

THE WRIGHT EXPERIENCE

Story and Photos by Michael J. Martin



Martin House

Most times, RVing is all about relaxation and escapism from the daily grind. Enjoying all that nature should offer. At other times, it is about sharing the outdoors with family and friends. Spending fun times making memories with those closest to you. But, every once in a while, RVing is all about adventure. The RV is an ideal platform to discover new experiences - to do things that you have never done before. An RV is a perfect means to feed both the mind and the soul. This was the goal when we decided to discover the world of famed architect, Frank Lloyd Wright.

Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) is an American icon, a celebrity architect. Wright is reputed to be one of America's greatest architects. At least, that is what he told everyone. Wright had an enormous ego, which he translated into his work with great effect. Some of his projects still stand the test of time and clearly demonstrate his unique blend of art and science when designing some stunning buildings and homes. This being the 150th anniversary of his birth, it seemed fitting to make him the theme for our 2017 adventure. We set out to experience and learn all that we could about Wright on this trip.

To best understand Wright, a plan was made to spend a few days roaming around the USA to see and appreciate some of his more well-known home designs. Ultimately, we were heading to Oshkosh, Wisconsin for our annual

aviation gathering (See Oshkosh Romance, Canadian RVing, Jan/Feb 2017, p. 32-34), so a route was planned to permit us to end up at our destination for the second week escapade at AirVenture 2017. However, for the first week, we roamed around six U.S. states – New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin in search of Frank Lloyd Wright. The motorhome was the key means to travel and relax while we took detours to study and experience Wright homes.

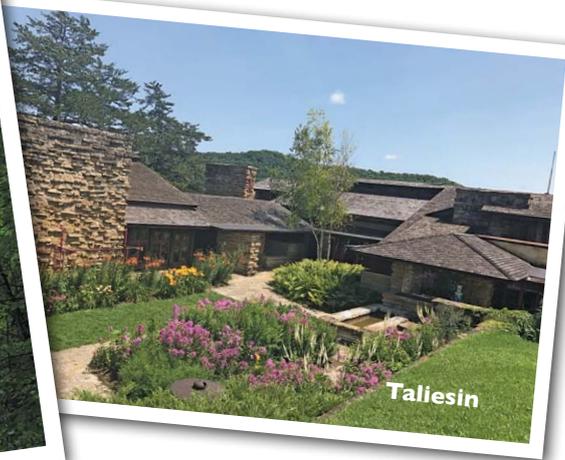
For the first leg (1) of the trip, we choose to leave the motorhome at a campsite on Grand Island and use the car to visit the Martin home as the streets were too challenging to drive a Class A coach around urban Buffalo. A towed car is a far smarter choice in most cases due to street parking limitations. A reasonable sized Class B motorhome can work, but I would recommend leaving all other forms of RVs elsewhere and drive in.

The Darwin D. Martin House was magnificent. It was built between 1903 to 1905. It is one of Wright's Prairie Style homes with long, low, sweeping horizontal lines reminiscent of the flatness of the prairies. Wright's attention to detail is impressive. From the Roman bricks to the nested eavestrough, he demanded that every line had to accentuate the flat, perfectly level visual plane.

