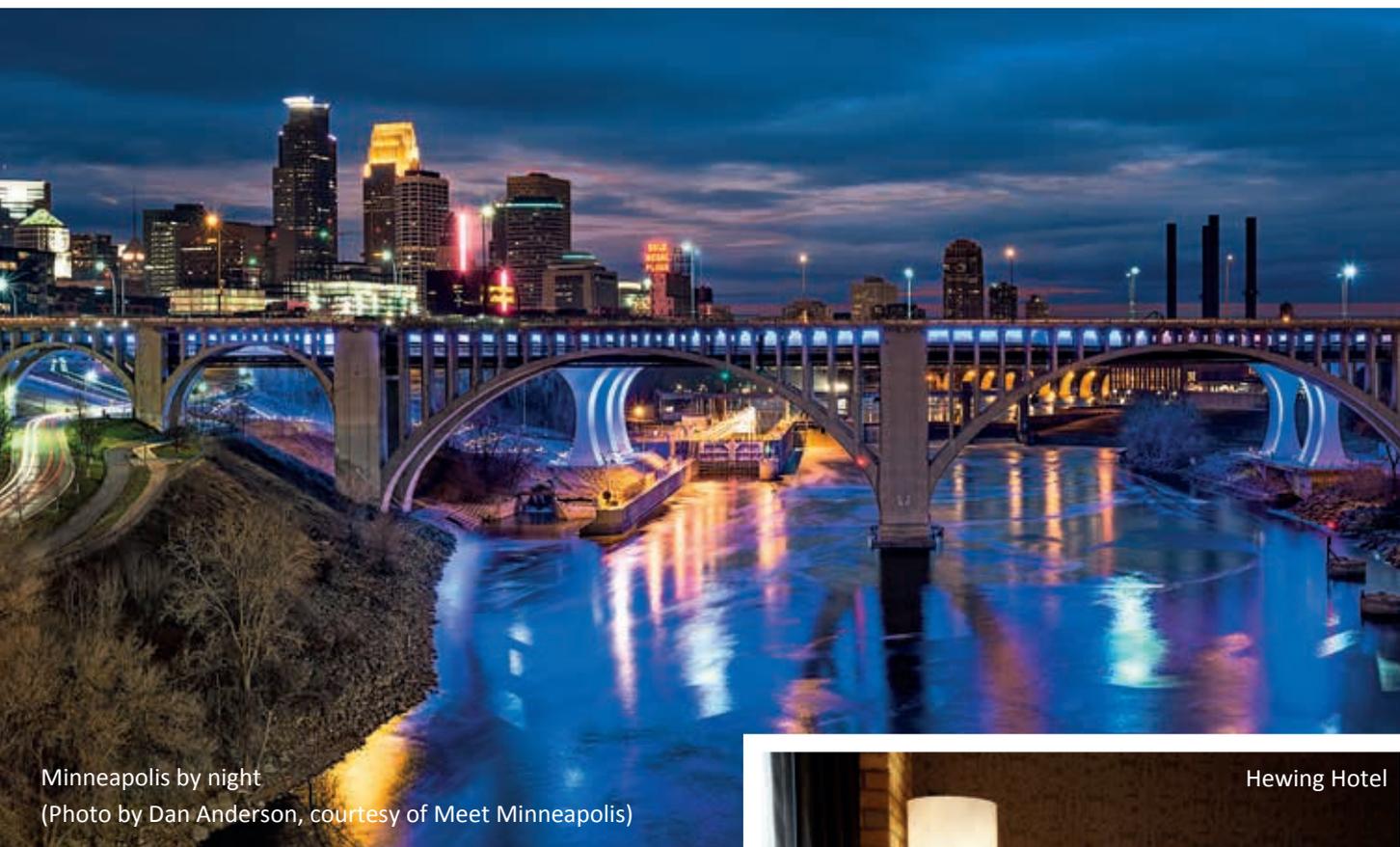


Minnesota Nice

Minnesota Nice is a form of Northern Plains' charm that makes this Great Lakes State a welcoming place to visit. Giselle Whiteaker explores the Land of 10,000 Lakes.

