

## MIDWEST TRAVELER

## Sanctuary in southwestern Wis.

Kickapoo Valley Ranch has fall colors, a wealth of recreation nearby — and no mosquitoes.

By MELANIE McMANUS  
Special to the Star Tribune

Wispy tendrils of fog loosely curl around the Ocooch Mountains, which suddenly — and strikingly — pop up on the horizon. Ed and I are mesmerized. We've traveled over nearly every inch of Wisconsin and have seen many beautiful sights, but nothing quite like this. The mountains, which are really a thick cluster of forested bluffs, appear perfectly rounded and resemble scoops of chocolate ice cream in the darkening night. As we drive along the serpentine country road, the Ocooch ice cream scoops on either side, I hope we reach the ranch before night's inky curtain falls. Cowboy Joe said if we didn't, it might be difficult to find the place.

The "place" is Kickapoo Valley Ranch, a clutch of eight cabins snuggled up against the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, 8,600 acres of public land in southwestern Wisconsin's Driftless Region. The ranch is touted as a sanctuary — a tranquil, beautiful spot, perfect for unwinding. No activities are offered, and cabins lack television reception, daily maid service, phones or bathrobes. What is included, according to the ranch's website, is a comfy bed, kitchen or kitchenette, and handcrafted Nantucket rockers on your cabin's expansive back porch.

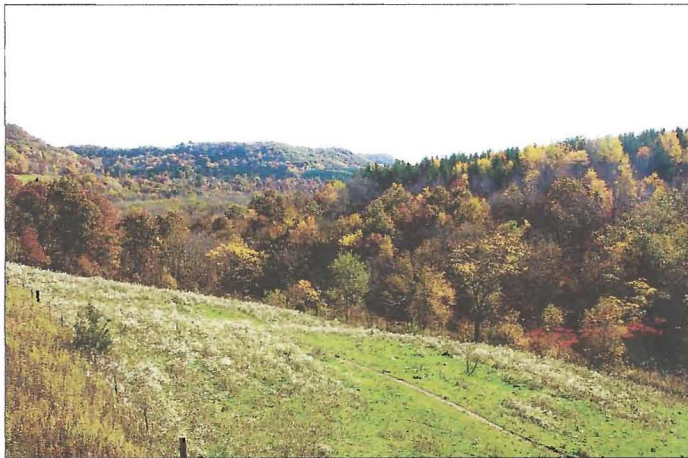
We reach the ranch just as the sun plops out of sight, then crunch along a small gravel walkway past a pen of llamas to reach the office. Cowboy Joe, aka co-owner Joseph Rogan-Nordstrom, is waiting for us. He gives us a key to the Big Sky Getaway, a spacious cabin that pairs handmade quilts with fine Egyptian-cotton linens. Then he dispenses pointers to help us enjoy our stay: The Kickapoo Valley Reserve offers a wealth of recreation. There are some great Amish gift shops in the area. The Driftless Cafe in nearby Viroqua, Wis., serves the best food within 300 miles. And there are no mosquitoes here on the ranch.

"No mosquitoes?" I raise an eyebrow.

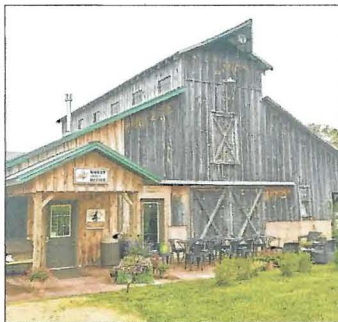
"I'm not saying there aren't any at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve," says Cowboy Joe. "But because of the up-and-down terrain here, we have no standing water, and so no mosquitoes."

I don't quite believe him. This is Wisconsin, after all.

The Big Sky Getaway cabin is large, clean and well-



The Kickapoo Valley Reserve in southwestern Wisconsin has more than 50 miles of trails through the so-called Ocooch Mountains.



Kickapoo Valley Ranch's office includes an on-site bakery.

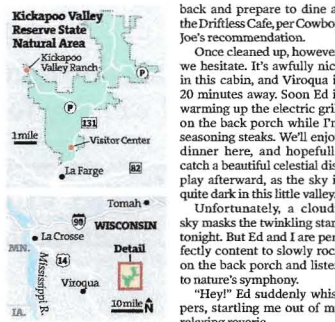
appointed (Cowboy Joe is an interior designer). Ed immediately finds four plump double-chocolate-chip-with-walnut cookies, and downs one within seconds. The cookies are a gift from Cowboy David Rogan-Nordstrom, the ranch's other co-owner. Cowboy David now operates a bakery on-site and creates gourmet cookies, cakes, cupcakes and muffins. They've been extremely popular with guests since the ranch's opening in 2003.

The next morning, comfortably ensconced in the giant rocker on our cabin's back porch, I want to linger rather than get the day started. But if we're to explore more than a sliver of the reserve, it's time to get going. Reluctantly I set down the mug of coffee I'm clutching and we head out.

