

Weekend Getaway | Brian E. Clark

Winter in Door County offers solitude, quiet



Door County Chamber of Commerce

A pair of lighthouses used to guide ships into Baileys Harbor, including the Upper Range Light building. The Upper Range Light is in the Ridges Sanctuary, a 1,600-acre pristine nature and wildlife area.

By Brian E. Clark, Special to the Journal Sentinel
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In the summer, it can seem like half of Chicago decamps for Door County, crowding the eateries, roads, galleries, lodging and parks.

This time of year, however, the pace up on this bony peninsula that juts out into Lake Michigan is much slower, making it an ideal spot for a quiet, contemplative escape.

Though many businesses are closed during the week, others are open on weekends. And some inns, B&Bs and hotels offer special deals to attract visitors.

"Sometimes, when I venture out into Peninsula State Park, about the only other living things I see have four legs," said Andy Coulson, who runs Fish Creek's White Gull Inn.

"I really do believe winter in Door County is the perfect place for a solo traveler or couple that wants to get away from the crowds," he said.

"There are enough lodging facilities and restaurants for the smaller numbers of visitors, and each town has several quality shops or galleries that stay open through the winter," he added.

According to the peninsula's visitor bureau, 125 stores and galleries, 75 restaurants and another 125 motels, hotels and inns are open during the winter.

With the slower pace, Coulson said guests - if they want - often have the undivided attention of local residents.

"You can chat with your innkeeper or the person serving you dinner, wander into one of the few shops or galleries that are open and actually get to know the owner," he said.

"It's not that you can't do this in summer, it's just that now you may be the only other person in the room," he said. "Sometimes that conversation can lead to a very unique experience, like being invited to go ice fishing."

But he warns that Door County in winter isn't for everyone.

"There are no waterparks, so activities tend to be self-directed, quiet and peaceful," he said. "It draws a special type of person, someone who doesn't need to be in a crowd all the time, and whose idea of a good time is looking skyward and seeing a lone eagle soaring over the bluff. Or standing alone at Sunset Beach and watching the thundering waves of a winter storm breaking on the beach."

Coulson said some of his guests just want to curl up in front of the fireplace and read a book, or maybe take a walk through the semi-deserted streets of Fish Creek.

His inn also has teamed up with the nearby **Thorp House Inn** to offer four **Holiday Progressive Dinner** weekends in December and January, and they host monthly concerts featuring nationally touring folk musicians.

For the movable feasts, diners start at the 110-year-old **Thorp House** for the first course of hors d'oeuvres and champagne, then travel by horse-drawn wagon to the 116-year-old **White Gull Inn** for the remaining courses.

After dinner, guests can grab a mug of hot cider and enjoy caroling around the White Gull bonfire with Door County singers **Katie Dahl** and **Jess Holland**.

For those who like to get out and about, he often directs them to one of the county's five state parks - and nearly two dozen county parks - where they can wander for hours on skis, snowshoes or just footpaths.

Those parks include:

Newport State Park, 475 County NP near Ellison Bay, boasts 2,400 acres of wilderness, 11 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline and 30 miles of hiking trails. It also has 12.5 miles of groomed, single-track cross-country tracks, including the Europe Bay, Newport and Fern trails.

Peninsula State Park, 9462 Shore Road, Gibraltar, is the biggest of the county's state parks with 3,776 acres on Green Bay. It has hiking, an impressive 16 miles of groomed ski trails, sledding, an observation tower, six miles of shoreline and the 144-year old Eagle Bluff Lighthouse.

Potawatomi State Park, 3740 County PD, Sturgeon Bay, covers 1,200 acres and has 2 miles of Green Bay shoreline with six miles of hiking trails, nine miles of groomed ski trails and observation towers.

Whitefish Dunes State Park, 3275 Clark Lake Road, Sturgeon Bay, has 867 acres of forest and dunes on the rugged Lake Michigan shore. The park includes a mile of sandy beach, two miles of rocky shore and the highest sand dunes in Wisconsin. It also has nearly 14 miles of hiking, skiing and snowshoeing trails.

The Ridges Sanctuary, 8270 Highway 57, Baileys Harbor, ridgessanctuary.org, is a 1,600-acre pristine natural area. Formed in 1937, it's the oldest private nature preserve in the state. It is designated as a State Natural Area, a National

Natural Landmark, an Audubon Important Birding Area and a Wisconsin Wetland Gem. In the winter, it offers snowshoe hikes and other programs.

If your fancy runs to vineyards, these peninsula wineries are open for tours or tastings:

Harbor Ridge Winery, 4690 Rainbow Ridge Ct., Egg Harbor; **Red Oak Winery and Vineyard**, 325 N. Third Ave., Sturgeon Bay; **Door Peninsula Winery**, 5806 Highway 42, Sturgeon Bay; **Orchard Country Winery & Market**, 9197 Highway 42, Fish Creek; **Simon Creek Vineyard & Winery**, 5896 Bocek Road, Sturgeon Bay; **Stone's Throw Winery**, 3382 County Road E, Egg Harbor; **Von Stiehl Winery**, 115 Navarino St., Algoma; and **Parallel 44 Vineyard & Winery**, N2185 Sleepy Hollow Road, Kewaunee.

Clausen said a wide variety of classes are available at the **Clearing Folk School**, 12171 Garrett Bay Road, Ellison Bay; **Peninsula School of Art**, 3900 County Road F, Fish Creek; and the **Hands On Art Gallery**, 3655 Peninsula Players Road, Fish Creek.

If you'd like to brush up on your cooking skills, consider a class at the **Inn at Kristofer's**, 10716 N. Bay Shore Road, Sister Bay; **Savory Spoon Cooking School**, 12042 Highway 42, Ellison Bay; and **Northeastern Wisconsin Technical College**, 229 N.14th Ave., Sturgeon Bay.

And if your idea of a relaxing getaway includes a massage or some other kind of treatment, these spas offer winter hours:

The Spa at Sacred Grounds, 10453 Townline Road, Ephraim; **Spa Verde**, 7821 State Highway 42, Egg Harbor; **Saguaro Day Spa**, 3899 Old Highway Road, Sturgeon Bay; **Lori's Spa Essence**, 3290 Gibraltar Road, Fish Creek; **Lavender Spa**, 9126 Highway 42, Fish Creek; and **Door County Massage**, which has therapists who will come to your lodgings, (920) 743-1092 or doorcounty_massage@yahoo.com.

For more information on Door County in the winter, see doorcounty.com or call (920) 743-4456.

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