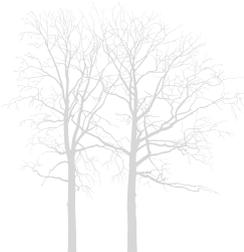


A Colorful Drive Through Brown County



By **Ruth Ann Ingraham** Photography by **Bob Anderson**

When our oak, maple, beech, hickory, and sassafras trees are festooned in radiant shades of gold, orange, and red, it's that magical season, fall, which is nowhere more beautiful in Indiana than in Brown County, Monroe County's contiguous country cousin.

For a choice Brown County experience, take a one-day fall road trip that gives you a chance to enjoy both the handiwork of Mother Nature as well as that of latter-day and contemporary artists and artisans. Choose a day in October—any day—and slip some “mood” music into your CD player. Be sure to include “Liar’s Bench” and “My Brown County Home” by Bloomington’s Slat’s Klug and Nashville’s Steve Miller. The lyrics offer a musical glimpse into the lives and times of earlier folks, many of whose descendants are still in “the hills o’ brown.”

As you drive the sinuous roads and roller-coaster hills, you’ll truly understand the inspiration for the line in “Liar’s Bench” that goes, “The road to my place is so crooked it ‘ud break a snake’s back.”





Visit “House of the Singing Winds”

Whether or not you follow the self-guided Driving Tour of Artists’ and Craftsmen’s Studios described herein, you should start out heading east on SR 46, then turn at Belmont toward the T.C. Steele Historic Site, home of Theodore Clement Steele, a noted member of the “Hoosier Group” of American impressionist painters and an artist of international renown. As you zip up the paved road, picture newlyweds T. C. and Selma Steele a century ago, slogging through ankle deep mud, brush, and brambles—their hired “hack” pulled by two horses mired in mud at the bottom of the hill—en route to the abandoned ridge where they would build a home in 1907.

Today you can tour their home (which they named “House of the Singing Winds”), the artist’s studio, and the extensive gardens Selma created on their 211-acre property. Some of Steele’s paintings hang on the walls of the red barn there.

Steele was among the artists who came from other Midwestern cities to Brown County, drawn by its bucolic beauty. Most arrived in Helmsburg, northwest of Nashville, on the Indianapolis Southern railroad. Often they made a ritual of walking the eight miles to lodgings in Nashville, where they eventually formed an artists’ colony in what they named Peaceful Valley. The Hoosier Impressionists, known for their landscapes, established a tradition of creativity that is kept alive today by area weavers, potters, painters, blacksmiths, glass artists, and woodworkers.

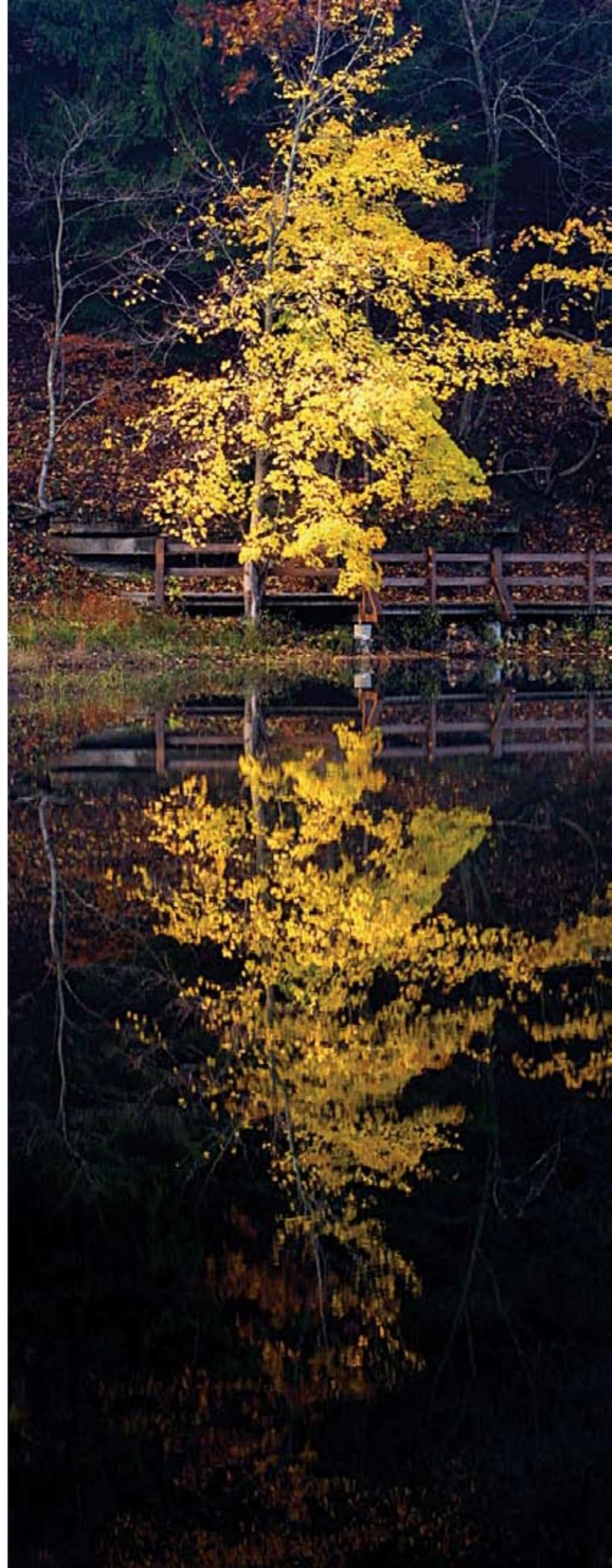
Plan on lunching at Brown County State Park, bringing along a picnic packed at home or picked up at Bloomingfoods on your way out of town. Select the perfect lookout point, spread a blanket, and enjoy the view of gentle, forested hills that ripple to the horizon. Bask in the aura of the turning leaves, and again, look back in time.

