



An outing with Dells Boat Tours.
WDVCB

FAMILY WEEKENDERS

Weekenders: The Wisconsin Dells Way

Discover this beloved riverside playground.

By Renee Brincks



The town of Wisconsin Dells is more than the sum of its popular water parks, which hold some 200 slides and 16 million gallons of water. Incorporated as Kilbourn City in the 1850s, the south-central Wisconsin community was later renamed for the bluffs—called *dalles* in French, then anglicized to *dells*—that drew the town’s early visitors. The Cambrian sandstone dells march alongside the Wisconsin River for five miles, creating an otherworldly corridor that bisects the town. These days, Wisconsin Dells draws vacationing midwesterners year after year, thanks not only to its attractions but also to its year-round recreation, culinary bounty and gentle nature excursions.

Sense of Place

By the western waterfront, **Bella Goose Coffeehouse** is a great place to order a cup of single-origin brew before crossing the Wisconsin River into downtown Wisconsin Dells. Set your sights on the tree-lined Scenic River Walk, which starts near Broadway and Eddy Street and continues for a quarter mile. Along the way, 10 narrative markers introduce the area’s geography and the history of the town.

Some of the compelling images that inspired turn-of-the-century tourists to visit the Dells decorate the **H.H. Bennett Studio**, two blocks from the start of the Scenic River Walk. Civil War veteran and landscape photographer Henry Hamilton Bennett established his workshop here in 1875, and his photos of the region’s scenery helped make it famous. Today the

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original structure houses Bennett's cameras, darkroom equipment and prints.

Old-time portrait studios, souvenir shops and candy stores line the surrounding downtown lanes. Residents linger over lunch at **High Rock Café**, where on top of the usual offerings, a special monthly menu spotlights one seasonal ingredient served in creative ways. A dessert stop at the nearby **Wisconsin Dairyland Fudge** includes an opportunity to watch employees pull fudge on a marble slab, just as they've done since 1962.

Outings with **Dells Boat Tours** visit the Upper and Lower Dells segments of the Wisconsin River (one north of downtown, the other south) while guides share stories of the people, events and natural forces that shaped the landscape. Meanwhile, the one-hour **Original Wisconsin Ducks** adventure crosses fern-filled gorges and forests on land before floating past the river's legendary sandstone rock formations.

Splash, Soar and Swing

Three decades ago, waterslides first went up along the Wisconsin Dells Parkway, and today the community bills itself as the Waterpark Capital of the World. Most splash pads, wave pools and water roller coasters are clustered on or near the parkway's five-mile stretch between downtown and Interstate 90/94. The water parks are generally open from Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day, but many have indoor sections so you can play year-round.

One of the largest parks, **Noah's Ark Waterpark**, spreads plunge slides, raft routes, river floats and child-friendly pools across 70 acres. **Kalahari Resort Waterparks** introduced the Smoke That Thunders, a hybrid bowl-and-funnel waterslide with a 55-foot drop, in 2017. And **Mt. Olympus Water & Theme Park** also unveiled a 2017 expansion: a swimming area with four islands, private cabanas and a 100-foot geyser.

Inspired by a water-ski performance he watched in 1949, Midwestern radio host Tommy Bartlett later created his own traveling ski and speedboat thrill show in 1952. An early Wisconsin Dells stop drew such a crowd that Bartlett anchored his 90-minute stunt-filled spectacle permanently on Lake Delton, in a town of the same name that borders Wisconsin Dells to the southwest. The **Tommy Bartlett Show** remains a classic 66 years later, with water-skiers completing more than 1,800 jumps and 17,000 costume changes each season.

There's fun to be had off the water as well. During **Bigfoot Zipline Tours**, participants soar on seven lines suspended above ponds and parkland, while over at **Trappers Turn Golf Club**, a course outlined by two-time U.S. Open champion Andy North and designer Roger Packard, there are new greenside bunkers on all 27 holes.

The **B-Lux Grill and Bar** serves lunch and stays open late, which makes it a good place to chow down on burgers, salads, milkshakes and sides between outings. An order of Ellsworth Creamery Cheese Curds—puffs of gooey melted cheese coated with a crunchy fried crust—makes for a fun only-in-Wisconsin snack.

Unexpected Gems

Quieter experiences unfold along the two-lane roads that ramble past farmsteads south of the city. Fifteen minutes from downtown Wisconsin Dells, the **International Crane Foundation** offers the rare opportunity to see all 15 of the world's crane species in one place. Nature trails loop through the global conservation group's 240-acre headquarters, and outdoor exhibits showcase the grey crowned crane, with a crest of golden feathers atop its head, and the endangered whooping crane. The foundation has helped raise the world's total whooping crane population to more than 700, up from 21 in 1944.