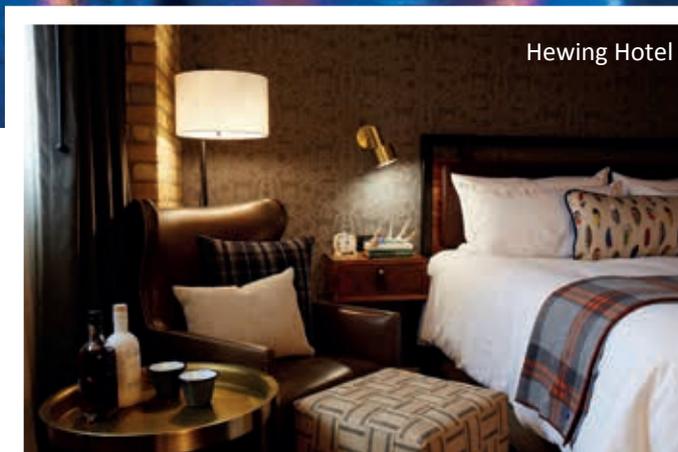


Minneapolis by night
(Photo by Dan Anderson, courtesy of Meet Minneapolis)

The Minnesotan air is frigid when I step out of the rental car and walk the few paces to the entrance of the Hewing Hotel. It's nearing the end of winter and my breath forms into small, white clouds. I've never visited the state during the big chill and I'm keen to learn how Minnesotans keep warm.

The Hewing Hotel is a good place to start. The former farm implements warehouse has been reshaped into luxury lodging. Leather armchairs sit by the fire burning in the lounge and plush rugs lie on wooden floorboards. My lamp-lit room feels like a drawing room, with exposed brick, metal and timber and a bottle of gin within arm's reach of the corner chair.

Before I imbibe, I tuck into exquisite fare at Tullibee restaurant downstairs. Propped up on a stool at the counter, I watch the chefs shift items between the wood-burning grill



Hewing Hotel

and oven in the open cooking space. The Nordic influence is evident in both the *Lefse* [Norwegian flatbread], topped with cottage cheese, radish and crispy duck, and the sweet potato with preserved mushroom oil, cashew, and a Norwegian tangy cheese called *gjetost*. The Wild Acres Duck, smoked over the open grill is simply superb and the Anise cheesecake with huckleberries finishes me for the night.

After a solid night's sleep, I'm keen to hit the road for the two-and-a-half hour drive north to Duluth. I swing by Mall of America to stock up first, although I'll be back here for a shopping spree to take advantage of the tax-free clothing status in Minnesota before I leave. I also take in Flyover America, one of the mall's many attractions. The 4D flight simulation ride is a soaring aerial tour of some of the greatest landmarks and regions in the country, whizzing through misty clouds and over mountains, helping me work up an appetite for breakfast.



Aerial Lift Bridge

Cedar + Stone at the JW Marriott within the mall wins my morning patronage with its focus on regional produce. I wolf down a Minnesota Skillet, a pan packed with the goodness of over easy eggs, Pemmican beef, heirloom potatoes, feta and tomatoes, with a side order of a deliciously crumbly home-made maple bacon biscuit that fortifies me for the drive.

When I pop over the hill that descends into Duluth, the port town is spread out before me. I'm booked into Pier B Resort, a relative newcomer to Duluth's accommodation scene and the only waterfront hotel here, overlooking Lake Superior. Through the large picture window in my room, I have superb views to Duluth's major landmark, the Aerial Lift Bridge spanning the Duluth Ship Canal. The shipping season has yet to start, so the bridge hovers motionless over the frozen water.

From Pier B it's a pleasant stroll past Bayfront Festival Park into Canal Park, where I stop at the new Duluth Pack store to examine the locally-made range of canvas and leather packs. The store is a Duluth institution, featuring anything and everything you could possibly need in the great outdoors.

With fingers tingling from the cold, I duck into Vikre Distillery, an award-winning micro-distillery with an inviting cocktail room. After a fascinating tour of the working area, where a range of spirits is produced, I sip through a flight of four prime samples, before purchasing a single bottle of aquavit – the maximum the distillery is able to sell directly.

