

# Writing - It's My Thing

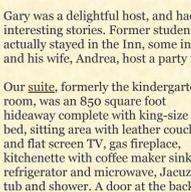
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2011

### Want a great weekend getaway? Try Southern Illinois.

I think the furthest south I've ever been in Illinois isn't even technically Illinois - St. Louis is about as far as I've gotten. I had heard that there was some amazing hiking and beauty in Southern Illinois, but it always seemed so... far.

It's really not. And it's well worth the 4-1/2 hour drive.

We left late Friday morning and began our trek. The weather was beautiful on this bright October day. The sun reflected on the changing trees, and the further south we drove, the more colorful they became. The flat plains of Central Illinois gave way to rolling hills and breathtaking landscape. We could almost feel ourselves breathe a relaxing sigh as we made our way to our home away from home for the weekend, [The Davie School Inn](#) in Ama, IL.



The Davie School Inn was built in 1910 and served as a public school until 1996. The proprietors, Gary and Andrea Dahmer, bought the schoolhouse in 2002 and completed renovations in 2006. Each classroom has been turned into a suite - 11 in all. What's amazing is that many modern conveniences as there are (fireplaces, Jacuzzi tubs, kitchenettes and private baths), they still managed to keep the atmosphere of the old schoolhouse. Many rooms still have the original hardwood floors and chalkboards. School desks and even the original water fountains still remain.

Gary was a delightful host, and had excellent recommendations as well as interesting stories. Former students and teachers from the school had actually stayed in the Inn, some in their old classrooms. Every year, Gary and his wife, Andrea, host a party for alumni, the oldest a spiry 103 years.

Our suite, formerly the kindergarten room, was an 850 square foot hideaway complete with king-size bed, sitting area with leather couch and flat screen TV, gas fireplace, kitchenette with coffee maker sink, refrigerator and microwave, Jacuzzi tub and shower. A door at the back headed out to a small patio amidst mature trees. The room itself was decorated with lovely antiques, but still had a modern quality that made it quaint and comfortable.



We checked in and had an informative conversation with Gary, who gave us hiking and biking recommendations as well as some restaurant don't-misses. We headed out late in the afternoon and drove north to [Giant City State Park](#), an impressive 4,000 acre wilderness paradise. Unfortunately, the Visitor's Center was closed, so we made our way to the lodge to ask for directions. We're not sure if we got on the right trail or not - we think not, but we did enjoy several miles of "Horse Trail", minus the sidestepping of equine poop. After some precarious rocky terrain, we came upon some impressive sandstone structures that almost looked like meteors dropped from the sky. We made it back just before nightfall and were given a farewell by an ornery screech owl, who scared the daylight out of me.

Ready for some sustenance, we headed to the [Blue Boar Restaurant](#), which had been recommended to us. After taking a wrong turn down a gravel path (according to the picture on the GPS, we dropped off the face of the earth), we finally drove down a windy road and saw a small, 8 x 10 paper sign with an arrow that said "Blue Boar". Needless to say, we were not optimistic. How wrong we were. The Blue Boar is an open lodge full of eclectic wall hangings including animal heads on one side, New Orleans-style instruments on the other, and sports memorabilia over the full bar. A one-man band entertained us on the guitar from a balcony perch overlooking the mess hall-style room, which felt cozy with tables of families and friends who all seemed to know each other. We dined on excellent steaks and imbibed in the pumpkin ale that the waitress recommended, and I dare say it was one of the most comfortable meals we had ever had.

The next morning, Gary delivered breakfast to our room at 9:30 am sharp - a bountiful display of some sort of egg and spinach and cheese scramble, spicy hash browns, bacon, and the most amazing pastries. Oh, and fruit. According to him, all of it was fat-free. After breakfast, we ventured behind the Inn to Anna Park and found the tennis courts for a few sets. Amidst the pee-wee football teams playing on the fields next to us and the cool, crisp autumn air, it felt like a piece of Americana.

