

# MIDWEST TRAVELER

## Iowa: Where a farm is a farm

Iowa's annual Farm Crawl is a quaint detour through some of the state's smaller farms.

By BETSY RUBINER  
Special to the Star Tribune

Standing beside neat rows of well tended vegetables planted in south-central Iowa, a farmer was fielding questions from visitors about sustainable irrigation methods when drops began to fall.

"All summer we wanted rain and it has to be today," she said with the forbearance of an old hand who weathered severe drought this year, not to mention tornadoes in years past.

The brief shower did not put a damper on the 11th annual Farm Crawl, a free self-guided driving (not crawling) tour of family farms spread across a gently rolling three-county area, held the first Sunday afternoon in October, starting about 40 miles southeast of Des Moines.

Drawing an estimated 2,000 people, Farm Crawl is the self-proclaimed "original, biggest and best" of several one-day "agritourism" events in rural Iowa offering the rare opportunity to wander around small (especially for Iowa) farms, meet farmers and learn about raising crops and livestock. Most events are in the fall but some are in the spring and summer.

I first attended Farm Crawl three years ago, after spotting a flyer at a vendor's stand during Des Moines' popular Saturday downtown farmers market. Soon afterward, I was walking around the vendor's lovely Blue Gate Farm, visiting the gardens, chickens and alpaca that provide the stand's chemical-free vegetables, eggs and yarn.

This fall I returned for Farm Crawl 2017, which featured five farms and two agriculture-related endeavors. As in the past, the crawl offered kids' activities, tractor rides, live music, crafts, vintage ag equipment (including old Minneapolis-Moline tractors, once made in Minnesota) and, of course, locally grown and produced food.

Because the crawl is only four hours long, we prioritized to make sure we got to the farms, most not open regularly to the public. A driving map (available at FarmCrawl.com) provided a 45-mile loop with three access points to help visitors find the best maintained roads, albeit mostly gravel. Discreet "Farm Crawl" signs posted along the roadside also proved helpful.

Getting there was half the fun, with not-on-the-map discoveries along the way. Driving on roads, on and off the "loop," during what became a crisp and sunny fall day, our tires kicked up dusty clouds as we passed fields of yellowing corn and dun-colored soybeans, brown cows and black horses grazing in green pastures, a tidy farmstead here, a less tidy farmstead there.

Except for the occasional farm-crawling car, the roads were mostly empty and quiet, some winding and surprisingly hilly. A big black crow perched on a fence post. A flock of birds



At 40-acre Crooked Gap Farm in Marion County, Iowa, tractor rides were part of the fun during the annual Farm Crawl.



Crooked Gap Farm produces and sells meat from pasture-raised and grass-fed animals.

flew by in formation. A yellow combine sat near a partially harvested field. By a weathered farmhouse, we chanced upon a rare round barn — white-brick and dark-roofed, massive and squat.

### Where a pig is a pig

After a return visit to Blue Gate Farm, again as pristine as its farmers market stand, we drove to 110-acre Coyote Run Farm, which raises chemical-free produce, eggs from pastured hens, and hormone-free and grass-fed beef. We admired the horses, mules and roosters as well as the tomatoes inside a "high tunnel" or "hoop house" — a Quonset-hut-shaped, unheated greenhouse that helps farmers extend their growing seasons.

At 40-acre Crooked Gap Farm, which produces meat from heritage and rare-breed animals that are pasture-raised and grass-fed, we encountered a large sow behind a fence enjoying the great outdoors, unlike most pigs raised in this top pork-producing state. Hence the farm's motto: "Where a pig is a pig."

"Hands back, friends! We are working animals, not

trained petting zoo animals," read a nearby sign, among several dotting the idyllic-looking farm that also has cattle, sheep, rabbits and chickens, as well as having an interesting back story. The farm was started in 2008 by a young couple, neither of them farm-raised, who are now parents of five young children. We opted not to reserve a whole or half hog, as offered, but left with some pork chops.

