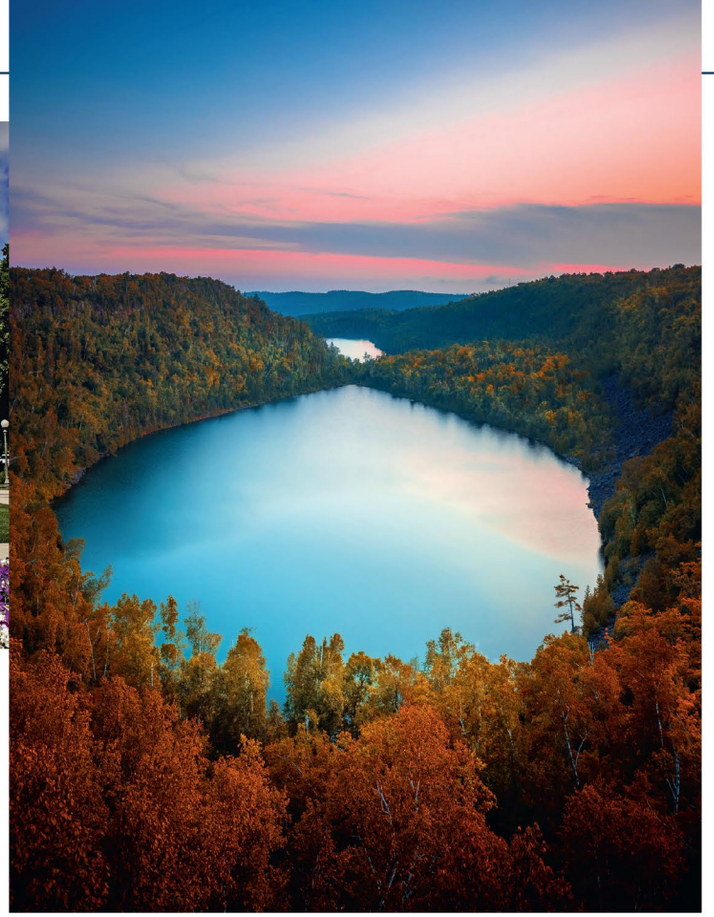
Minnesota nice



"Minnesota nice" is a phrase used to describe the residents of Minnesota, but is the midwest state a nice place to visit? You betcha! Minnesota is also outdoorsy, artsy, edgy, sporty, foodie – and has just the right amount of quirky. From canoeing in one of the nation's last great wildernesses, to dining at a one-of-a-kind award-winning restaurant, or following in the path of Minnesota music legends, there is so much to explore in the true north state.

OUTDOORSY

Tucked up against the border of Canada, Minnesota may be as far away as you can get from the ocean, but you'll find water everywhere – and locals taking full advantage of it. Even the state's 10,000 lakes don't seem enough, with a sea of aquatic adventures filling their waters in the warm summer months. On any given day you will find folks boating, kayaking, fishing, standup paddleboarding or water skiing – which, unsurprisingly considering all those lakes, was invented in Minnesota. When winter throws its white blanket over the state, join the hardy locals on the frozen lakes for ice skating, pond hockey, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing or ice fishing.

Minnesota also has one impressively large lake. Lake Superior is the most expansive body of fresh water by area in the world, but the landlubbers will love the 300-mile Superior Hiking Trail that skirts along the rugged coastline. The trail meanders its way through white cedar forests, down to thundering waterfalls and climbs up cragged bluffs with elevated vistas of the lake. There are over 90 free backcountry campsites to stop for the night along the route, but if a hot shower beckons you can stay in one of the cabins or historic lodges right on the rocky lakefront.

Have you heard of Lake Itasca? Probably not, but this small lake has a consequential part in one of the world's great rivers. The mighty Mississippi begins its 2,340-mile journey to the Gulf of Mexico from Lake Itasca, then on its winding journey south slices through the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

There, you can jump on a paddleboat cruise at sunset, dine al fresco on its banks or bike the 51-mile Grand Rounds Scenic Byway, which takes you on an off-street urban adventure through parklands, around lakes and along the shores of the Mississippi River.

