through the woods and wind up and down the hillside, along ravines, and across the prairie. Be sure to check out the trail guide before heading out to find the right difficulty rating of the route to match your skill level.

Skip Ad

West Rock Wake Park: You don't need a boat to wakeboard or water ski in the heart of Rockford. Thanks to the cable pulley system set up at Levings Lake, you can hop in the water, hold on, and go. The course is great for every skill level and age, with a training course for beginners and a more advanced loop course for people who are more experienced and want to hit the jumps. Reservations are required, so check the website before heading out.

Burpee Museum of Natural History: Fascinating displays of the geological history of Rockford and the surrounding area are on full display here. It's where you'll find Jane, the world's most complete and best-preserved juvenile T. rex. The 21-foot skeleton and surrounding exhibit offer fascinating insights into what the region was like some 66 million years ago. There are three other floors of the museum to explore, including live animals like turtles, snakes, and beetles in the SPROUTS Learning Lab.

Connected via tunnel to the Burpee Museum is the Rockford Art Museum, which has pieces that show a diverse glimpse into Chicago Imagist art and early 19th and 20th century artists all the way up through modern Midwest creators of today.



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Rock Cut State Park: On the northeast side of the city about a 20-minute drive from downtown Rockford is Rock Cut State Park. With nearly 3,100 acres of forested hiking trails, two lakes, and 270 campsites to choose from, this is a well-known destination for those looking to appreciate everything about the great outdoors. You can rent bikes and motorboats while in the park. It's a great spot for horseback riding and wildlife watching. It's also a prime location for spending time outdoors in cold weather months if you're interested in ice fishing, cross-country skiing, and ice skating.

Where to eat and drink in Rockford

Prairie Street Brewing Company: Situated right on the banks of the Rock River, restoration of the historic brewery building began a decade ago. Today, it offers fantastic ambience for dining whether you're inside the building or out on the dock. Snag a flight of the craft beer and an order of cheese curds while you decide what to have for your main meal.

Rockford City Market: A favorite summertime tradition in Rockford is the City Market on Friday nights. There are more than 70 vendors and food trucks that set up shop here, most of which offer something tasty to eat or drink. You can try crepes, cake in a cup, vegan treats, cantina tacos, wood-fired pizza, and much, much more. There's also fresh produce, honey, and cheese as well as handmade items and jewelry. Find a spot under the pavilion in the heart of downtown Rockford and enjoy your market treats and a local brew while listening to live music.

The neighborhood surrounding the market is chock full of locally owned shops with friendly owners. Pop into 317 Art Collective to view an eclectic mix of modern art by local artists. Rockford Art Deli features custom eco-conscious screen-printed t-shirts as well as hats and other branded apparel. 510 Threads is a lovely fashion-forward women's boutique. And at Bath & Body Fusion you can find locally made bath bombs and body butters galore.

The Norwegian: This is a can't miss spot for breakfast in Rockford. The restaurant's Nordic design is charming and welcoming, and the food is delicious. Be sure to sample the Æbleskiver (Danish pancake balls served with maple syrup and house-made raspberry jam) and the Swedish cinnamon knot. Plus, the croque madame, sourdough waffles, and salmon and egg are excellent choices to start your day. The Norwegian is also open for lunch and dinner (limited hours and menu), occasionally hosts live music, and has a fabulous pergola-covered patio.

Barnstormer Distillery: A visit to Barnstormer Distillery is like a walk in the park, but with really tasty cocktails. Owners Tim and Addie Ford are as friendly as can be. They've created whiskeys, vodkas, rums, and more. You can sample many of the spirits in their new hangar-style bar. Open on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, you can stop by for samples, drinks, and bottle sales. You will also likely find a local food truck, like Batchz BBQ which dishes out delectable barbeque sandwiches and nachos, parked right outside the hanger. Plus, local musicians provide entertainment. The ambience of the whole property is enchanting. The distillery is set on 22 acres, and some of the ingredients for their craft liquors and craft cocktails are grown on the grounds. Make time to wander through the pine trees.

Octane: This spot has been a fixture on the Rockford dining scene for some 20 years. The menu blends global cuisine with down home, satisfying meals, all creatively plated. Try out the flavorful selection of baos and ramen dishes or the modern TV dinner. The fried chickpeas and sweet corn elotes are a great way to start your meal. And the espresso martini comes highly recommended.

Gelato Joe's: If you're a fan of gelato or sorbet, make a plan to stop at Gelato Joe's. The creamy flavors are the perfect sweet treat to cap off the day as you savor your choice on the patio under the string lights. Check the flavor list before you go, but you'll likely find everything from strawberry, raspberry, lemon basil, and pistachio, to velvet caramel vanilla, mocha crunch, and tiramisu.

Candy Cloud: This spot is known for colorful desserts and drinks. What started as a cotton candy stand at the city market has transformed into a store front that whips up coffee drinks and sweet treats right before your eyes. The layered ice cream options are divine, with bits of boba, cake, or doughnut mixed in. The coffee drinks and revivers are caffeine boosts. And the specialty drinks, which change seasonally, are just plain fun.

Where to stay in Rockford

We hope you love the spaces we recommend! Just so you know, Matador may collect a small commission from the links on this page if you decide to book a stay.

Embassy Suites by Hilton Rockford Riverfront: A former cabinet hardware factory has been transformed into a 12-story industrial chic hotel situated on the riverfront in the heart of Rockford. The Riverside Embassy Suites opened in 2020 and offers the perfect spot to stay while in town, and includes a complimentary happy hour and made-to-order breakfast. Make sure to head up to The Top Rooftop Bar & Lounge to grab appetizers and a cocktail. The rooftop offers a stunning panoramic view of the city and is an ideal spot to watch the sunset.

How to get to Rockford, Illinois

Rockford is about 90 miles northwest of Chicago. It's also just an hour south of Madison, Wisconsin, and about an hour and a half from Milwaukee. If you're looking to travel by air, you can fly into Chicago Rockford International Airport.

How to get around

Rockford is a pretty easy city to navigate. Downtown is walkable on both sides of the Rock River, and by foot is the best way to take in the many colorful murals on the sides of buildings. Bikes are another convenient way to get around, though there's plenty of parking if you drive. You'll want to have a vehicle to get to the outdoor destinations beyond those right near the Rock River in downtown. 🚗