A place that no one wanted

Brown County, which attracts an estimated three million visitors annually, was founded in 1836, but ironically, only after the surrounding counties—Monroe, Jackson, and Bartholomew—declined to annex it. Too rugged and inaccessible, they said.

The inhospitable terrain, carved by glacial melt, almost dared the folks who settled there to make a go of it. With grit and determination, the pioneers survived as subsistence farmers, but by the middle of the second decade of the 20th century, their small plots, stripped of the trees, often failed on the exhausted and eroded clay soil.

Meanwhile, road improvements in the early 1920’s made it easier for visitors and artists to visit the area, where they came to enjoy the landscape or search for their romantic notion of the simple life. Ironically, those better roads threatened to destroy the very charms that drew the tourists, by making it easier to haul logs, railroad ties, and lumber out of the “hollers” that had remained densely wooded. With much of Indiana’s forested beauty lost, Hoosiers in the 1930’s had the foresight to create a system of state parks and forests. Trees were replanted in some places, and elsewhere denuded ridges began to regenerate on their own. Today Brown County’s woodlands and those in surrounding counties encompass 300,000 contiguous acres and provide vital habitat for wildlife, including several endangered species such as the wood thrush and worm-eating warbler.





A surprise in the hamlet of Story

After your picnic lunch, fold your blanket and drive to the park's north entrance. Cross the covered bridge and follow SR 135 east and then south to Stonehead. Soon you'll come upon the Spears Gallery. Stop in to see the displays, which include fine art and photography along with the work of self-taught potter Larry Spears. He brings a rich color palette to his wares—pitchers, teapots, dinnerware, and more—with a wide variety of glazes and glazing techniques.

Get back on the serpentine road bordered by corn and soybean farms, and continue on to the hamlet of Story. Chances are you'll see horses waiting patiently, their reins looped over a rail, as their riders enjoy a meal at the Story Inn, Indiana's oldest country inn, restaurant, and bed and breakfast. Noting the weathered exterior of Story's former general store and knowing that its creaky wooden floors and potbellied stove are intact within, you may be surprised to find that the restaurant is known for its gourmet fare. Check out the beautiful, recently restored

stained glass windows, then continue on your way to a nearby loop that takes you to a group of artisans' studios that you'll want to check out, the Homestead Weaving Studio, Barzillai Forge, and Tedrowe Furniture Studio.

Next, continue your drive through Gatesville and Peoga, and cross into Johnson County to Apple Works, an orchard where more than 50 varieties grow. Accommodating clerks will cut as many chilled, crisp, juicy sample slices as you wish from bins brimming with yellow, green, and red apples. Select your favorites to take home, along with the perfect pumpkins for your Hallowe'en jack-o-lanterns, and take a jug of cider along to quench your thirst.

Return to Peoga, turn west to Spearsville and south on Bean Blossom Road for your last studio stop of the day, at the Schatz Studio & Gallery, where artist Greg Schatz sells functional pottery that he creates from stoneware and porcelain, fired for 24 to 35 hours in a wood-burning kiln.



For More Information

The Brown County Convention and Visitor's Bureau

www.browncounty.com

Download a county map

T. C. Steele State Historic Site

4220 T. C. Steele Road, Belmont

www.tcsteele.org

812-988-2785

Artists' and Craftsmen's Studios

www.BrownCountyStudioTour.com

Download maps and GPS coordinates.

The Apple Works

County Road 250 West, Trafalgar

www.apple-works.com

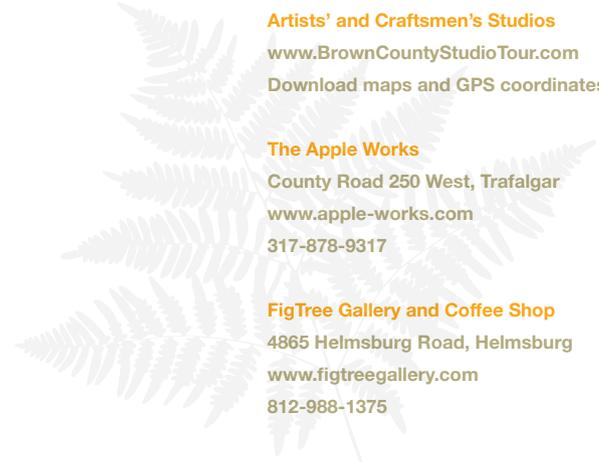
317-878-9317

FigTree Gallery and Coffee Shop

4865 Helmsburg Road, Helmsburg

www.figtreegallery.com

812-988-1375



Where the front door is in the back

Farther along, in tiny Helmsburg, just south of the railroad track that brought artists to Brown County 100 years ago, you'll find the family-friendly FigTree Gallery and Coffee Shop, a two-story brick building with the front door in the back. Inside, there's an eclectic display of items, some for sale and some for sheer viewing enjoyment, that includes African art, Star Wars and Lord of the Rings memorabilia, works of local craftsmen, and a slowly bobbing, illuminated pink flamingo. Jigsaw puzzles, assembled on a corner table by regulars, "paper" some of the walls. You're probably ready for a little pickup, so have a cup of coffee (perhaps the special Dandy Goat house blend) and nibble on a Potok Pecan or Black Mamba Danish roll. If you're fortunate enough to be there on a Friday or Saturday night, at 7 pm you can enjoy live entertainment—a perfect end to a lovely day. ✨

