

# Great Plains

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## Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Oklahoma Joe's (p629)
- ➔ Rieger Hotel Grill & Exchange (p629)
- ➔ Ted Drewes (p622)
- ➔ Cattlemen's Steakhouse (p660)

## Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Hotel Fort Des Moines (p632)
- ➔ Magnolia Hotel (p651)
- ➔ Hotel Donaldson (p636)
- ➔ Hotel Alex Johnson (p644)

## Why Go?

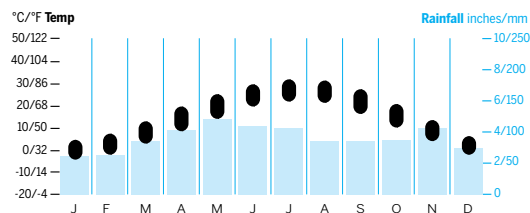
To best appreciate this vast and underappreciated region in the heart of the US, you need to split the name. The first word, 'great,' is easy. Great scenery, great tornadoes, great eats, great people all apply. The problem is with 'plains.' 'Humdrum' and 'flat' are two words that come to mind. Neither apply. Amid the endless horizons and raw natural drama are surprises such as St Louis and Kansas City, the Alpine beauty of the Black Hills and the legacy of Route 66.

Great distances across the beguiling wide-open spaces are the biggest impediment to enjoying this enormous region, which includes the states of Missouri, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma. Many sights lie near the interstates and the more intriguing two-laners, but other far-flung points of interest and scenic drives are also worth seeking out.

From miles of sand dunes to lushly forested countryside, small towns to great cities, the majestic sweep of the continent's center is yours to explore.

## When to Go

### St Louis



**Nov–Mar** Attractions cut back hours, or close. Blizzards shut down roads and trains for days.

**Apr, May, Sep & Oct** Average maximum of 55°F (13°C); uncrowded seasons to visit.

**Jun–Aug** Thunderstorms and even tornadoes add drama; sultry days and wildflowers bloom.

## Getting There & Around

The main airport is **Lambert-St Louis International** ([www.flystl.com](http://www.flystl.com)), but visitors from abroad will be better off flying to Chicago, Denver or Dallas and connecting to one of the region's myriad airports or hitting the open roads.

Greyhound buses only cover some interstates, but **Jefferson Lines** ([www.jeffersonlines.com](http://www.jeffersonlines.com)) and **Burlington Trailways** ([www.burlingtontrailways.com](http://www.burlingtontrailways.com)) take up some of the slack. They both honor Greyhound's Discovery Pass.

**Amtrak** ([www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com)) routes across the Plains make getting here by train easy, but getting around impractical. The main train services are:

**California Zephyr** Between Chicago and San Francisco via Iowa (including Osceola, south of Des Moines) and Nebraska (including Omaha and Lincoln).

**Empire Builder** Between Chicago and Seattle via North Dakota.

**Heartland Flyer** Between Fort Worth and Oklahoma City.

**Lincoln Service** Fast trains between Chicago and St Louis.

**Missouri River Runner** Between St Louis and Kansas City.

**Southwest Chief** Between Chicago and Los Angeles via Missouri (including Kansas City) and Kansas (including Topeka and Dodge City).

**Texas Eagle** Between Chicago and San Antonio via St Louis.

### GET YOUR KICKS

Unlike elsewhere in the US, you can get somewhat of a feel for this region from the interstate, since the wide-open spaces know no bounds. But the real joy of the region is the many two-lane roads. Substantial stretches of Route 66 survive and are covered in the Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma sections. And don't overlook other roads like US 2, US 20 and US 50.

## Top Great Plains Parks

- ➔ **Theodore Roosevelt National Park** Buffalo roam amid stunning canyons carved by rivers after the ice age.
- ➔ **Badlands National Park** Bizarrely eroded rocks and canyons offer an unforgettable spectacle.
- ➔ **Wind Cave National Park** Below ground is one of the world's largest cave formations; above ground, deer, antelope and bison play.
- ➔ **Homestead National Monument** Farmland with hikes amid rivers and wildflowers.
- ➔ **Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve** Most of the prairie grasslands have gone the way of the farmer's plow; only 1% of the original tallgrass survives at places like this.

### DON'T MISS

Local diners and cafes with fab home-cooked food are where locals gather to chew on all the news and gossip.

## Fast Facts

- ➔ **Hub cities** Kansas City (population 460,000), Omaha (population 409,000)
- ➔ **Time zones** Central (one hour behind NYC), Mountain (two hours behind NYC)
- ➔ **Temperature** Enjoy balmy summer evenings when it stays light well past 8pm.
- ➔ **Driving** Check road conditions and forecasts in winter when even interstates can be closed.

## Did You Know?

The population density in North Dakota is 9.9 people per sq mile. In NYC it's 26,800 people per sq mile.

## Resources

- ➔ **National Scenic Byways** ([www.byways.org](http://www.byways.org)) details scores of nationally designated scenic drives in the region.
- ➔ **National Park Service** ([www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)) lists little-known sites.
- ➔ **Tornado HQ** ([www.tornadohq.com](http://www.tornadohq.com)) has maps and the latest official warnings.