

Falling for Southern Minnesota

The 'land of 10,000 lakes' soars as an autumn destination for nature enthusiasts

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Minnesota, the "Land of 10,000 Lakes," is also the source of the Mississippi River. Perhaps the best time to visit is in the fall, when bald eagles outnumber the unofficial state bird — the mosquito.

It was autumn when my husband, Jim, and I visited the Twin Cities area and asked some locals to recommend an interesting route for us to follow in our motorhome. After hearing the town of Red Wing mentioned several times, we decided that we'd start our journey there and travel southeast on U.S. Highway 61 following the Mississippi River.



This section of highway is part of the Great River Road National Scenic Byway and the fall colors on the bluffs along the way from Red Wing to Winona are take-your-breath-away beautiful. With daytime temperatures in the 50s to 70s, it promised to be a pleasant journey.

Because many campgrounds close by Oct. 15, we planned our reservations carefully. We stayed at the RV parks at Treasure Island Resort and Casino near Red Wing and Prairie Island Campground in Winona. A few other campgrounds in the area were open, but the water had been turned off for the season.

Red Wing

By the time we arrived in Red Wing, we were ready to stretch our legs. Barn Bluff, a heavily treed and brightly colored ridge east of town, seemed like the perfect place for a hike. The small parking lot at the trailhead doesn't have designated RV parking, but on this weekday there was room for a motorhome. After

studying the map, we opted to hike the easiest trail to the top of the 340-foot bluff and come down a more challenging route. From atop the hill, we had a panoramic view of the Mississippi River Valley and the city of Red Wing — famous for its pottery and Red Wing Shoes.

Several centuries-old manufacturing businesses still thrive in this charming town of 16,000. Red Wing's pride in its footwear heritage is evident everywhere from street corners to the golf course. To celebrate its centennial in 2005, the Red Wing Shoe Company created the world's largest boot, weighing in at 2,300 pounds and standing 16 feet tall. If the old woman who lived in a shoe wants to upsize for all those children, this is it. The gigantic boot is housed in Red Wing's newest shoe store.



To further commemorate the first 100 years, local artists painted 36 4-foot-tall concrete sculptures fashioned after Red Wing's signature work boot. While some of the boots were sold to private collectors, the remaining ones adorn street corners and shopping malls.



Red Wing Shoe's presence is felt even at the Mississippi National Golf Links. The first hole on the Lowlands course is sponsored by the shoe company. The sign says, "Last time we saw 18 holes this tough, we put laces in 'em." The 36-hole championship public golf course has rolling fairways, spacious greens and magnificent views. On a warm day, it could be one of the best golf finds of the year. The well-maintained course is uncrowded and reasonably priced.

In the mid-1860s, European immigrants settled in the area. Skilled German potters created natural clay containers for processing and storing foods. Red Wing Pottery is a family business that's been operating for more than 140 years. It produces salt-glazed gray or tan stoneware with cobalt blue decorations, and Bristol glazeware with a uniform smooth finish. Visit the Red Wing Pottery Museum, or watch potters hand-turn their creations in the studio. Bowls, crocks and teapots are available for sale in the showroom. Fiestaware fans beware: This is also the single largest U.S. outlet for the popular dinnerware. Better make room in the motorhome.

Cyclists will find bicycling bliss on the 19.7-mile-long Cannon Valley Trail. Formerly a railroad corridor connecting Red Wing and Cannon Falls, the asphalt trail parallels the scenic Cannon River. Keen observers are likely to spot white-tailed deer, eagles, beavers and other wildlife.

South of Red Wing, Frontenac State Park is a birdwatcher's paradise. This jewel lies beside a widening in the river called Lake Pepin. Trees in the park and the nearby town of

Old Frontenac flaunted vivid shades of amber, ruby and emerald.

Wabasha Continuing our drive along the Mississippi, we came to the National Eagle Center in Wabasha. Here, four bald eagles and one golden eagle reside. These eagles had been injured and rehabilitated, but couldn't be returned to their natural habitat. Countless eagles live year-round outside the center, with hundreds more attracted to the unfrozen feeding grounds in the winter.

