Escape from the hustle and bustle of the city and head out into the lush, tranquil greenery of prairie lands, nature preserves and state parks along the I&M Canal.

Start your tour in Chicago

WHERE TO PARK
Park at Chicago Portage National Historic Site, 4800 S. Harlem Ave., Lyons, IL 60534. Check the website for hours and other visitor information.
Chicago Portage National Historic Site – 773/590-0710

Stand upon the same ground traversed by Native Americans, famed explorers, and early settlers. See the vital crossroads where French fur traders would “portage” their goods across a narrow marshy area separating the waters of the Great Lakes from those of the Mississippi River. Highlights include a must-see monument to Jacques Marquette, Louis Jolliet, and their Native American guides, as well as several interpretive panels.

Available monthly tours last about 90 minutes and involve walking half a mile along the gravel path through the woods. Due to the rustic natural setting of the portage and Mud Lake area, long pants and sturdy walking shoes are recommended attire.

Continue on to Hodgkins

WHERE TO PARK
Park in the lot at Santa Fe Prairie Nature Preserve, 7100 River Rd., Hodgkins, IL 60525. Visit the Nature Preserve’s Facebook page for more information.
Santa Fe Prairie Nature Preserve – 708/598-6139 (volunteer steward)

Imagine what Illinois, the “Prairie State,” must have looked like hundreds of years ago when covered by these colorful native grasslands. Here, life-size steel silhouettes, a viewing deck, and several interpretive panels tell the story of this 10.5-acre extant “wet” prairie remnant, an ecological treasure where the state’s acclaimed prairie restoration movement began. Stop at the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway caboose, open on weekends and serving as the geologically unique site’s visitor center.

Make your way to Darien

WHERE TO PARK
Park in the lot at Waterfall Glen Forest Preserve, Northgate Road & Cass Avenue, Darien, IL 60561. Check the Forest Preserve website for hours and other visitor information.
Waterfall Glen Forest Preserve – 630/933-7200
Located just outside the historic canal town of Lemont is Waterfall Glen Forest Preserve, encompassing nearly 2,500 acres of ecologically diverse habitat and home to over 740 native plant species. Lose yourself amid peaceful prairies, savannas, and oak-maple woodlands. Preserve the moment with a photo from one of the scenic overlooks. Hike, bike or cross-country ski to some of Waterfall Glen’s most scenic areas via four mapped trails containing almost 11 miles of limestone- and turf-covered routes. Notice the ridges and scattered potholes that make up the topography of Waterfall Glen — and most of DuPage County. These are the result of one geological event, the Wisconsin Glacier. In fact, the entire Des Plaines River Valley was formed by glacial meltwaters and drainage from a postglacial lake that covered most of the Chicagoland area.

WHERE TO EAT
Old Vilnius Café, 2601 75th St., 630/324-6811
Tai San Chef, 2813 83rd St., 630/985-5006
Blueberry Hill Breakfast Café, 7340 Ill. Rte. 83, 630/734-1300
Zazzo’s Pizzeria, 7360 Ill. Rte. 83, 630/655-4788
Darien Chop Suey, 7516 S. Cass Ave., #18, 630/852-8899
Chuck’s Southern Comforts Café, 8025 S. Cass Ave., 331/431-4000
Chiba Japanese Restaurant, 801 Plainfield Rd., #15, 630/850-7848
Jam N Jelly Café, 7511 Lemont Rd., 630/850-7848
Home Run Inn, 7521 Lemont Rd., 630/739-9696

Head over to Lemont

WHERE TO PARK
Park at the Heritage Quarries Recreation Area, Main Street and Talcott Avenue, Lemont, IL 60439. A large parking area is situated at the main entrance to the Heritage Quarries, on the south side of the I&M Canal. Four smaller parking areas are distributed throughout the park and can be accessed from the north side of the canal. There is no cost for parking.

Village of Lemont – 630/257-1590

Enjoy 3 miles of hiking and biking trails looped around spectacular quarry lakes along the Lemont section of the I&M Canal. Four pedestrian bridges provide access for hiking, biking and fishing in a nearly 100-acre pristine natural area. During construction of the I&M Canal, fine-grade limestone was discovered here and led to a mining boom that lasted 50 years. After the quarry industry declined, underground springs consumed the depressions left behind, creating these freshwater lakes.

Conclude your tour in Wilmington

WHERE TO PARK
Park at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie Welcome Center, 30239 S. Ill. Rte. 53, Wilmington, IL 60481. Visit the Midewin website for hours and additional information.

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie – 815/423-6370
Begin your visit to Midewin at the Welcome Center located between Wilmington and Elwood along Ill. Rte. 53. Here you will see exhibits designed to lay the groundwork for your exploration, whether on your own or participating in one of the guided field trips or other programs. Only an hour from Chicago, this reconstructed grassland was formerly the site of the Joliet Arsenal. Now researchers, biologists, ecologists and local partners are working to restore this incredible, 30-mile area to its natural state. About 13,000 acres of Midewin are currently open to the public, including over 34 miles of trails. About 22 miles of those trails are shared by hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians. Watch a thriving herd of more than two dozen American bison roam across the vast pasture lands and rolling landscape. Bring your binoculars for optimum viewing. Before you leave, be sure to check out the variety of gifts and outstanding literature in the Midewin Interpretive Association’s bookstore.

WHERE TO EAT
Big Fish Bar & Grille, 27425 S. Will Rd., 815/476-9331
Nelly’s, 140 Bridge St., 815/476-9590
Wilmington House Family Restaurant, 210 Bridge St, 815/476-2426
Hayden’s Crossing, 107 N. Water St., 815/476-5925
Mikki’s Diner, 1099 S. Water St., Ste. A, 815/476-0556