



LAKE PEPIN HIGHLIGHTS
 Clockwise from top left: The view of Lake Pepin from Maiden Rock Bluff; Maiden Rock Creamery; downtown Alma's National Historic District; Pepin's Harbor View Café.

LAKE PEPIN PERFECTION

FALL IS THE PERFECT TIME TO EXPLORE THE BLUFF-TOP VIEWS, ECLECTIC ART GALLERIES, AND DELECTIOUS RESTAURANTS. ALONG WISCONSIN'S GREAT RIVER ROAD. | BY ANNA BEFORT

Growing up, my family made annual pilgrimages to Harbor | View Cafe in Pepin, Wisconsin, a tradition that started when I was a baby.

We'd load into the car for the interminably long hour-and-a-half ride, and I'd inevitably *doze* off in the back seat as my mom and her friends chatted around me.

Three decades later, my mom still makes the pilgrimage to Harbor View every spring when it opens, and again before it closes in fall. She's not alone in that tradition. But what many people miss in the Harbor View to-and-fro are the quiet charms of the surrounding area: the eclectic art galleries, the artisan food shops, the wineries rising unexpectedly from farmland. To appreciate all of it requires an overnight, if not a whole weekend. And one of the best times to go is fall, when the bluffs along Lake Pepin light up in blazing reds and oranges.

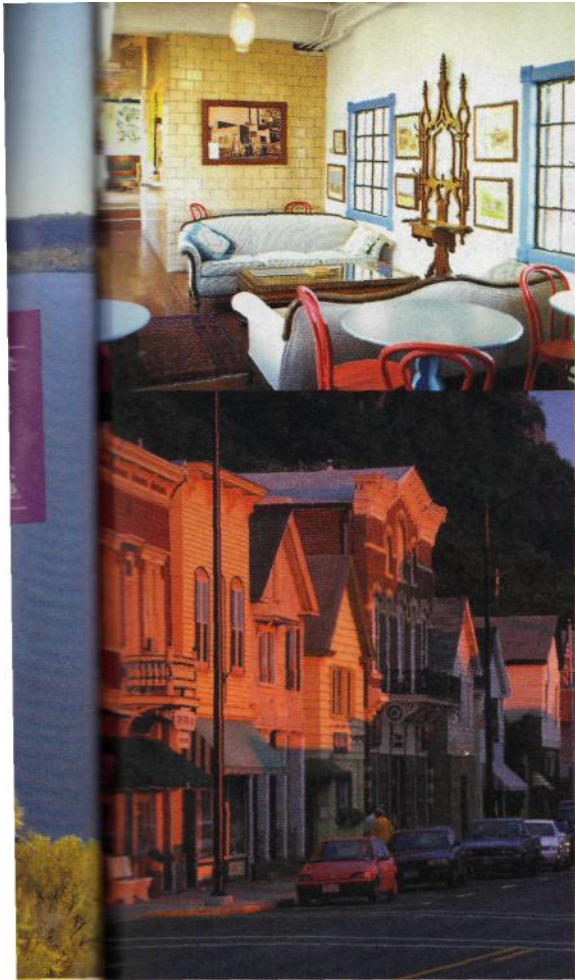
MAIDEN ROCK

An hour and a half southeast of the Twin Cities, on Wisconsin's Great River Road (aka Hwy. 52) marks your entry into the scenic riverside towns. Christenyt as I always do, with a stop at the remodeled **Smiling Pelican Bakeshop**

where the cookies still cost 85 cents. Take your lavender-ginger sugar cookie or slice of triple berry pie to the porch, where you can savor it in an old-fashioned rocking chair. It sends a deliberate message to your psyche: It's time to slow down.

Check in for the night at **Maiden**





Rock Creamery, one of the few places for families to comfortably stay in the area. Owner Kathy McNay has resurrected this 1945 creamery building as an event space, coffee shop, art gallery, and two-apartment inn, though only the inn was operating when we visited in July. City dwellers will feel at home in The Gallery Loft, with its 12-foot ceilings, hardwood floors, and IKEA furnishings. Just be forewarned: Trains are a regular part of life along the Great River Road, and you'll hear them—even feel them—here.