Perhaps not realizing our limitations, we loaded up our bicycles and headed over to the [Shawnee Hills Wine Trail](#), a 28.7 mile stretch of rolling woodlands and farm fields interrupted (conveniently) by strategically-placed local wineries.

We should have read the full description of the Trail, which says, "Consuming great amounts of wine and bicycling narrow, winding, hilly roads is a treacherous enterprise. Use care when combining the vino with the velo." Upon commencing our trek, we were greeted by "Hill #1". I call it that because it wasn't the only one. There were SOOOO many more. I kept thinking, "We've gone up so much; eventually we will have to go down." We did, but it was always paired with another "up". I had to walk my bike up many of the steep inclines, and was more than thankful, when, after about 6-1/2 miles, we reached the first winery, [StarView](#).



The tasting room was crowded (a limo had pulled in right before us), but we finally had our Chardonnay and Vignoles in hand and ventured out to the lake next to the vineyard and took a break to take in the breathtaking view and watch the kot swim in the pond. We could have easily stayed there all day, but we had miles to go.

About 6-1/2 more treacherous miles later, we arrived (panting) at [Blue Sky Vineyards](#), an incredibly impressive, Tuscan-style winery. Having been to the California Wine Country, I was impressed at how "like that" it was. We sat on the patio and enjoyed a Chambourcin and a White Wine Sangria while munching on cheese and sausage, crackers and grapes. The pavilion overlooked an expansive, grassy area full of tables near a large pond, and a folk singer serenaded us nearby. Again, we could have called it quits there.



But no - we ventured on. Again, another six or so miles later, we made our final stop at [Owl Creek Vineyard](#), a rustic, simple place that was bustling with patrons. A bluegrass band entertained outside in the bed of an old, rusted out pickup truck, singing songs like "Constant Sorrow" from *Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou?* We both sampled the Seyval Blanc, and before we could try the "Chardonnay" or the "Whoos

Blush", we had closed the place down.

Finally back in a vehicle that didn't require pedaling, we headed to nearby Cobden and found [The Palace Pizzeria](#), famous for their Double Crust Pizza. They also sold most of the wines from our tour, but by then, I settled for the Saluki Porter. After a 20 mile bike ride, the pizza was the best I had ever tasted.

The next morning, our muscles were screaming from the prior day's exercise. Gary delivered breakfast (thank goodness; I probably could not have made it down to the kitchen). This time it was a dish he said he had finally perfected - a cross between a French toast and a bread pudding, with a nutty caramel sauce. I expected it to be heavy and rich, but instead it was light and extremely flavorful, and served with sausages and meatloaf. After that hearty meal, we checked out of our room, but not before sitting in Gary's office (the old principal's office) to hear more stories of the Davie School Inn. We even viewed the old bell clock and the safe where the milk money was kept.



Hoping to stretch out our tired muscles, we headed homeward, but stopped at the [Pomona Natural Bridge](#), one of those "are we going the right way because I'm not seeing anything and we've been on this gravel road for miles" treks. We did a short, hilly bike and walked across the sandstone bridge that had been created by years of water erosion. What amazed me most was not only this natural beauty, but the diversity of trees in this forest - far more than what you see in Central Illinois.

From there, we headed home, and the rolling landscape and colorful foliage gave way to flatter plains and less impressive-looking colors. But what I will remember is the beauty of that region of Illinois that I never realized was there. And there's so much more we didn't see - the main part of [Shawnee National Forest](#), [Garden of the Gods](#), [Little Grand Canyon](#)... all saved for another weekend.

Thanks to Gary at Davie School Inn for giving us an amazing resting place, to my companion who made the weekend one to remember, and to God for creating such a beautiful place so close to home.