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Even in the city, nature at its most dramatic is within easy reach. Watch the cascading water ripping over the bluff at Minnehaha Falls, then hike along the river through a forest of oak, elm, silver maple, basswood, hackberry and cottonwood trees.

Previous spread (clockwise from the left): Known as the Land of 10,000 Lakes, you are never far away from the water in Minnesota; The Minnesota State Capitol is a Twin Cities landmark; The Bean and Bear Lakes are considered a crown jewel of the Superior Hiking Trail; Minneapolis is home to a vibrant arts and culture scene; The easily accessible Gooseberry Falls; Lake Superior is the largest freshwater lake in the world.

This spread (clockwise from below): Minnesota is a four-season destination; The quirky Spoonbridge and Cherry in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, one of the largest urban sculpture gardens in the United States; Prince's Paisley Park is open to the public for tours; Bob Dylan was born in Duluth, Minnesota's main port on the Great Lakes.

ARTSY

In the Twin Cities, art is always close at hand, from the many commissioned murals that adorn city buildings to a collection of progressive galleries. And even the galleries are a work of art. Designed by architect Frank Gehry, the swooping silver and twisted metal Weisman Art Museum is the sibling and predecessor of the iconic Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Inside, the airy main galleries hold cool collections of 20th-century American art, ceramics and Korean furniture.

The city's parks also come alive with art, and in the front yard of the contemporary Walker Art Center is one of the largest urban sculpture gardens in the country. Studded with contemporary and colourful works, the literal cherry on top is a whimsical giant cherry dangling on the edge of a 33ft-high spoon. The iconic *Spoonbridge and Cherry* was designed especially for the park by pop-art artists Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.

Minnesota's chilly winter doesn't even deter outdoor artists from showcasing their work. Slide around the ice at the Art Shanty Project, a four-weekend experiential art installation held on a frozen Lake Harriet, where more than 150 artists create outlandish artwork and performances inspired by the pop-up ice fishing villages that dot the frozen lakes across the state.

EDGY

Minnesotans have always been visionaries in music, film, art and literature. Here are just a few names that you might recognise: Prince, Bob Dylan, Eddie Cochran, the Coen brothers, Charles Schulz and F Scott Fitzgerald.

For all his fame, genre-defying music artist Prince remained loyal to Minneapolis. He may have only been 5ft 2in, but Prince's legacy looms large around the city, from giant murals to music venues and the king of them all, Paisley Park. You can tour Prince's wildly eccentric and predominantly purple mansion, which includes a full Hollywood-style sound stage, four recording studios, a nightclub and a room filled with 300 pairs of his extravagant shoe collection. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the release of the movie *Purple Rain*, and you can relive it all in the new *Purple Rain* musical, which will have its world premiere in Minneapolis in spring 2025. You can also sleep like a Prince: the house used for his abode in the movie is now available on Airbnb. The bedroom is an exact replica of the one seen in the film, with moody purple lighting, Prince sheet music and a mural of eyes gazing over the bed.

Other nods to former illustrious residents include the Duluth Dylan Fest in the bard's birthplace, a scavenger hunt for statues of Charles Schultz's *Peanuts* characters in his hometown of St. Paul and a walking tour of the childhood haunts of F Scott Fitzgerald, also in St. Paul.

FOODIE

The Twin Cities has a foodie scene that rivals bigger and brasher cities, from the award-winning modern Indigenous restaurant Owamni, which showcases Native foods and culture, to the diverse cuisine from the local Hmong, Somali and South American communities. You can sample the world in the city's burgeoning food halls, including the Hmongtown Marketplace and the Midtown Global Market, but don't miss trying some of Minnesota's homegrown fare.

Top of the list should be a Jucy Lucy. There is debate about who created the first Jucy Lucy, but hit up either Matt's Bar and Grill or the 5-8 Club for a burger where the cheese is inside the beef patty. A word of warning: the volcanically molten American cheese can burn the roof off your mouth.

