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THIS MONTH'S TOC

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## 52 Great American Weekends (under \$200)

*An entire year's worth of affordable, action-packed getaways in every state of the union*

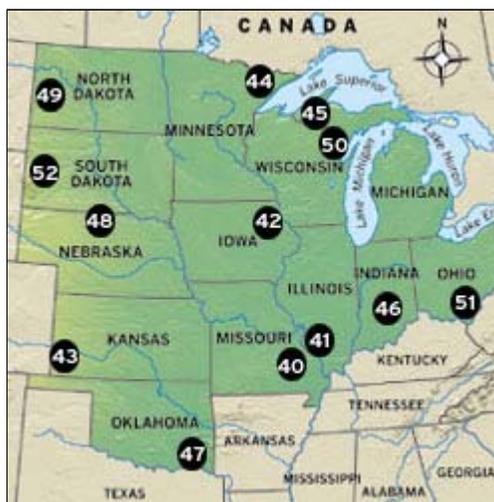
### MIDWEST

*Between the mountain biking, spelunking, and ice fishing, you'll never call it the flyover zone again.* By Jason Daley

#### 40 SCUBA DIVING

##### Bonne Terre Mine, Missouri

Below the Ozark burg of Bonne Terre lies a gigantic former lead mine that filled with more than a billion gallons of gin-clear water after it was shut down in 1961. West End Diving leads 24 dive trails with 100 feet of visibility and a 600,000-watt lighting system -- perfect for spooky year-round views of abandoned mining equipment (\$65 per dive; 314-209-7200; [2dive.com](http://2dive.com)). Victorian Veranda Bed & Breakfast provides hearty, pre-dive breakfasts (\$85; 800-343-1134). **SPLURGE** Sign on for a five-dive, two-night package with West End for \$400.



#### 41 SPELUNKING

##### Illinois Caverns, Illinois

Most of the caves in Huck Finn country are dolled up with walkways and pastel lights, or require spelunking expertise. But Illinois Caverns, 40 miles south of St. Louis, is one of the few wild ones you can visit without prior training. Wade through subterranean passages by the beam of your own headlamp, and glimpse stalactites and endangered cave critters like the Illinois cave amphipod. Wash off at the Swans Court Bed & Breakfast in Belleville, 30 miles to the north (\$69; 618-233-0779). **SPLURGE** Head two hours north of the caves to the Pere Marquette Lodge, where a 700-ton fireplace will keep you warm as you feast on family-style catfish and fried chicken dinners (\$101; 618-786-2331).

#### 42 MOUNTAIN BIKING

##### Little Switzerland, Iowa

The area of eastern Iowa along the Mississippi River, nicknamed Little Switzerland, is steep, forested, and relatively corn-free. Base yourself in Iowa's mountain-biking capital, Decorah, and spend day one grinding your gears on the town's 12-mile network of undulating technical single- and doubletrack. The next day head to Yellow River State Forest, where 20 miles of trails wind along the state's best trout streams. Finish up on the 25 miles of doubletrack in the Volga River State Recreation Area. Set up camp at the Pulpit Rock campground (\$10; 563-382-9551). **SPLURGE** Base yourself at the Hotel Winneshiek (from \$104 for a deluxe room, \$114 for a deluxe whirlpool room; 800-998-4164; [hotelwinn.com](http://hotelwinn.com)).

#### 43 HIKING

##### Santa Fe Trail, Kansas

All that's left of the old wagon route from Kansas to New Mexico is wheel ruts winding

across the prairie -- but it's enough to give you a feel for the pioneer interstate. Begin your hike three miles northeast of Wilburton Crossing, at the Conestoga Trailhead, where 23 miles of the Santa Fe Trail cut across the plains of fading sagebrush in the Cimarron National Grassland. Camp for \$7 at the Cimarron Recreation Area (620-697-4621).

**SPLURGE** Rent a car in Salina (from \$32; 800-654-3131; [hertz.com](http://hertz.com)) and drive through Smokey Hill country to see limestone barns and houses, and October's fiery colors.

#### 44 DOGSLEDDING

##### North Country, Minnesota

Summer is only a fleeting illusion in northern Minnesota. To really know the place, visit when the big white five-month blanket has descended. The best way to explore the frozen lakes and dense boreal forest of northern Minnesota is to mush along with man's best friend. The guides at Gateway North Outfitters, located in Ely, will keep you from getting twisted up in the gang lines (\$175 for a day trip; 800-280-2359; [gatewaynorthoutfitters.com](http://gatewaynorthoutfitters.com)). Warm up at Ely's Adventure Inn (from \$50; 218-365-3140; [ely-motel.com](http://ely-motel.com)).

**SPLURGE** Shell out \$875 for a four-night, lodge-to-lodge dogsledding trip, starting in mid-December (218-365-6022; [dogsledding.com](http://dogsledding.com)).

#### 45 CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

##### Porcupine Mountain Wilderness State Park, Michigan

This 60,000-acre swath of the Upper Peninsula gives a taste of elevation in the Midwest's flatlands. Forty-two miles of cross-country trails -- some along Lake Superior -- are interspersed with cabins (\$35; 906-885-5275).