Posted by Amy Kennard at 11:23 PM  
Labels: Blue Sky Vineyard, Davie School Inn, Giant City State Park, hiking in Southern Illinois, Owl Creek Vineyard, Pomona Natural Bridge, Shawnee Hills Wine Trail, StarView Winery

### 10 comments:

**PeoriaIllinoisan** October 24, 2011 at 12:13 PM  
The Shawnee is gorgeous! The Little Grand Canyon was always one of my favorite places to explore. Next time you're down there be sure not to miss Bald Knob Cross either.  
Reply

**ellen** October 24, 2011 at 10:03 PM  
Welcome to my back yard! Glad you enjoyed your trip, and don't forget to come see us in Alto Pass next trip!  
Reply

**yvonne@attractedtooshinythings** October 26, 2011 at 9:58 PM  
Sounds awesome. Good for you, but now I'm hungry.  
Reply

**Barbara Bock Dallas** October 27, 2011 at 11:44 PM  
Thank you for visiting and writing about one of the most beautiful Regions of our State! In addition to the natural attractions you described, there are many lakes scattered around the Region, two of which are located near one of the gateways to the Shawnee National Forest and the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail--Murphysboro. Kinkaid Lake and Lake Murphysboro both have primitive and full-service campsites and lodging accommodations--and lots of fish. Deer and other wildlife are plentiful, many of which routinely visit my yard. The wineries on the Shawnee Wine Trail continue to produce prestigious state and national award-winning wines, and the number of wineries are increasing and/or expanding, adding B&Bs, cabins, and restaurants offering unique food. Non-affiliated overnight lodging cabins and lodges are also developing. The apple and other fruit orchards are bountiful, with many also selling cobbler, jams, and other products, including those made by local artists. The Southern Illinois Region is full of history, with old cemeteries and other sites located throughout its boundaries. The Gen. John A. Logan Museum, located in Logan's Murphysboro birthplace, is the only such museum in the country. In addition to its permanent exhibit, its gallery routinely houses state, national, and specially-made displays covering a broad range of the country. Murphysboro is historic Riverside Park that has a concrete base ball stand and a concrete "shell," both of which are among the few in the country. The Park also contains the only leash-free Dog Park in the Region. Cultural and entertainment activities include offerings by Southern Illinois University (I saw Garrison Keillor perform there Monday night.) and its University Museum, the Marion Cultural Center, the Cartersville Center for the Arts in Carbondale, John A. Logan College in Carterville, and many others including the vintage Liberty Theater in Murphysboro. Fundraising parties are held throughout the year ranging from the Little Black Dress Party to the Little Red Dress Party, including options for men, to Relay for Life and National Nights Out. Festivals and celebrations are commonplace in many communities, such as the HerrinFest and the DuQuoin State Fair, and most have Fourth of July celebrations with fireworks. Murphysboro alone has a St. Patrick's Day Celebration, a Community Flag Day Service, the Shawnee Hills Wine and Arts Festival, Logan Day, the Apple Festival, the Barbecue Cook-Off, Cruise Nights, the Civil War Ball, and the Hometown Christmas. Sporting events include the Miners--a Premier League base ball team housed at Rent One Park in Marion--to the Clarkes--a vintage base ball team based in Murphysboro--and college and high school sports. Your taste buds will be tantalized by the local and diverse culinary offerings, and we have the best barbecue in the country. It's not Michigan Avenue or Wrigleyville, which I love and frequent, but I guarantee you'll enjoy the Southern Illinois scenery, activities, food, and hospitality. I live in my Southern Illinois hometown by choice, and I invite y'all to visit. Some of you might even stay.  
Reply

**Amy Kennard** October 28, 2011 at 9:59 AM  
I guess there is a reason you were named "Citizen of the Year" in Murphysboro, Barbara! Thank you so much for the comment. We look forward to visiting there again soon - and it really is someplace where I could see spending a lot of time someday!  
Reply

**Anonymous** October 31, 2011 at 1:48 PM  
Hi Amy. Great post on your travels to Southern Illinois. Were you able to find an online resource on biking the trail when you were planning the trip?  
Some friends and I are looking to take our bikes on an upcoming trip. Did you bike on the roads or next to the roads? We just want to make sure we have all the information before we attempt such a feat!  
Thanks!  
Reply

**Amy Kennard** October 31, 2011 at 2:07 PM  
This site was helpful and was how we found the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail Ramble.  
[http://www.trails.com/catalog\\_trail.aspx?trailid=BGM067-041](http://www.trails.com/catalog_trail.aspx?trailid=BGM067-041)

However, we were a little surprised that they would "market" such an unfriendly bike route. Though the roads were paved, it was basically barely a 2-lane road with hardly any shoulder. Two cars could not pass when we were on the road. The traffic on the other end (up 127) was worse as far as traffic.

