



48 HOURS IN

Madison, WI

WIDE OPEN · DEEPLY ROOTED

Welcome to Madison, WI.

Madison does not feel like a state capital. It feels like a university town that got the Capitol building by accident, built the finest farmers market in America around it, and then spent the next century figuring out how to be good at everything else. The result is a city of 270,000 people -- stretched across an isthmus between two lakes, Lake Mendota and Lake Monona -- that consistently registers as one of the most livable, most educated, and most food-obsessed cities in the Midwest.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison defines the city's energy in the way that few universities define their cities outside of college towns: the Memorial Union Terrace, perched on the shore of Lake Mendota, is the most beautiful public gathering space in Wisconsin. The Chazen Museum of Art on the campus is free and world-class. The farmers market that encircles the Capitol every Saturday morning from May through November is -- by most accounts -- the largest producers-only farmers market in the country.

Madison rewards solo travel in ways that larger cities sometimes don't. The isthmus is compact and walkable. The bar and restaurant culture is genuinely excellent, with a concentration of serious independent restaurants unusual for a city its size. The State Street corridor from the Capitol to the campus is one of the finest pedestrian commercial streets in the Midwest.

The outdoor culture is the bonus: kayaking on Mendota or Monona, the lakefront trails, and the Four Lakes chain that extends beyond the city. In summer, Madison is one of the finest small-city destinations in America.

Quick Facts

Best time to visit	May-Oct, summer ideal
Airport	MSN 5 miles from Capitol Square
Getting around	Walking + Uber (compact isthmus)
Solo dining	Excellent -- strong independent restaurant scene
Currency	USD
Language	English
Tipping	18-20% restaurants, \$1-2/drink bars
University	UW-Madison (50,000 students -- major cultural force)

DAY ONE -- CAPITOL SQUARE / STATE STREET / MEMORIAL UNION / WILLY STREET

Day One covers the heart of Madison: the Capitol, the Saturday farmers market (if applicable), the State Street corridor from Capitol to campus, and the Memorial Union lakefront before ending on Williamson Street.

Morning 8:00 AM -- 1:00 PM

8:00 AM

Dane County Farmers Market -- Capitol Square

The largest producers-only farmers market in the United States, encircling the State Capitol every Saturday morning from late April through November. 160+ vendors selling cheese, bread, meat, produce, flowers, and prepared food. The cheese stalls alone are worth the trip: Hook's, Bleu Mont Dairy, and Cedar Grove among the anchors.

→ Arrive by 8am on a summer Saturday -- the market fills by 9am and the best cheese and bread sells out. Walk the full square before buying; the market rewards a complete circuit.

9:30 AM

Wisconsin State Capitol

The Wisconsin State Capitol (1917) is consistently ranked among the most beautiful state capitol buildings in the US -- a Beaux-Arts dome clad in granite and topped with Daniel Chester French's bronze sculpture "Wisconsin." The interior is exceptional: 43 types of stone, hand-carved marble, and the largest dome constructed since the US Capitol. Free guided tours every hour.

→ The 6th floor observation gallery (accessible by elevator on free tours) gives the finest panoramic view of Madison available from any public space -- the two lakes, the isthmus, and the UW campus on the west shore of Mendota.

11:30 AM

State Street -- Browse & Coffee

The pedestrian corridor connecting the Capitol to the UW-Madison campus -- eight blocks of independent coffee shops, bookstores, restaurants, and galleries with no chain retail. Ancora Coffee Roasters is the finest coffee on State Street. Avol's Books (421 State St) is the best used bookshop in Madison and worth thirty minutes.

→ State Street is entirely car-free and walkable. The Memorial Library at the State Street end of campus has free WiFi and reading rooms open to the public -- the ideal rain contingency.

Afternoon 2:00 PM -- 6:30 PM

1:00 PM

Lunch: Merchant (State Street)

Craft cocktails and seasonal food on State Street -- one of Madison's most reliable solo lunch spots with excellent bar seating. The burger is the local benchmark. \$18-28. 121 S Pinckney St.