#### 46 SPELUNKING

##### The Shaft, Indiana

About 2,500 caves riddle the underground wilderness between Bloomington and the Ohio River. Sign up with Earth Adventures to submerge yourself among bats, salamanders, and blind fish (\$25; 260-424-1420; [earthadventures.com](http://earthadventures.com)). After resurfacing, check into a cabin at Abe Martin Lodge in nearby Brown County State Park (\$58; 812-988-4418).

#### 47 HIKING

##### Ouachita National Recreation Trail, Oklahoma

Oklahoma's cow patty-flat reputation takes a beating on this 222-mile mountain path, which traces the Oklahoma-Arkansas border. Set aside three long days, pitching your tent anywhere (501-321-5202).

#### 48 CANOEING

##### Niobrara River, Nebraska

Six ecosystems -- including three types of prairie and boreal forest -- vie for attention on the banks of the Niobrara National Scenic River in Nebraska. The river, only knee or waist deep in most spots, tips over 90 waterfalls and glides through a 100-foot canyon full of elk and bison. Start your two-day, 30-mile trip at the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge (canoe rental for \$47 per day at Dryland Aquatics; 800-337-3119; [drylandaquatics.com](http://drylandaquatics.com)). The campground on Fritz's Island has showers and a convenience store (\$15; 877-700-3791 or [campniobrara.com](http://campniobrara.com)).

**SPLURGE** Take a two-day inn-to-inn kayaking trip on the last free-flowing stretch of the Missouri with Missouri River Expeditions (\$750 for two; 605-360-2646; [missriverexp.com](http://missriverexp.com)).

#### 49 MOUNTAIN BIKING

##### Maah Daah Hey Trail, North Dakota

Even without the elk and bighorn sheep, the 97-mile Maah Daah Hey Trail would be a scenic ride: The trail bisects rolling prairies with 360-degree views. You can try to tackle the trail in two or three days, starting at the CCC campground in McKenzie

County (bike rentals for \$45 per day at Dakota Cyclery West; 701-623-4808; [dakotacyclery.com](http://dakotacyclery.com)). Rent a bike trailer and camp at one of the four established free sites along the path.

**SPLURGE** For \$550 Dakota Cyclery will drop you at the trailhead and shuttle food, water, and tents for a three-day ride.

### 50 ICE FISHING

#### Eagle River, Wisconsin

More than 25 percent of the fish caught in Wisconsin are nabbed when the lakes have frozen over, which tells you how popular ice fishing is in dairy country. One of the choicest areas to auger a hole is around Eagle River, where walleye, bass, and perch swim in the area's 1,300 lakes and 73 rivers and streams (jig pole and tip-up rentals from \$40 at Eagle Sports Center, 715-479-8804; [eaglesportscenter.com](http://eaglesportscenter.com)).

Snag a room at the Eagle River Inn (from \$65; 866-479-2060; [eagleriver-inn.com](http://eagleriver-inn.com)).

**SPLURGE** Jim Stanzil will guide you and your friends through a day of walleye fishing (\$250; 715-546-4126; [jimstanzilfishingguide.com](http://jimstanzilfishingguide.com)).

### 51 BACKPACKING

#### Buckeye Trail, Ohio

When it comes to convenience, the Buckeye has the Appalachian Trail beat: You finish where you began, after a 1,300-mile loop along surprisingly hilly terrain and past the historic Miami-Erie Canal and monuments. A favorite weekend-size section (about 60 miles total) lies in southeastern Ohio, beginning in Tar Hollow State Forest and winding northeast toward Pike State Forest. The route crosses through Scioto Trail State Park, where hikers can hunt for morel mushrooms, fish for trout, and canoe on Caldwell and Stewart Lakes. North of Scioto, the Hocking Hills region, pocked with terraced waterfalls and narrow slot canyons, is a great spot to camp (\$20 per night; 740-385-6841; for trail info, [buckeyetrail.org](http://buckeyetrail.org)).

**SPLURGE** Reserve the Strong Wolf, a 19th century-style log cabin, at the Inn at Cedar Falls, near Hocking Hills (\$245; 800-653-2557).

### 52 MOUNTAIN BIKING

#### Black Hills, South Dakota

This is the Moab of the Great Plains -- hundreds of miles of technical singletrack and rail trails winding through Black Hills National Forest and Custer State Park (bike rentals for \$25 per day at Trailside Bikes; 605-673-5526; [trailsidebikes.com](http://trailsidebikes.com)). Warm up your quads on the George S. Mickelson Trail, a 114-mile rail trail that goes from Deadwood to Edgemont, or try the northern or southern end of the classic 111-mile Centennial Trail, a tough ribbon of singletrack that hits some of South Dakota's best parks, including Wind Cave, Bear Butte, and Custer, where you can camp out with the buffalo (\$15; [custerstatepark.info](http://custerstatepark.info)).

**SPLURGE** Sign up for Trailside Bike's custom tours, such as an all-frills, five-day inn-to-inn fat-tire tour along the entire Mickelson Trail (from \$400).

Click here for more weekend getaways: [WEST](#) | [SOUTH](#) | [NORTHEAST](#)

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