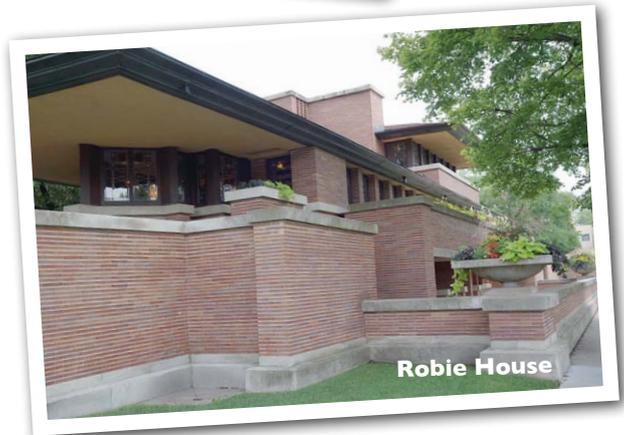
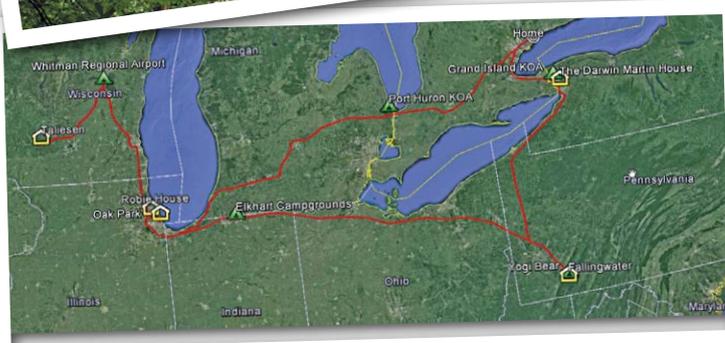
He used Roman-style bricks that are considerably longer than they are tall (24" x 4"). Even the mortar was deeply recessed on the top and bottom and accentuated



Fallingwater



Taliesin



Robie House

level to the face of the brick on the sides to enhance the horizontal visual effect and erase the vertical effect.

For the eavestrough to work visually, he nested the functional sloping eavestrough within larger, perfectly level cosmetic fascia. The inside gutters needed the slope to drain away the water, but that would harm the exactness for the horizontal lines, so he installed the sloping eavestroughs within the perfectly level outer shell to maintain the horizontal illusion. No vertical downspouts were permitted as they would ruin the result, so the water just fell out of drain holes at the ends of the troughs.

According to the Martin House Restoration Corporation which was formed to restore the home, the Darwin D. Martin House received National Historic Landmark status in 1986. Leading Frank Lloyd Wright scholars consider the house as one of Wright's finest achievements of the Prairie period and, indeed, of his entire career.

The complex consists of six interconnected buildings designed as a unified composition, including; the main Martin House and a pergola that connects it to a conservatory and carriage house with chauffeur's quarters and stables, the Barton House, a smaller residence for Martin's sister and brother-in-law, and a gardener's cottage added in 1909. The landscape design for the six-acre grounds of the complex is highly integrated with the overall composition of buildings.

The second leg (2) of the trip was from Grand Island to Mill Run, PA. A campsite just four miles from Fallingwater was reserved at Yogi Bear's Jellystone Park. If you have kids with you, then this campground is ideal. But, for adults not looking to stay in a circus-like setting, it is to be avoided. It was also very expensive for sites that are jammed closely together on uneven terrain. A valuable lesson was learned.

The night before our tour of Fallingwater, a severe thunderstorm raged through the region. The rainfall was extreme. As a result, our tour was slightly delayed. Architectural Digest reported after the storm that the waterfall that runs beneath Fallingwater had overflowed due to flooding, damaging the plunge pool beneath it and Jacques Lipchitz's sculpture, Mother and Child, that stood there. These events did not take away from the tour of this amazing multilayered building.

Wright designed Fallingwater as a weekend retreat for wealthy department store owners, Liliane, and Edger Kaufmann. Built in 1935, Fallingwater was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1966. What makes this home special is the many layers of cantilevers that jut out every which way. The core of the home has a huge robust vertical column rising upwards which underpins the horizontal layers, reminiscent of a tree. While very different from the Martin home, they share the theme to bring the indoors and the outdoors together. Wright's

design permits nature to flow transparently between the indoors and the outdoors. For example, giant rocks protrude from the stone floor beside the fireplace and perpendicular corner windows open fully, without the requisite corner post obstructing the view of nature. The construction style is simple, clean, and sturdy. Smooth concrete is used everywhere, mixed with slabs of rock, sharing one uniting natural colour scheme.

After visiting Fallingwater, we drove the third leg in two parts (3a), first to Elkhart, IN, to stop overnight at the Elkhart Campgrounds. It was difficult to do the Fallingwater tour and cover this extended drive all in the same day. It would be smarter to add an extra day.