→ *The bar at Merchant is the best solo lunch seat on the Capitol Square. Arrive before 1pm to avoid the noon rush.*

2:30 PM

Chazen Museum of Art -- UW Campus

The University of Wisconsin's art museum -- free admission, 22,000 works spanning antiquity to the contemporary. The collection is strongest in prints and drawings, with notable works by Rembrandt, Winslow Homer, and Georgia O'Keeffe. One of the finest free art museums in the Midwest for its size.

→ *Free and open Tuesday through Sunday. Allow 90 minutes. The rooftop terrace (weather permitting) has a view west across Lake Mendota that is difficult to beat.*

4:30 PM

Memorial Union Terrace -- Lake Mendota

The University of Wisconsin's lakefront gathering space -- arguably the finest public terrace in any American university. Sunburst chairs at the water's edge, a full bar open from noon, live music in summer, and the view west across Lake Mendota at late afternoon. Open to the public; no UW affiliation required.

→ *A beer at the Memorial Union Terrace at 5pm on a summer afternoon -- the lake, the sailboats, the late light -- is the finest free experience in Madison. Go before dinner; stay longer than planned.*

6:30 PM

Pre-dinner: Williamson Street (Willy Street)

The Williamson Street neighborhood east of the Capitol is Madison's most character-filled commercial strip -- a counter-cultural Main Street with wine bars, craft beer taverns, a natural food co-op, and the best independent bookstore in Wisconsin (Mystery to Me, 1863 Monroe St). The Great Dane Pub & Brewing Co. (123 E Doty, nearby) is Madison's founding craft brewery.

→ *The Great Dane is the social anchor of Madison's beer culture since 1994. The taproom is excellent; the back patio in summer is the ideal pre-dinner spot.*

Evening 7:30 PM -- Late

7:30 PM

Dinner: L'Etoile

The restaurant that put Madison on the national food map -- Tory Miller's farm-to-table flagship on Capitol Square, operating since 1976. The menu is built entirely from Wisconsin ingredients, changes with the season, and is the finest single meal available in Madison. Bar seats available. \$70-95. 1 S Pinckney St.

→ Reserve the bar seat at letoile.com. The tasting menu is the way in; the bar menu gives you the same kitchen in a more relaxed format. This is the meal that justifies the trip.

9:30 PM

Eno Vino Wine Bar

The finest wine bar in Madison, located atop the Graduate Hotel overlooking Capitol Square. 50+ wines by the glass, a rooftop terrace, and the best elevated view of the Capitol building available from any bar. 601 Langdon St.

→ The rooftop terrace at Eno Vino at 9:30pm on a warm evening -- the Capitol dome lit, the square quiet below -- is the finest bar experience in Madison.

DAY TWO -- LAKE MENDOTA / OLBRICH GARDENS / MONONA TERRACE / WILLY ST EVENING

Day Two moves around Madison's two lakes, through the finest public gardens in Wisconsin, and across the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed convention center before ending in the city's best neighborhood.

Morning 8:00 AM -- 12:00 PM

7:30 AM

Lake Mendota Kayak or Canoe

Lake Mendota is one of the most studied freshwater lakes in the world and one of the most beautiful: 10 square miles, bordered by the UW campus on the south, residential neighborhoods to the north, and state parkland at its western end. Kayak rental from Rutabaga Outdoor Programs (220 W Broadway) or University Recreation's Hoofer Sailing Club. \$15-25/hour.

→ The early morning on Mendota -- low mist, loons calling, the Capitol dome visible to the east -- is the finest water experience in Madison. Rent a kayak; paddle for two hours. This is what the city is.

10:30 AM

Olbrich Botanical Gardens

A 16-acre public botanical garden on the southeast shore of Lake Monona -- one of the finest in the Midwest. The Thai Pavilion (the only authentic royal Thai pavilion in the US, donated by the Thai government) is the anchor; the wildflower meadow and rose garden are at peak in June and July. Free outdoor admission; \$3 for the tropical conservatory.

→ The Thai Pavilion at Olbrich is genuinely extraordinary -- teak and gold leaf donated by Thailand, installed by Thai artisans in 1991. The surrounding formal garden is one of the most serene spaces in the city.

12:00 PM

Brunch: Bradbury's Coffee

The finest single-cup coffee in Madison, in a compact Williamson Street space. The brunch pastries from local bakeries pair with serious espresso. A neighborhood institution. 1206 Williamson St.