#### Impressive reserve

The reserve, opened in 2001, has an interesting history. Its acreage is dominated by the Kickapoo River and its tributaries, pretty trimmed by towering bluffs and sandstone outcroppings. The river is a canoeist's dream, as it gently meanders across the terrain. But it's prone to flooding. The reserve property was originally set aside for a flood-control project that included the creation of a dam and recreational lake. But in 1973, it was halted due to environmental and economic concerns. The land lay unused for 20 years before its rebirth as the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, a perfect spot for canoeing, fishing, hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, skiing, snowshoeing and more.

Some 50 miles of trail wind through the reserve, one of



Source: maps4news.com HERE

back and prepare to dine at the Driftless Cafe, per Cowboy Joe's recommendation.

Once cleaned up, however, we hesitate. It's awfully nice in this cabin, and Viroqua is 20 minutes away. Soon Ed is warming up the electric grill on the back porch while I'm seasoning steaks. We'll enjoy dinner here, and hopefully catch a beautiful celestial display afterward, as the sky is quite dark in this little valley. Unfortunately, a cloudy sky masks the twinkling stars tonight. But Ed and I are perfectly content to slowly rock on the back porch and listen to nature's symphony.

"Hey!" Ed suddenly whispers, startling me out of my relaxing reverie.

"What?"

"Cowboy Joe was right — there hasn't been one mosquito out here all night."

That alone is worth a return trip.

#### Getting there

Kickapoo Valley Ranch is about 200 miles or 3½ hours southeast of the Twin Cities. It's an hour east of La Crosse, Wis., or an hour south of Tomah, Wis., via state and county roads.

#### More information

**Kickapoo Valley Ranch:** King and queen cabins starting at \$169-\$219; kvranch.com or 1-608-625-6222.

**Kickapoo Valley Reserve:** kvr.state.wis.us or 1-608-625-2960.

**Wisconsin Fall Color Report:** travel.wisconsin.com.

Radzicki McManus, of Sun Prairie, Wis., writes about travel and fitness.

## QUICK TRIPS

#### Crosslake

**CROSSLAKE, MINN.** Stop by **Crosslake Days** Thu.-Sat. in the Brainerd Lakes area to check out live music and dancing, an outdoor movie (all Fri.); a classic car/motorcycle and tractor show (9 a.m.-3 p.m. Sat.); chili cookoff samples (noon Sat.), plus other activities including a historic log village with a cider and candlelight tour, horse and wagon rides, disc golf, wine tasting and arts and crafts. [tinyurl.com/8c99jv](http://tinyurl.com/8c99jv); 1-800-450-2838.

#### Albert Lea

**ALBERT LEA, MINN.** Relive the pioneer era during the **30th Annual Big Island Rendezvous and Festival**, the state's largest fur-trade re-enactment, Oct. 1-2 in Albert Lea, Minn. The weekend features more than 1,000 costumed performers, demonstrations, crafts, storytelling, music, food and other activities. Hours are 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Sat., 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Sun. Admission is \$12, \$7 for ages 6 to 11. [bigislandfestival.org](http://bigislandfestival.org); 1-800-658-2526.

#### Duluth

#### DULUTH

Fans of fright, get ready for the annual **Haunted Ship Tons** in October aboard the retired ore carrier William A. Irvin. Visitors will walk the eerie decks to experience ghosts, ghouls, haunting sounds and a dark maze in the ship's hull beginning Oct. 6. The event continues weekends and select days through Oct. 31. Admission is \$12; ages 12 and under must be accompanied by a parent. Bring a canned good to get \$2 off. Cash and checks only. [duluthhauntedship.com](http://duluthhauntedship.com).

COLLEEN A. COLES

#### VIEWFINDERS EXUMA, THE BAHAMAS

## Reader shows off a real Bahamian star

**THE TRAVELER:** Zach Stadler of Northfield.

**THE SCENE:** A starfish rests on rippled sand in shallow, aqua waters of the Exuma Cays, part of the Exumas, the Bahamas.

**THE DESTINATION:** The Exumas contain about 365 islands; the largest of them is Great Exuma, where the capital city of the district, George Town, is located. An international airport is also located on the island, and Nassau is nearby. During more than a week of kayaking 120 miles in the Exuma Cays, Stadler didn't come in contact with a single person. "The water is so clear, there are hundreds of small untouched islands and the marine life is still very healthy," he wrote in an e-mail.

**HOW I GOT THIS SHOT:** Stadler used an Olympus OM-D E-M5 with a 9-18mm wide-angle lens, all encased in underwater housing. He likes the photo for "the vibrant colors of the starfish and how they disappear in the surface of the water."

**ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY:** Stadler wrote, "Over the last few years, I have had the pleasure of traveling to some of the most exotic destinations in the world. With the territory, I quickly developed a love for the ocean and photography naturally became my tool for capturing my surreal experiences both in and out of the water."

**SHARE YOUR PHOTOS:** To submit your travel photo for consideration to Viewfinders, share it on Instagram tagged with #STTravel, or e-mail a jpeg to [viewfinders@startribune.com](mailto:viewfinders@startribune.com).