Maiden Rock's main drag is home to a couple art galleries and biker bars, but not a whole lot more, so explore the countryside with a visit to **Pepin Farm Pottery** (call ahead). Gracious owners Peter and Mary Deneen have been making pottery for four decades through their St. Paul wholesale company, but their bluff-top studio is a more personal workshop, featuring one-of-a-kind pieces, lake views, and a charming guesthouse.

STOCKHOLM

For a town of only 82 (or 97, depending on the sign), Stockholm has a lot going on.

Founded by Swedes some 160 years ago, it seems to have an art studio or gourmet food shop around every corner.

If the weather cooperates, have brunch on the patio at Bogus Creek Cafe & Bakery, where you can watch the town go by as you enjoy from-scratch breakfast burritos or Swedish pancakes with lingonberries. Then stroll the compact blocks of the town center, making sure to stop into Abode, a well-curated home store and gallery run by two former Twin Citians and their store dog, Tully. Co-owner Steve Grams recently took over the space next door, and his past life as a co-op buyer shines in Stockholm General's nearly all-local selection of artisan beers, cheeses, and other foodstuffs. In the same building, you'll also find the new WideSpot Performing Arts Center (which, the weekend we were there, was offering a burlesque class for \$29, complete with boa and gloves) and Stockholm Pie Company, which makes a killer cherry-berry pie.

Get a closer look at the area's limestone bluffs and fall foliage on Maiden Rock Bluff. The relatively mild mile-and-a-half

Travel

walk brings you to the edge of the 400-foot bluff, where legend has it that the young Dakota princess Winona flung herself to her death rather than marry the man her father, Chief Red Wing, had chosen for her. This area is part of the Mississippi Flyway, one of the country's major bird-migration routes, so chances are good you'll see peregrine falcons or other raptors overhead.

Drive a little farther on County Road E to visit Maiden Rock Apples, an 80-acre farm with more than 25 apple varieties. The orchard expanded in 2008 to become a winery and cidery, and it's a happy addition. At the tasting bar, you can sample its apple wines (including a tart crab-apple vino), plus the most popular offering: Honey Crisp Hard, a very Midwestern take on hard cider.

PEPIN

There's a good reason my mom has been road-tripping to Harbor View Cafe for 31 years. Pepin's restaurant-by-the-lake continues to deliver fantastic food and friendly service in a completely unpre-

tentious setting. I can't resist the halibut with black butter caper sauce, but you really can't go wrong here. Plan to arrive a little before or after peak dining times, as Harbor View doesn't take reservations (or credit cards), and waits can be long in fall color season. After dinner, head down to the marina, one of three on Lake Pepin, and walk onto the jetty to get a better view of the 21-mile-long lake.

Drive a couple miles south of Pepin on the Great River Road, and you'll find another local gem: Tiffany Bottoms State Natural Area. Its 13,000 acres of wetland and forest are home to rare birds and other wildlife, making it a good spot for canoeing and walking, or fishing and hunting if that's more your speed. (If you're pressed for time, it also looks quite pretty out the window of the car.)

NELSON

At first glance, Nelson feels like a stereotypical Wisconsin burg, filled with fireworks shops and small-town bars. But don't rush to judgment—at least

not until you've been to Nelson Cheese Factory. If you're a cheese lover, you'll feel like a kid in a gourmet candy shop. Browse the food store, then find a table on the pretty patio and order a glass of wine or beer and the cheese board, which might feature anything from cranberry-chipotle cheddar to a perfectly pungent bleu. It's a sophisticated take on Wisconsin cheese, though you'll certainly find cheese curds here too.

In the past five years, this area has seen a spate of new open-air dining venues on farms, featuring fresh ingredients and limited hours (the Tuesdays-only A to Z Produce and Bakery pizza farm and Vino in the Valley being two examples). But the first was The Stone Barn, set on a family farm outside Nelson. All that's left of the 115-year-old namesake barn is its stone foundation, which provides a perfect ring-around for the outdoor dining area. The only food on the menu is thin-crust *pizza*, but it's beautifully done—fresh and crisp from the brick oven, loaded with locally raised meats and just-picked organic herbs.