→ Bradbury's is the coffee shop that Madison's food-obsessed residents go to when they want something taken seriously. Walk-in; queue is worth it.

Afternoon 1:00 PM -- 6:30 PM

1:00 PM

Monona Terrace -- Frank Lloyd Wright Convention Center

The Frank Lloyd Wright-designed convention center on the shore of Lake Monona -- conceived in 1938, built in 1997. The rooftop garden (free, open daily) is the finest public outdoor space in downtown Madison: a circular terrace at the water's edge with views across Monona toward the Capitol. The building's exhibition space inside details Wright's original 1938 design.

→ The rooftop terrace is free and requires no convention ticket. Walk to the edge: the Capitol to the north, Lake Monona to the south, the isthmus compressed to its narrowest -- this is Madison at its most essential.

3:00 PM

University Avenue & Near West Side

The neighborhood west of the Capitol toward Regent Street and Monroe Street: independent hardware stores, decades-old taverns, the finest pizza in Madison (Ian's Pizza on State Street, \$3/slice, serves unconventional toppings), and the Monroe Street bookshops. A pleasant afternoon walk off the tourist circuit.

→ Ian's Pizza at 115 State St is a Madison institution -- the mac and cheese slice is not a joke. A solo traveler who eats one slice on State Street at 3pm is participating in the city correctly.

5:30 PM

Happy Hour: Coopers Tavern

A Capitol Square tavern with an excellent craft beer list and the finest Old Fashioned in Madison. The Old Fashioned is Wisconsin's state cocktail -- brandy-based, with a muddled orange and a float of sour mix. Every bartender in Madison has a version; Cooper's is the best. 20 W Mifflin St.

→ Order the Wisconsin Old Fashioned sweet. Observe the ritual. The brandy-based Old Fashioned is one of the most distinctive regional cocktail traditions in America.

Evening 7:00 PM -- Late

7:00 PM

Dinner: Graze

Tory Miller's more casual restaurant below L'Etoile on Capitol Square -- the same sourcing philosophy, a more accessible menu and price point. Wisconsin beef, local produce, excellent bar seating. \$40-60. 1 S Pinckney St.

→ Graze shares a kitchen philosophy with L'Etoile and serves it at a price point that makes a second great dinner in Madison possible. The bar is the best solo dinner seat on Capitol Square.

9:00 PM

Willy Street -- Evening

Return to Williamson Street for the evening: Come Back In (2090 Atwood Ave) for live music; the Willy Street Co-op for a late grocery browse; or the Crystal Corner Bar (1302 Williamson St) for a classic Madison neighborhood bar

experience unchanged since 1946.

→ *The Crystal Corner Bar is Madison at its most genuine -- a neighborhood tavern with no pretension, cold beer, and whoever walked in from Williamson Street. The kind of bar that defines why people love American neighborhood life.*

Breakfast & Casual***Dane County Farmers Market***

Capitol Square \$

The largest producers-only market in the US. Hook's Cheese, Stella's hot cross buns, and Everything Bread are the anchors. Saturdays only.

Ancora Coffee Roasters

State Street \$

Best espresso and pour-over on the State Street corridor. Multiple locations; the Capitol Square location is the anchor.

Bradbury's Coffee

Williamson St \$

The finest single-origin coffee in Madison. Worth the walk east of downtown.

Ian's Pizza

State Street \$

\$3 slices of unconventional toppings -- the mac and cheese is not ironic. A Madison institution.

Bars & Late Night***Memorial Union Terrace***

UW Campus \$-\$\$

The finest public bar terrace in any American university. Beer, music, and Lake Mendota. Open to the public.

Great Dane Pub & Brewing

Downtown \$\$

Madison's founding craft brewery since 1994. Full menu, excellent taproom. 123 E Doty St.

Eno Vino Wine Bar

Capitol Square \$\$

Rooftop wine bar above the Graduate Hotel. 50+ by the glass, the best elevated view of the Capitol.

Crystal Corner Bar

Williamson St \$

A neighborhood tavern unchanged since 1946. Cold beer, no pretension. 1302 Williamson St.