My cheeks rosy, I slip into Bellisio's Italian Restaurant around the corner, choosing the least traditional items on the menu for dinner: polenta-crusting fried green tomatoes and an unusual, yet delicious, salad combining sautéed beef tenderloin tips with

fresh strawberries, goat cheese, arugula and a balsamic glaze, each morsel more delicious than the next. For dessert, I have something special on the cards.

Back at Pier B, I load a marshmallow onto a toasting fork and hold it over the flames of the outdoor firepit. At the maximum point of gooiness, I scrape it onto sweet Graham Crackers, adding squares of Hershey's chocolate from the smore kit the hotel provided. The sugary confection warms my soul as I listen to slabs of ice in the lake creaking in the breeze, the moon dangling in the sky like a giant, golden peach. It's a perfect moment and I linger until the sugar rush subsides.

I'm up at the crack of dawn, watching the sun rise behind the bridge, pink hues reflecting on white ice. As I drive along the lakeshore I catch glimpses of the glowing horizon until I head inland through forested groves, coated with snow. A deer trots onto the road just before I enter Ely, the gateway to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, more than a million acres of wilderness and waterways in the heart of the Superior National Forest.

My first stop is the International Wolf Centre, a centre that advances the survival of wolf populations through education. It's fascinating watching the five wolves kept in the main exhibit area as they go about their day. Lori Schmidt, the Wolf Curator, takes me behind the scenes to visit retired wolves, Grizzer and Luna. The centre monitors pack behaviour carefully and wolves that would leave or be forced from the pack in the wild are re-housed in a private space.

Standing by the fence of the main enclosure watching Lori interact with two young Arctic Gray wolves introduced last



A resident at the International Wolf Center

The International Wolf Centre, a centre that advances the survival of wolf populations through education.

With fingers tingling from the cold, I duck into Vikre Distillery, an award-winning micro-distillery with an inviting cocktail room

year, I'm delighted when Lori instructs me to place my hand flat against the fence and Axel and Grayson saunter over to sniff my fingers. It's a rare opportunity to be close to these magnificent creatures. It's only the booking I have at the Ely Folk School that drags me away.

In a bid to engage my creative side, I'm taking a class to make a birch-bark star. It sounds so simple, but slicing, dividing and manipulating the bark in a series of intricate folds, under the direction of the ever-patient Ely Folk School staff, is harder than I anticipated. It's with no small amount of pride that I leave several hours later with an ornament that's generally the right shape.

After a quick lunch at Gator's Cheese Emporium, I drive along a narrow road packed with snow to Wintergreen Dogsled Lodge, to be greeted by Dave Freeman, my guide for the afternoon. After a briefing, we harness up my dog team, composed of three excited Canadian Inuit dogs. Standing on the rails of the sled while Dave skis ahead, my knees are shaking, but as we glide through the trees and on to the flat ice of White Iron Lake, I relax. The dogs know what they're doing – my main task is slowing their pace with the rubber mat that acts as a brake so we don't overtake Dave – giving me time to admire the natural surrounds. It's a gorgeous part of the country, worth coming back to for a summer canoeing experience.

Sitting in the quiet air on the deck of my cabin at Timber Trail Lodge in the evening, I write a list of things to see back in Minneapolis: the Walker Art Center with its iconic *Spoonbridge and Cherry* sculpture; Mill Ruins Park; the Frank Gehry-designed Frederik R Weisman Art Museum; and of course, shopping at Mall of America. I pause and look to the sky, blanketed in thousands of twinkling stars. Minnesota Nice is more than a slogan; it's a fact.

Minneapolis

STAY AT: The Hewing Hotel www.hewinghotel.com

DON'T MISS: Shopping at Mall of America www.mallofamerica.com

EAT AT: Cedar + Stone www.marriott.com

Duluth

STAY AT: Pier B Resort www.pierbresort.com

DON'T MISS: Vikre Distillery www.vikredistillery.com

EAT AT: Bellisio's www.bellisios.com

Ely

STAY AT: Timber Trail Lodge www.timbertrail.com

DON'T MISS: The International Wolf Centre www.wolf.org

MUST TRY: Dogsledding with Wintergreen Dogsled Lodge www.dogsledding.com

For more information see www.greatlakesusa.co.uk and www.exploreminnesota.com



Dogsledding with Wintergreen Dogsled Lodge in Ely