



Beth Johanneck and Melanie Dunlap.

# Road trip

**Two friends travel Minnesota to find good food, fun places and interesting people**

*Story and photos by Audrey Kletscher Helbling*

**M**elanie Dunlap of Prior Lake sits behind the wheel of her 2002 Toyota hybrid car. Beth Johanneck of Richfield rides shotgun.

For three years now, these friends have hit the road, checking out mostly Minnesota places on one-day road trips from the Twin Cities. They've ventured across the border into Wisconsin a few times. But sometimes they don't even leave the metro.

Dunlap, who initiated the trips after Johanneck unexpectedly

lost the love of her life, researches their destinations and chooses at least one must-see point of interest to visit. Johanneck simply follows along, Canon PowerShot A 540 camera in hand.

Johanneck posts her photos and writes about their adventures in a blog at [countrymouse.blogharbor.com](http://countrymouse.blogharbor.com), which she launched in 2007. Her blog, Minnesota Country Mouse, a name derived from her rural Minnesota roots, gets 15,000 visitors a month.

She didn't start the blog to share their travels, Johanneck says. She simply wanted an outlet for the photos she

snapped with her new point-and-shoot digital camera. But showcasing her images and writing about the pair's jaunts quickly became the focus of her website. Johanneck also writes about family, everyday life and places she sometimes visits without her longtime friend.

When the two set out, they have no expectations. "We don't know what is going to happen," Johanneck says.

"No place can disappoint us," Dunlap adds.

They've explored river towns like Red Wing, Faribault, Northfield, Henderson, Montevideo and Granite Falls. Johanneck loves the Minnesota River Valley, where she once worked as the executive director of Redwood Regional

Tourism and facilitated designation of the Minnesota River Valley National Scenic Byway. She grew up on a farm near Wabasso on the southwestern Minnesota prairie. Dunlap, a nurse practitioner, was raised further to the west by Storden. The two moved to the metro area within years of each other, Johanneck first in the mid-1990s.

**“It’s a good time for reflection and good for the spirit.”**  
**–Beth Johanneck**

That prairie background fostered Johanneck’s passion for architecture, which she seeks out on their trips. “I like feeling cocooned,” she says. Appreciating the artistic side of architecture is part of her “genetic memory” imprinted by her artist mom, Marie Johanneck, and painter grandfather, Arnold Kramer, known as Minnesota’s “Grandpa Moses,” she says.

A self-taught writer and photographer, for whom photography has become a passion, Johanneck describes her work as primitive, like that of her late maternal grandpa. She calls herself a folk blogger. “It’s recording history in a very homespun, ordinary way,” she explains.

Getting into the history of the places they visit ranks high on the pair’s travel tour agenda as does meeting people. “The people pull us in,” Dunlap says. They’ll chat it up with shopkeepers, restaurateurs, fellow diners and ordinary people they meet on the street.

They poke around antique stores, quaint little shops and any place that looks interesting.

Johanneck has posted photos and written about handbags at Lillians in Excelsior, plants

at Tonkadale Greenhouse in Minnetonka, grain elevators in Belview, the Lake Superior Maritime Visitor Center in Duluth and an evening at Bootleggers Supper Club, an

old roadhouse in Granite Falls, and much more.

Food is also part of their experience. The two rave about the creamy, caraway seed-laced Reuben soup served at the Trout Scream Café in tiny Welch. Johanneck discovered her new favorite salad of “golden goat cheese fritters on a bed of baby spinach with pine nuts, sliced apples and dried cranberries” at the Liffey Irish Pub in St. Paul. And she’s partial to the chicken dumpling soup at The Calf Fiend Café in Redwood Falls.

Even when she’s dining, Johanneck pulls out her camera, shooting photos of sandwiches, baskets of sweet potato fries, restaurant interiors, even other diners. She looks for light and dark contrast in her photos, preferring natural light to flash, while considering colors and shapes. She always wanted to be a photographer, but instead pursued a business degree and works in patient financial services for a metro clinic and hospital.

She’s excited about promoting the places she visits and about providing an Internet presence to businesses that may not have one.

Johanneck is now also plugging homegrown Minnesota music, like that of Sacred Heart blues/country/folk musician Jerry Ostensoe, online.

She’s added podcasting, a 15-minute, on-demand Minnesota Country Mouse Radio talk show that features Minnesota talent.

She continues to promote her grandfather and his paintings at [arnoldkramer.com](http://arnoldkramer.com).

But about twice a month, you’ll find her sitting in the passenger seat of Dunlap’s Toyota. The two talk and share stories and laughter, as they head out on their next excursion.

“It’s a good time for reflection and good for the spirit,” Johanneck says of their drives.

And sometimes, it’s a good time to read. “Beth reads romance novels out loud on long trips,” Dunlap says.

Not because she wants to, her friend adds, but because “Melanie has no compunction.” It’s a word they picked up from all of that romance novel reading.

They laugh. And they talk about how lucky they are to share these road trip adventures. Lucky too, they agree, to meet so many new and interesting people in so many interesting places right here in Minnesota. [MM](http://midwestmixmagazine.com)



Johanneck (left) and Dunlap in front of the archway leading to historic Shattuck-St. Mary’s School in Faribault.