Day trip: You don't have to go hungry at Starved Rock

For 20 years, Lisle and Pat Elshbury made the 80-mile drive from their suburban Chicago home to Starved Rock State Park, one of the state's favored hiking and camping spots.

They became particular fans of Duffy's Tavern, a bar and restaurant dating to the early 1970s that stands proudly at the head of North Utica's blink-and-you-miss-it downtown. Over the years, the Elshburys joked that if Duffy's ever went up for sale, they'd put in a bid and move to their favorite getway.

Then, when they were down for a trip in 2003, they learned that Duffy's was indeed for sale. Weeks later, they were handed the keys.

Not much has changed at Duffy's since then. It remains an Irish-themed bar where shamrocks hang year-round and the Reuben remains the signature menu item. It also remains one of North Utica's go-to spots, especially for visitors.

"People come down to hike at Starved Rock, and then they need a place to eat and drink and relax," Lisle Elshbury said. "That's where we all come in."

Indeed, there is quite enough to turn a visit to Starved Rock into a full-on day trip in the Illinois Valley — from broad views to boat rides and red wine to Reubens.

The place: The Illinois Valley, a collection of towns and natural wonders along the Illinois River.

Where it is: About 100 miles southwest of downtown Chicago, just off Interstate Highway 80 (via Interstates 55, 94 and 57).

The main attraction: Starved Rock State Park (www.starvedrockstatepark.org), which is home to 18 small, lovely canyons formed by glacial meltwater and erosion across its 2,500 acres.
What there is to do: Well, Starved Rock, of course. If you still have energy after exploring those gorgeous canyons, there are several other worthy nearby excursions into nature: Matthiessen State Park (http://tinyurl.com/matthiessen), which includes a 1-mile canyon and charming little Lake Matthiessen. There’s also Buffalo Rock State Park (http://tinyurl.com/buffalorockstatepark), which offers broad views of the Illinois River on a bluff that once was an island within the river.

But if you’re tuckered from traipsing through Starved Rock and ready for some relaxation, fair enough.

North Utica is small enough that it might be worth heading west to LaSalle or east to Ottawa. LaSalle’s downtown is a bit depressed with plenty of boarded-up storefronts along the wide heart of downtown, First Street. Today a few food options appeal (see below), and there are also a couple of interesting stores worth popping into.

Canal Cargo (737 First St.; 815-545-6656) is a massive space full of vintage and quite reasonably priced furniture and knickknacks, while just down the street, To Be Continued Consignment Boutique (105 Marquette St.; theboutique.com) is housed in an old bank. While it has a decent second-hand selection (its sports Hall of Shame jersey collection on the day I visited included a Cedric Benson Bears jersey and a Kirk Hinrich Bulls jersey), the reason it’s a must-see is the old safe-deposit vault, which remains pristine and on display.

LaSalle also offers an opportunity to ride a slice of the 96-mile I&M Canal (754 First St., http://lasallecanalboat.org), which provided a trade route between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River for hundreds of years. Now it’s mostly a historical curiosity, though in LaSalle, a visitor can ride it on a "mule-pulled, full-size replica canal boat (that) will take you on the same hand-dug waterway that 19th century pioneers traveled ... (taking) you back in time to life on the American frontier and the Illinois prairie."

Conversely, Ottawa’s engine seems strong. The town of nearly 20,000 has plenty of parks, coffee shops, restaurants and a charming, tree-shaded town square.

Eating and drinking: Though not a culinary mecca, there’s no need to rush back home to eat after a day at Starved Rock. The area’s most impressive restaurant has long been worth a visit unto itself, and paired with Starved Rock, makes for a sublime day: Ron’s Cajun Connection (897 E. U.S. Highway 6; www.ronacajunconnection.com).

Lake Charles, La., native Ron McFarlain opened his restaurant in a modest 90-year-old former single-family home in the mid-1990s. It’s long on McFarlain’s charming Southern banter. Cajun music drifting from the speakers and a Louisiana bounty of boudin, blackened alligator, jambalaya, etouffee, gumbo, red beans and rice and, well, you get the idea. If I’m having one meal in the area, this is it.

But if in the mood for some grease and a beer — both of which are particularly gratifying after a day of hiking — don’t discount Duffy’s (101 Mill St.; duffystavernandgrill.com) and that Reuben. It also has one of the better beer lineups in the area, and occasionally features beer-pairing dinners (including one recently with Lyons’ BuckleDown).
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Across the street stands the August Hill Winery tasting room (106 Mill St.; www.augusthillwinery.com), which doubled in size over the summer after a sleek expansion of trim black furniture, fresh wood floors and lights that dangle above in glass orbs. You’d sooner expect to find such sleek sensibility in a much larger city, but here — like many businesses — it happens to be astoundingly large due to an abundance of affordable real estate. August Hill specializes in sparkling wines made in the traditional champenoise method and attracts decent crowds, I’m told, especially during Utica’s Winter Wine Walk, which is held the second Saturday in February.

And for something sweet on your way out of the park, check out Two Girls and a Cupcake (729 S. Clark St.; 315-667-7075), which makes all their tempting offerings (cupcakes in the forms of Caramel Nut Cheesecake, S’mores and something called “Vanilla Explosion”) in house. (I went for the Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough.)

LaSalle offers a few solid dining options that include the broad American menu that arrives on a digital tablet at Uptown Grill (601 First St.; www.uptowngrill.com); the tapas (pronounced "TAP-es" down here) at The Pink Chihuahua (633 First St.; www.thepinkchihuahua.co); and the audacious hot dog menu at The Dog House (848 First St.; www.lasalledoghouse.com), which includes such novelties as the San Antonio dog (guacamole, sour cream, grilled onions and grilled peppers) and the Tampa Bay dog (ketchup, mustard, mayo and pineapple — ugh).

What surprised me: The easy charm of downtown Ottawa was an eye-opener but so was how much I enjoyed the scrappy main street in downtown LaSalle (which is called First Street). With several vacant storefronts, and several others promoting video gambling, it’s a town clearly a bit down on its luck. But it also presents a fighting spirit, with signs in a few storefronts that declare, “I believe in LaSalle!” Walking up and down First Street, it’s not hard to imagine that the street was teeming a generation or two ago. It’s also not hard to root for it to get back on its feet.

If you choose to stay the night: The Willows (325 Clark St.; www.thewillows325hotel.net) is a boutique option in North Utica just down the road from the park, and Starved Rock offers its own option (including restaurant) with the stone-and-log Starved Rock Lodge (2668 E. 873rd Road; www.starvedrocklodge.com) within the park.