

41 Shawnee Hills Wine Trail Ramble

Wineries with porches overlooking the vineyards, expansive views of the surrounding countryside, a choice of bed-and-breakfasts, and one of the best state parks in Illinois—what could be better? How about throwing in a bike ride along a series of quiet, scenic roads?

Start: Picnic shelter 4 at Giant City State Park, located next to the park's visitor center at the corner of Church Road and Giant City Park Road.

Length: 28.7 miles.

Terrain: Rolling woodland and farm fields are often interrupted by large hills with far-off views.

Traffic and hazards: Consuming great amounts of wine before bicycling narrow, winding, hilly roads is a treacherous enterprise. Use care when combining the vino with the velo. Also, watch for narrow bridges with boards (yes, wooden boards) on the surface. Be sure to cross these bridges on the raised boards lined up for car wheels.

Getting there: From Carbondale, head south on SR 51. Follow signs to Giant City State Park by turning left on Makanda Road (CR 29). In Makanda, keep straight ahead on Baptist Hill Road and enter the park. Follow the signs to the visitor center. Park at picnic area 4, located just north of the visitor center. Coordinates for starting point: 16S 306815E 4163891N

The Ride

Wineries in Illinois have rapidly multiplied in recent years. Since the mid-1990s the number of wineries went from about a dozen to more than seventy, and now Illinois is among the top twelve wine-producing states in the nation. Many of Illinois' new wineries have sprouted up within the Shawnee Hills. Kirby Pringle, a wine columnist for the *News-Gazette* in Champaign-Urbana, recommends trying Shawnee Hills wines made with the following grapes: Chardonnay, Vignoles, Vidal Blanc, Chambourcin, and Norton (also known as Cynthiana). The wines range in price, but nearly all the vineyards offer bottles starting at around \$12.

Cyclists with a taste for wine (including those schlepping wine bottles back with them) may be glad to know that the second half of this ride is where you'll encounter four wineries. The second half also hosts the quietest and most scenic roads—as well as the most hill climbing.

The ride starts with a trip from Giant City State Park to the town of Cobden, which is nestled among the big Shawnee Hills. On the way into Cobden, enjoy long views of the surrounding countryside—particularly as you descend the steep hill into town. A community park sits along the railroad tracks in the center of this hilly town. Like so many other small towns in Illinois, Cobden was named after one of the bigwigs of the Illinois Central Railroad.

After crossing SR 51 east of Cobden, you're greeted with more expansive views of the surrounding landscape sprinkled with farms and swaths of woodland. After

passing StarView Vineyard on the right, Wing Hill Road accompanies Bradshaw Creek for a short stretch. Knock out a steep climb, then turn onto Rocky Comfort Road, where you'll follow a gradual downhill. In between the several substantial climbs on Rocky Comfort Road, you'll encounter two more wineries—Orlandini and Blue Sky. Before turning on Water Valley Road, you can't miss Blue Sky Vineyard's Tuscan-style building on the right.

Water Valley Road is quiet, narrow, and never flat, with plenty of hilltop views. Use care as you cross a wooden bridge and what's called a "ford-bridge," where you'll pedal through a small stream as it runs over the road. This lovely stretch of road hosts Owl Creek Vineyard, which offers an array of red, white, and dessert wines.

As you head north back to the state park, you'll climb a ridge and enter a large orchard. On top of the ridge, watch for the sprawling view of the Shawnee Hills on the left. In particular, look for a big white cross that sits on a hill about 8 miles west. The 100-foot steel and marble cross was erected in 1963 on Bald Knob Mountain. The final miles back to the state park offer up more spine-tingling views as you make a long descent down from the ridge.