Restaurants***L'Etoile***

Capitol Square \$\$\$\$

The restaurant that put Madison on the national map. Farm-to-table, Wisconsin ingredients, bar seats available. Reserve at letoile.com.

Graze

Capitol Square \$\$\$

Tory Miller's casual flagship beneath L'Etoile. Same sourcing, more accessible. Bar seat recommended. 1 S Pinckney St.

Merchant

Capitol Square \$\$

Craft cocktails and seasonal food on Pinckney. The best bar food on the Square. 121 S Pinckney St.

Heritage Tavern

Downtown \$\$\$

Farm-to-table American in a historic tavern space. Excellent bar seats. Reserve at heritagetavern.com.

Osteria Papavero

Downtown \$\$\$

The finest Italian in Madison. Handmade pasta, Italian wine list, bar seats available.

Tutto Pasta

State Street \$\$

Reliable Italian on the State Street corridor. The best value sit-down dinner near the Capitol.

Paul's Club

Downtown \$

A Madison institution since 1959. Cheap brandy Old Fashioneds and cold beer. The most democratic bar in the city.

Uber / Lyft	Varies	Primary transport. Downtown to airport: \$12-18. The isthmus is compact; most destinations are under \$10.
Walking	Free	State Street, Capitol Square, and the campus are all connected by foot. The isthmus is 1.5 miles long and entirely walkable.
B-Cycle (bike share)	\$3/30 min	Extensive network across the isthmus. Best for the lakefront trails and State Street corridor.
Metro Transit Bus	\$2/ride	Routes 2 and 5 cover the main isthmus corridor. Willy Street is Route 2 east from the Capitol.

Practical Information

Getting to Madison	Dane County Regional Airport (MSN) is 5 miles from Capitol Square. Uber: \$12-18. No rail to the airport. Amtrak Empire Builder stops at the Columbus, WI station (30 miles) with no direct connection.
Best time to visit	May through October. Summer (June-August) is Madison at its finest: farmers market, terrace, lakes, and outdoor music. January through March is harsh (cold, snow, lake-effect wind). September is ideal: cool, post-summer quiet, lakes still warm.
Solo dining	Madison has one of the finest independent restaurant scenes in the Midwest relative to its size. L'Etoile, Graze, Merchant, and Heritage Tavern all have excellent solo bar seating. Reserve in advance; the best tables fill on weekends.
Useful apps	Uber (primary transport), B-Cycle (bike share), Resy or OpenTable (reservations), danecountyfarmersmarket.com (market schedule), hoofers.org (kayak rental on Mendota).

Spring

March -- May

Variable weather -- warm days, late snowstorms. The farmers market opens in late April. Mud season on the lakefront trails. The Memorial Union Terrace opens by mid-May.

Good option

Summer

June -- August

Madison at its best: farmers market, Memorial Union Terrace at full capacity, lake swimming, and the full restaurant season. Book accommodation 3-4 weeks ahead for summer weekends.

Best time to go

Autumn

September -- October

September is the finest month: temperatures moderate to 60-75F, the lake is still swimmable, and the campus energy peaks with the academic year. Badgers home football games bring large crowds -- book ahead.

Best time to go

Winter

November -- February

Cold and snowy (-10F to 30F). The lakes freeze completely by January. Ice fishing, cross-country skiing on the lakeshore, and a resilient indoor food and bar scene make winter survivable. Not recommended for a first visit.

Good option

- Reserve L'Etoile bar seat -- letoile.com (book before arrival)
- Dane County Farmers Market: arrive by 8am on Saturday -- market fills by 9am
- Kayak rental on Mendota -- rutabaga.com or hoofers.org (reserve in season)
- Memorial Union Terrace: open to public, no UW ID required
- Wisconsin State Capitol tour: free, hourly on weekdays
- Monona Terrace rooftop: free, open daily
- Download B-Cycle app for isthmus bike share
- Badgers home football: check uwbadgers.com -- hotel rates double on game weekends

Your interactive map is one scan away.

All locations from this guide, colour-coded by day, open on your phone.

goingsolo.life/maps/madison

GoingSolo.Life
TRAVEL ALONE. LIVE FULLY.