For some more interesting fare head to the Minnesota State Fair. Founded in 1859, it's the biggest state fair in the US by daily attendance. It's also the world food on a stick capital. You can try deep-fried Spam curds on a stick, deep-fried Twinkie on a stick or deep-fried spaghetti and meatballs on a stick. And if it's not on a stick, the food is wrapped in bacon. You haven't lived until you've tried deep-fried turkey leg wrapped in bacon. Then wash it all down with one of 300 different types of beer, including chocolate chip cookie beer and dill pickle beer.

QUIRKY

From giant trolls hiding in the forest to a museum devoted to pork in a can, you can get your fill of quirkiness in Minnesota. In the town of Brainerd, a 26ft statue of the mythical giant lumberjack Paul Bunyan welcomes you by name when you walk up to him, while at Detroit Lakes you can go in search of giant wooden trolls hidden away in the forest. For a unique museum experience, visit the Spam™ Museum in the town of Austin, which is dedicated to all things Spam and has the world's most comprehensive collection of spiced ham artefacts.

With all those lakes, the locals have come up with some novel ways to get on them. I know, let's put a sauna in the middle of a lake. The Sisu + Löyly floating sauna in Duluth and Grand Marais is the first of its kind open to the public in the country.

Whether it's outdoors or indoors or summer or winter, you'll find happy locals out and about enjoying their state. In fact, the London-based Institute for Quality of Life recently released its 2024 Happy City Index, and Minneapolis came on top as the happiest city in the United States – and was the only city in the country to make the list. No wonder everyone is so nice.

GETTING THERE Minneapolis – St. Paul (MSP) International Airport is served by non-stop daily flights from Heathrow. The Light Rail Transit (LRT) connects the airport to downtown Minneapolis.

BEST TIME TO GO If you're aiming for warm weather and plenty of outdoor activities, late spring to early autumn (May to September) is best.

WHERE TO STAY In the city, The Hewing Hotel (hewinghotel.com) in the historic Warehouse District boasts a rooftop sauna, as well as a rustic Nordic-inspired restaurant. Or do as Minnesotans do and book a lakeside cabin in the summer.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Go to *exploreminnesota.com/en-GB* for details.

Bon Voyage offer a six-night "Land of Lakes" tour of Minnesota, visiting Minneapolis and St. Paul, Duluth, Bemidji and St. Cloud, including car hire, hotel accommodation and return flights from the UK from just **£1,995 per person**. Visit bon-voyage.co.uk or call 0800 316 3012 to find out more.

SPORTY

Minnesota has seven major professional sports teams – baseball, basketball, American football, ice hockey and soccer – and if you time your trip right, you could attend three different sports in one week. The champion of all the venues is US Bank Stadium, the home of the Minnesota Vikings football team. This architectural marvel is one of the most unique stadiums in the world, and attending a game here is an electrifying experience – from the razzle-dazzle of the pre-game entertainment to the deafening jeers from the purple-painted fans when the opposition team has the ball. And, if you can't catch a game, be sure to take the guided tour, where you can go into the changing rooms and score a touchdown out on the field.

All the major sports stadiums are easily accessible from the downtowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul, so it's easy to catch a game any time. In the summer you can take part in America's "national pastime" and soak up the sunshine during a Twins baseball game at Target Field or join in the chants standing in the "Wonderwall" at a Minnesota United soccer match.

Want some exercise? How about walking around the biggest mall in America, the Mall of America™? You'll need to walk more than three miles to see all 520 stores. It might be worth it, though – there's no sales tax on clothing and retailers from around the world have outlets there. And when you want a break from shopping, there's a full-scale indoor amusement park right in the middle of the mall.

This page from the top: Game day at the striking US Bank Stadium in Minneapolis; The Mall of America is the largest shopping and entertainment complex in the United States.

Right (from the top): Giant wooden trolls await visitors at Detroit Lakes; The Minnesota State Fair is known for offering many different varieties of food, often on a stick; Ten-foot statue of Paul Bunyan who, according to legend, created Minnesota's 10,000 lakes with his blue ox, Babe.

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