Not surprisingly, there was a crowd at Schneider Orchard, which had major kid magnets including a treehouse and tractor rides, plus apples served every which way — fresh, dried, caramel, in pies, crisp, cider, doughnuts and bread.

Also bustling was Pierce's Pumpkin Patch. After wading through a wide assortment of pumpkins, squash and gourds (the "red warty things" were my favorite) scattered around an old farmhouse, we entered a garage unexpectedly lined

with decades-old framed front pages of the Des Moines Register with banner headlines such as "WAR WITH NAZIS!"

On the leafy grounds of an 1853 red brick country church, we stopped at a sale of ironwork crafted by a local high school chapter of FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America). An FFA queen, wearing her sash and a black cowboy hat, waved us into a makeshift parking lot on the lawn, where we were greeted by a series of courteous FFA kids. The beef from their "Cattle Project" was sold out by the time we arrived, as were most of their cut-iron signs.

As the afternoon progressed, our car gradually accumulated a coat of dirt from the road and our trunk gradually filled with apples, pumpkins and pork — not to mention the items we ate in transit including kettle corn, dried apples and homemade molasses cookies. The only place we didn't get to,

Provided by Bret Parkhill Photography



because we ran out of time, was a stop with miniature horses and pottery made from local clay. Maybe next crawl!

### Getting to Farm Crawl 2018

Iowa's 2018 Farm Crawl is scheduled for Oct. 7. This year's crawl included seven stops across Marion, Lucas and Warren counties, about 280 miles south of the Twin Cities (FarmCrawl.com).

For more information, visit **Practical Farmers of Iowa** (practicalfarmers.org), which cosponsors the Farm Crawl in south-central Iowa, and the **Iowa Tourism Office** site (traveliowa.com) under the "agriculture" category.

### Other Iowa multi-farm tours

Dates are not yet announced for 2018, but at least a half-dozen events were scheduled in 2017, including two near the Minnesota border — Hancock County's Fresh on the Farm in August (healthyharvestni.com/HancockCrawl) and the Winneshiek Farm Crawl near Decorah in September (visitdecorah.com).

Others 2017 events that may return include the Harvest Spoon Tour in May and October in southwest Iowa (sites.google.com/site/harvestspoon); a tour in Van Buren County in July (facebook.com/J40FarmCrawl) and a September "Farm Cruise" north of Des Moines (farmcruise.com).

Betsy Rubiner is a Des Moines-based travel writer.

### QUICK TRIPS



**HACKENSACK, MINN.** Ice fishing fans can grab their gear and head to Birch Lake Jan. 13 for the ever-popular ice fishing contest held during the annual **Back to Hack** winter festival Jan. 11-14. The festival begins at 10 a.m. Thursday with a medallion hunt and a meat raffle. On Friday, the medallion hunt will continue if necessary and at 7 p.m. bingo will be offered. Most of the events will be held on Saturday, including a run/walk, sled dog rides (\$5), children's winter carnival, snow-sculpting judging, a chili feed, live music and more. On Sunday, the snow sculpture winners will be announced and a raffle and dart tournament will be held (hackensackchamber.com; 1-800-279-6932).



**OKOBOJI, IOWA** If broomball, snow softball, flag football and other outdoor sports sound like fun, you might want to check out the **Okoboji Winter Games** Jan. 25-28 at Parks Marine on East Lake Okoboji. The annual events will draw visitors from around the region to partake in everything from a Freeze Your Fanny bike ride to a 5-10K race, ice fishing, sledding and hiking, to helicopter rides, an ice show featuring snowmobiles, UTVs and bikes, plus fireworks and more. Admission is free, but most sporting events require registration and/or an entry fee (tinyurl.com/ybyusy6q).



**MOORHEAD, MINN.; FARGO AND WEST FARGO, N.D.** The opening kickoff for **Frostival** will be held from 6-10 p.m. Jan. 26 with food, beer, live music, shopping and more. The annual fest continues on Jan. 27 with outdoor and indoor events including children's activities, ice skating, disc and snow golf, cardboard sledding, birding, a Frozen Fortress at the Hjemkomst Center, a family dance and more (frostival.com).

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