Upstairs in the National Eagle Center, flag historian Robert Richardson is passionate about telling America's story through its state flags. His personal collection of antique flags is displayed in the rotunda. If you're a history buff, go on a Wednesday, Saturday or Sunday to hear his stories about eagles and other symbols used in state flags.

Around the corner is the Wind Whisper West Kimono Gallery. This one-of-a-kind shop specializes in vintage Japanese wedding kimonos. Owner Richard Fuller has 2,500 kimonos in his collection, but only a fraction of them are on display. Most garments are sold to collectors for \$300 to \$900.

Kellogg

In nearby Kellogg, LARK Toys is a must-see if you're traveling with children, and highly recommended even for adults. Not only is it one of the largest independent toy stores in the U.S., it also has an antique toy museum, an 18-hole miniature golf course and a carousel with hand-carved creatures.

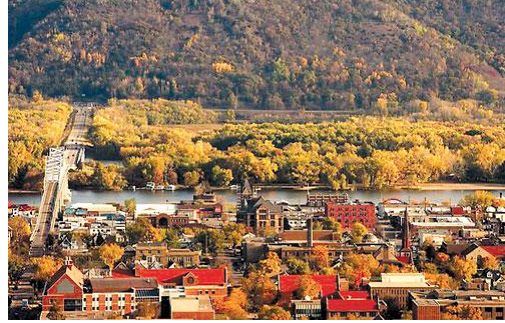
The carousel is the result of a nine-year collaboration of three local artists and craftsmen. Tim Monson joined pieces of basswood to create large blocks. Bill Stark carved intricate, fanciful animals, and Mary Eversman painted each one by hand. Carving was done on-site so people could watch the progress.

Winona

Even after seeing how excited Minnesotans were about shoes, eagles and kimonos, we still weren't prepared for Winona's passions: banks, museums and a cemetery. It's easy to understand the enthusiasm over eagles or museums, but banks? And a cemetery?

Many of the banks, churches and public buildings in Winona have massive stained-glass windows. An original Tiffany window rises above the entrance to Winona National Bank. With cameras in hand and mouths agape, my husband and I were easily identified as tourists. The receptionist encouraged us to look inside the massive steel vault with a 22.5-ton door, and tour the wildlife museum. Yes, that's right, in a bank we were invited to look at the gun collection and African safari trophies of the bank's original owners.

On a walking tour of historic downtown Winona, you'll see fine examples of Prairie School and Romanesque architecture. Many of these buildings have art glass windows, but none is more impressive than the Tiffany window at Watkins Inc., makers of baking products and personal care items. The window depicts Winona's famous Sugar Loaf Mountain with the Mississippi River in the foreground.



Tourist literature didn't mention it, but the RV park manager insisted we see Winona's Woodlawn Cemetery. "It's a peaceful place to enjoy the fall colors," he promised. He was right.

Winona also has its share of museums — all offering a unique perspective on the area's history. Overlooking the Mississippi River, the Minnesota Marine Art Museum is not to be missed. Having recently opened its fourth art gallery, it showcases a fine collection of more than 60 paintings from the Impressionism, Hudson River School and Luminist movements. Downtown, you can find the Polish Museum, the Winona County Historical Museum and more.

Great River Bluffs State Park is a relaxing way to end your exploration of Minnesota's Mississippi River Valley. It has a quiet, primitive campground 500 feet above the river. Read a book or grab your binoculars and add a few birds to your life list. The park is along a major flyway for eagles, hawks and waterfowl.

Minnesotans are proud and passionate people, and with good reason. They are proud of those 10,000 lakes and the mighty Mississippi, and passionate about their outdoor recreation. They take pride in their history, whether it's told in shoes or stained glass, and love sharing it with others.

This is a state I'm delighted to have visited. And there wasn't a single mosquito.