It was incredibly hilly, but if you are a seasoned biker, it will be a great ride for you. The scenery was wonderful and it was nice to be able to stop every 6 miles or so and rest (and have a glass of wine!)

Try this link - I think Garden of the Gods has bike trails but we did not make it there.  
<http://www.trails.com/activity.aspx?area=15095>

Also, this site has a downloadable map of the Wine Trail:  
<http://www.shawneewineinrail.com/>  
Reply

**Barbara Bock Dallas** November 1, 2011 at 8:40 PM  
Lake Murphysboro, immediately west of the town of Murphysboro off Route 149, is ideal for biking. Hilly and no refreshments, but there are restrooms, and the scenery is incredibly beautiful...especially the Fall colors. And you can stock up on BBQ and other food/drinks in town and picnic at one of the many sites overlooking the lake.  
Reply

**Barbara Bock Dallas** November 3, 2011 at 8:36 AM  
Thank I had already posted this, so please accept my apology if this is a duplicate. Lake Murphysboro, just west on Route 149 of the town of Murphysboro, is ideal for biking and walking. It is hilly and has no food, but does have restroom facilities and is very safe. In Murphysboro you can stock up on barbecue ribs, pulled pork, and other barbecue foods including baked beans, cole slaw, and sweet tea at the original national award-winning 17th Street Bar & Grill; the hamburgers and fried dill pickles are great, too. (Closed on Sundays.) Or the Cajun Cowboy Grill at 1908 Walnut St. (main street through Murphysboro, but closed on Sunday and Monday) has authentic cajun dishes ranging from alligator to gumbo to poboys to red beans 'n rice to etouffee to shrimp creole; they even have traditional salads and hamburgers for those whose palates or stomachs can't handle cajun. If you prefer authentic Italian, Cummare's Italian Restaurant (located behind the Courthouse at the corner of South 14th and Chestnut Sts.) offers the best (closed on Sunday). Should you desire Mexican food, MI Casa Restaurant, 1842 Walnut St., is excellent. The town also has the traditional all day breakfast restaurants--including biscuits and gravy--and "blue plate specials" at Annie Mae's (great duffet, too), Cindy B's, and Tippey's. There's a Dairy Queen, Hardee's, Pizza Hut, and many other fast food restaurants. But as you head west on Route 149 to Lake Murphysboro, proceed about 3/4 mile past the Lake turnoff and stop at Mileur's Orchard, where you'll find the best apples, cider and cobbler in the area...and local artwork and honey. Then go back east to the Lake Murphysboro turnoff (to the north) and, before or after your bike ride or walk, enjoy the tasty cuisine at one of the many picnic sites overlooking the Lake. The color is beautiful, though waning due to the rain and wind we got last night.

If you're needing overnight lodging accommodations, I recommend the B&B at Kite Hill Winery & Vineyard (that has won a number of awards, including this year's prestigious Governor's Award) which is located about six miles south of Murphysboro on Route 127. The short drive alone with the amazing colors is worth the trip. There an America's Best Motel on the eastern edge of town and Jan and Angelo's Inn at 8th and Walnut Sts. And try to work in a visit to the Gen. John A. Logan Museum (He's the dude responsible for giving you a day off work--Memorial Day.) on Edith St. between 16th and 17th Sts., just two blocks off Walnut St. (Hours are 1-4 daily, except for Monday when it's closed, but special arrangements can be made to open for group tours.) Hope to see you soon!  
Reply

**dunlapcurtains** December 6, 2011 at 3:13 PM  
Love the place, glad you enjoyed your trip.  
Reply

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