After overnighing in Elkhart, it was onward to Oshkosh for the rest of this leg. Driving around the perimeter of Chicago via the toll truck route was a smart decision. We avoided driving the coach in downtown traffic, which is congested every day of the week. We drove this leg (3b) on a Sunday morning to avoid rush hour traffic around the perimeter of Chicago. It was far less stressful. Months in advance, we order an EZ-Pass toll road transponder, again, a smart decision as stopping to pay tolls adds to the duration of the drive time and accessing the pay terminals from a Class A can be difficult to reach. Often, exact change is required at automated toll terminals. The transponder allowed us to zoom by and the tolls were automatically paid. Such a joy.

Our plan was to drop the motorhome at the temporary AirVenture campground on the Whitman Regional Airport property where we would spend the second week attending our aviation gathering. We would use this site as a hub to visit Wright's Taliesin villa complex in Spring Green, WI, and later to drive back to Chicago to do the bicycle tour of 21 of his Oak Park homes. We added a walking tour of the famed Robie House in High Park following the bicycle tour. We would use the car to get to these next two sites.

From Oshkosh, we drove the car ride to Taliesin (5). It was nice not to feel every bump in the road as is experienced in the motorhome. RV parking at Taliesin is possible, but is limited. Several Class B and smaller Class C RVs were there.

Taliesin was Wright's country home for more than 50 years. He referred to it as a villa since it combined the attributes of his home, design studio, and a working farm, just like the villas that he saw while visiting Italy. At 37,000 sq. ft., this is an amazing home to tour. Taliesin was Wright's living lab. He experimented and tried out many of his creative project ideas and structural designs there before using them on paying customer homes. It is also home to a graduate program in architecture today and has been a learning centre since 1932. On January 7, 1976, Taliesin was recognized as a National Historic Landmark District by the National Park Service. It is currently being considered for an UNESCO site designation.

The two-hour tour of the grounds, house, and studio is worth the time. The guided tour brought forth many delightful and powerful stories, some legendary, of Wright's family, lifestyle, and business dealings. The tour is rich with storytelling and background information, so it was fun, entertaining, and educational. Our guide, Victoria, was a delight and articulately described life at the villa over the 100-year time span that it has served the Wright families.

For the next two legs (6a, 6b) of the trip, we were up very early for a 5:30 am departure for our bicycle tour in Chicago. It is a 173-mile drive from our base in Oshkosh, WI to the Chicago, IL, bicycle tour departure point and we had to be there before 9:15 am. We allowed three hours to make this Sunday morning run as we hoped to be free of traffic and construction at this hour. The bicycles were loaded on the car carrier the night before so we were ready to go as the early morning sun started to rise in the sky over Lake Winnebago. We arrived a

Leg	Route	Travel Time (Hours)	Miles	Kilometres	Notes
1	Toronto to Buffalo	2.5	124	200	Border Crossing
2	Buffalo to Mill Run	5.5	300	483	Tolls
3a	Mill Run to Elkhart	7.5	415	668	Tolls
3b	Elkhart to Oshkosh	5.5	281	452	Tolls
4	Local Wisconsin driving	6	272	438	Local
5	Oshkosh to Green Spring (Return)	4.5	242	389	By Car
6a	Oshkosh to Oak Park (Return)	7	346	557	By Car / Tolls
6b	Oak Park to High Park (Return)	1.5	36	58	By Car
7a	Oshkosh to Port Huron	9.5	515	829	Tolls
7b	Port Huron to Toronto	4.5	200	322	Border Crossing
Totals		54	2731	4396	

wee bit early; luckily a gourmet coffee shop was already open for business across the street.