Miles and Directions

- 0.0** Head west on Church Road from picnic shelter 4.
- 0.4** Turn left on Giant City Park Road.
- 1.1** Stay right on Giant City Park Road.
- 1.5** Turn left on Shiloh Road (CR 1).
- 4.6** Turn right on Water Valley Road; it soon becomes Bell Hill Road, and near Cobden, Bell Hill Road becomes Poplar Street.
- 7.9** Turn left on Front Street.
- 8.0** Turn left on Ash Street, which soon becomes Wing Hill Road.
- 15.9** Turn left on Rocky Comfort Road.
- 19.1** Turn left on Water Valley Road.
- 24.5** Turn right on Giant City Park Road.
- 27.6** Turn right the three-way junction for Giant City Park Road.
- 28.3** Turn right on Church Road.
- 28.7** Return to picnic shelter 4.

Local Information

Shawnee Hills Wine Trail Association: Another half-dozen vineyards are located west of this ride along SR 127; c/o Pomona Winery; 2865 Hickory Ridge Rd., Pomona; (618) 967-4006; <http://shawneewinetrail.com>.

Southern Illinois Tourism Development Office: 3000 West DeYoung St., Marion; (888) 998-9397 or (618) 998-1024; <http://illinoisadventure.com>.

Local Events/Attractions

Blue Sky Vineyard: The largest of the vineyards on this route offers sandwiches, snacks, and a big outdoor terrace, in addition to lodging; open year-round; 3150 South Rocky Comfort Rd., Makanda; (618) 995-9463; www.blueskyvineyard.com.

Giant City Stables: Guided trail rides on the some of the park's many equestrian trails; 722 Giant City Rd., Makanda; (618) 529-4110; www.giantcitystables.com.

Orlandini Vineyard: Has a new tasting room and hosts several events near harvest time; open April through November; 410 Thorn La., Makanda; (618) 995-2307; www.orlandinivineyard.com.

Owl Creek Vineyard: Open March through December; 2655 Water Valley Rd., Cobden; (618) 893-2557; www.owlcreekvineyard.com.

StarView Vineyards: Features a gift shop, an expansive deck with a view of the vineyard, koi ponds; open year-round; 5100 Winghill Rd., Cobden; (618) 893-9463; www.starviewvineyards.com.

Shawnee Hills Wine Trail Festival: Typically held on Labor Day weekend; music, food, and, of course, wine are offered; see Shawnee Hill Wine Trail Association contact info above.

Restaurants

Dar Salaam: Highly regarded Middle Eastern restaurant; 218 North Illinois Ave. (US 51), Carbondale; (618) 351-9191.

Giant City Lodge: Dining room, cocktail bar, and gift shop; steak and seafood served; open for lunch and dinner; 460 Giant City Lodge Rd., Makanda; (618) 457-4921; www.dnr.state.il.us/lodges/gc.htm.

Accommodations

Blue Sky Vineyard: Offers lodging on the bike route; see contact information above.

Giant City Lodge: Offers 34 cabins in several different sizes; reasonable prices; see contact information above.

Giant City State Park Campground: Quiet, wooded campground with electric hookups and walk-in sites near hiking trails and lake access; (618) 457-4836; <http://dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r5/gc.htm>.

Shawnee Hills Bed and Breakfast: Three rooms with antique furnishings; occupies a beautiful stretch of road on the route; 290 Water Valley Road Rd., Cobden; (618) 893-2211; www.shawneehillbb.com.

Water Valley Inn Bed and Breakfast: Sits on 100 acres on the route; enjoy the wraparound porch; 3435 Water Valley Rd., Cobden; (618) 534-2244; www.1watervalleyinn.com.

Bike Shops

The Bike Surgeon: 404 South Illinois Ave., Carbondale; (618) 457-4521; www.thebikesurgeon.com.

Restrooms

Start/finish: Restrooms available at picnic shelter 4.

Mile 7.9: Pass a gas station/convenience store in Cobden.

Mile 12.3: Restrooms at StarView Vineyards.

Mile 18.8: Restrooms at Blue Sky Vineyard.

Mile 23.5: Restrooms at Owl Hill Vineyard.

Maps

USGS: Lick Creek quad, Makanda quad.

DeLorme: Illinois Atlas & Gazetteer: Page 89.