Travel

ALMA

Sandwiched between the bluffs and the Mississippi, Alma is not a big town: It consists mainly of two streets. But those streets have become a National Historic District, thanks to their well-preserved 19th-century buildings. Start with espresso (or ice cream, if you want to maintain a Wisconsin dairy theme) at **Fire & Ice** in the Hotel de Ville, then browse Main Street's historic storefronts. If you're here in November, you may be able to spot tundra swans making their annual migration; **Wings Over Alma Nature & Art Center** can provide the details and may even be able to set you up with a rail-car bird tour through Tiffany Bottoms park.

The best overlook in the area is at **Buena Vista Park**, 500 feet above Alma. It's an easy drive—no hiking required—and offers fantastic views of the river. From there, it's a short drive to **Danzinger Vineyards**, which just opened its tasting room in 2010. Sample three wines for free on the weekend, then get a glass of your favorite to sip on the patio-enjoying the bluff views for a few minutes longer. •

I THE SPECIFICS!

MAIDEN ROCK

* **Smiling Pelican Bakeshop**-
W3556 Hwy. 35, 715-448-3807

* **Maiden Rock Creamery**-
W3487 Hwy. 35, 612-670-4571
maidenrockcreamery.com

* **Pepin Farm Pottery**-W3706110th Ave.,
715-448-3300, pepinfarmpottery.com

STOCKHOLM

Bogus Creek Cafe & Bakery
N2049 Spring St., 715-442-5017

Abode-N2030 Spring St.,
715-442-2266,
abodegallery.com

Stockholm General-N2030
Spring St.,
715-442-9077
stockholmgeneral.com

Stockholm Pie
Company-N2030
Spring St., 715-442-5505,
stockholmpie company.com

Maiden Rock Bluff-Long Lane,
off Co.

Rd. E, dnr.wi.gov

Maiden Rock Apples-W12266
King Lane,
715-448-3502,
maidenrockapples.com

+ Strategies

When to Go: Vibrant fall colors usually appear between late September and late October. The Fresh Art Tour (freshart.org), featuring 17 studios and galleries, runs October 7-9. Keep in mind: Many area businesses shut down or have limited hours late fall through early spring.

Getting There: It's an easy hour-and-a-half drive from the Cities. Head east on I-94 to US 61, southeast on US 10 to Prescott, then south on WI 35.

Where to Stay: In addition to **Maiden Rock Creamery** (\$175/night), another good spot is **Journey Inn B&B** (\$110-\$165/night; W3671200th Ave., Maiden Rock, 715-448-2424, journeyinn.net), a rural eco-retreat with organic breakfasts and spa services. **One of my all-time favorites is Great River B&B** (\$175/night; Hwy. 35, Stockholm, 800-S57-4756, greatriverbedandbreakfast.com), where you get an entire 1869 stone cottage to yourself. **River Road Inn** (\$200-\$255/night; Hwy. 35, Stockholm, 612-306-2100, riverroadinn.com) is a much newer, luxe space, built in 2005, with spa showers and balconies overlooking the lake. For traditional B&Bs, the new **Spring Street Inn** (\$90-\$125/night; N2037 Spring St., Stockholm, 651-528-9616, springstreetinnwis.com) and **The Tritsch House** (\$95-\$135/night; 601 S. 2nd St., Alma, 507-450-6573, thetritschhouse.com) are two tasteful options.

PEPIN

» **Harbor View Cafe-3141st St.,**
715-442-3893, harborviewpepin.com

* **Tiffany Bottoms State Natural**
Area-Along Hwy. 35 and Hwy. 25 between
Pepin and Nelson, dnr.wi.gov

NELSON

* **Nelson Cheese Factory-5237 Hwy. 35 S.,**
715-673-4725, nelsoncheese.com

« **The Stone Barn-5685 Co. Rd. KK,**
715-673-4478, nelsonstonebarn.com

ALMA

* **Fire & Ice-305N. Main St.,**
612-423-3653

* **Wings Over Alma Nature & Art**
Center-118 N. Main St., 608-685-3303,
wingsoveralma.org

« **Buena Vista Park-Buena Vista Rd.,**
off Co. Rd. E, 608-685-3330

* **Danzinger Vineyards -**
S2015 Crapeview Lane, 608-685-6000,
danzingervineyards.com