Frank Lloyd Wright's largest collection of buildings and homes are in Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago. It is where he began his career and he outright designed or oversaw the remodelling of 25 structures there from 1889 to 1913. Wright's famed Prairie style of homes were developed in Oak Park and you can see many of his early influences in these designs. The Prairie style homes have distinguishing low profile hip roofs and large overhanging eaves. Some of these homes have Wright's signature stained glass windows that integrate the outside with the inside to harmonize the two environments into a united setting. Wright's work is said to have set the standard for 20th century architecture in the U.S. Many of the Wright houses and buildings in Oak Park are registered National Historic Landmarks.

On the bicycle tour, we explored these picturesque historic neighbourhoods with a guide who stopped and described each of 21 Wright-designed structures. Wright sites featured on this tour include Wright's own home and studio, Frank Thomas House, Heurtley House, Cheney House, Furbeck House, and more. The bike ride was not very difficult and even the most inexperienced cyclist could easily complete the tour. Rental bikes are available if you do not have your own bicycle to ride.

After the bicycle tour, we loaded the bikes back onto the car carrier to drive across town to the Robie House (6b) for a one-hour walking tour. The 18-mile drive to the Frederick C. Robie House in downtown Chicago can take as little as 30 minutes, but factor in traffic and construction delays, and the trip can easily take twice as much time. Plan accordingly. We made the drive on a Sunday at noon and it took 45 minutes.

Built in 1909 in High Park, another suburb of Chicago, the Robie House has a fortress-like strength to it that suggests a home far larger than its 9,062 square-feet. This Prairie style home is in the heart of the University of Chicago campus so it is ideally situated in a gentrified neighbourhood of majestic homes and stately buildings of higher learning. As a result, street parking is at a premium so this is not a place to bring an RV; it is far better to drive in by bus, taxi, or your own car.

The 60' x 180' property setting for the Robie House is small compared to the many acres used for typical Wright homes. The house occupies almost all of it. Robie was a man who loved technology, consequently during the early days of the first industrial age he had an attached three-car garage, which was unique in its day. Historically, horse and carriage barns were detached and set back from the home to limit odours.

When cars came along, this approach continued due to the smells from the early engines so an attached garage was a revolutionary idea at the time. The home has six indoor bathrooms, also astounding at a period when even one indoor bathroom was deemed to be a modern marvel. A special feature of the house was a hidden stair, accessed from the outside to permit the iceman to deliver ice directly into the rear of the icebox without entering the home. A three-storey home, its generous length softens the tallness and large pendulous eaves maintains the long, low prairie allusion that Wright desired for these homes. The colour scheme is muted yellow which conjures up visions of long sheaths of wheat swaying in the wind. The home offers an abundance of windows that were designed to never have coverings, but permitted some degree of privacy with the two-section design and flower boxes strategically mounted. This practice might have been fine for men, but perhaps was somewhat questionable for a women's privacy.

The Robie House (1909) in Chicago is very much like the Darwin Martin House (1903-1905) in Buffalo, so it was a fitting end to this Frank Lloyd Wright adventure trip. It gracefully bonds the start to the finish for the many homes that we have toured and experienced. While the Martin House is further along in its restoration to its original grandeur, the Robie House has features that advanced the Prairie Style for Wright. The half decade time line difference illustrates how Wright continually tweaked his designs and advanced his overarching thinking for the style.

Now it was time to return to Oshkosh for the next adventure before unwinding the trip towards home in Toronto (7a, 7b).

This Wright experience was well worth the time and effort. It brings together the arts and the sciences of home design and offers something interesting for everyone. Using the motorhome to undertake this adventure helps manage the costs and provided a level of ease and personal comfort that meant we could focus on the quest rather than the hassle of hotels, packing and unpacking, costly hotel food, and ridiculous parking fees. There is a serenity to RVing that cannot be had any other way. I encourage you to go RVing and discover your own experiences. 

Michael J. Martin is a passionate photographer, amateur writer, technology aficionado, licenced pilot, and lifelong explorer of learning new things. He lives in Toronto with his wife Candy and their dogs. They own a 36' Holiday Rambler diesel-pusher Class A motorhome and the entire family loves time together exploring new places.