It's another seven miles to the town of Baraboo and **Circus World**, a National Historic Landmark at the site where the Ringling Bros. Circus wintered from 1884 to 1918. There's a 1950s-inspired tent show with the full works: jugglers, aerialists, elephants and clowns. Vintage costumes, posters and other memorabilia fill several former barns, and craftspeople continue to restore some of the 200 elaborate antique wagons on display. For the 2018

season, traditional big-top circus performances begin on May 18.

Just outside Baraboo, the **New Life Lavender & Cherry Farm** leads seasonal field tours and serves farm-to-fork baked treats. About 15 miles away in Prairie du Sac, **Wollersheim Winery** pours estate-grown wines on slopes where vineyards were first planted in the 1840s. The family's crisp 2016 Prairie Fumé won more than a dozen international awards the following year. Brandies, gin and absinthe star next door at **Wollersheim Distillery**.

Naturally Spectacular

Two state parks stretch across the bluffs and backwoods between Wollersheim Winery and Wisconsin Dells. At **Devil's Lake State Park**, the fairly flat Tumbled Rocks Trail parallels the western shore of the park's namesake pond. Several adjacent paths make up a segment of the 1,200-mile Ice Age National Scenic Trail, which follows the edge of the most recent glacier to have moved through Wisconsin.

Trails wind through pine and oak trees 15 miles to the north at the sprawling **Mirror Lake State Park**, where swimming beaches surround the calm waters of Mirror Lake, which flows from Lake Dalton. **Mirror Lake Boat Rentals** offers kayaks, canoes, rowboats and stand-up paddleboards by the hour or the day.

Above Mirror Lake, in the park's northeastern corner, the 65-year-old **Ishnala Supper Club** serves hearty steaks, seafood combos and desserts. After purchasing this land from the local Winnebago tribe, in 1826, settlers built a trading post that's been incorporated into the current restaurant. The dining area extends around the remaining original log walls, stairs and fireplace stones, and Norway pines grow through the roof near the bar. Floor-to-ceiling windows ensure that every table overlooks the sparkling lake below, making this a time-honored spot to toast to the region's many charms.

Play

Bigfoot Zipline Tours

1550 Wisconsin Dells Pkwy., Wisconsin Dells; 608-254-5555; bigfootzip.com; tours, from \$75 a person

Kalahari Resort Waterparks

*1305 Kalahari Dr., Baraboo; 877-525-2427; kalahariresorts.com; admission, from \$39; outdoor water park open Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day, and indoor water park open year-round**

Mirror Lake Boat Rentals

E10320 Fern Dell Rd., Baraboo; 608-254-4104; mirrorlakeboatrentals.com; pontoon kayak rentals, \$15 an hour

Mt. Olympus Water & Theme Park

1701 Wisconsin Dells Pkwy., Wisconsin Dells; 800-800-4997; mtolympuspark.com; admission, \$40

Noah's Ark Waterpark

1410 Wisconsin Dells Pkwy., Wisconsin Dells; 608-254-6351; noahsarkwaterpark.com; admission, from \$42; open Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day

Tommy Bartlett Show

560 Wisconsin Dells Pkwy. N., Wisconsin Dells; 608-254-2525; tommybartlett.com; tickets, \$21; children 5–11, \$12; children 4 and younger, free if sitting on an adult's lap; performances take place Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day

Trappers Turn Golf Club

2955 Wisconsin Dells Pkwy., Wisconsin Dells; 800-221-8876; trappersturn.com; greens fees, from \$45

Eat

Bella Goose Coffeehouse

1009 Stand Rock Rd., Wisconsin Dells; 608-253-0088; bellagoosecoffee.com; coffee for two, \$4.50**

B-Lux Grill and Bar

1481 Wisconsin Dells Pkwy., Wisconsin Dells; 608-254-7999; b-luxgrill.com; dinner for two, \$40

High Rock Café

232 Broadway, Wisconsin Dells; 608-254-5677; highrockcafe.com; lunch for two, \$25

Ishnala Supper Club

S2011 Ishnala Rd., Lake Delton; 608-253-1771; ishnala.com; dinner for two, \$96; open Memorial Day weekend through late October

Explore

Circus World

550 Water St., Baraboo; 866-693-1500; circusworldbaraboo.org; adults, from \$10; children 5–11, from \$5; children 4 and under, free

Dells Boat Tours

107 Broadway, Wisconsin Dells; 608-254-8555; dellsboats.com; adults, from \$24; children, from \$12; daily, April through early November

Devil's Lake State Park

5975 Park Rd., Baraboo; 608-356-8301; dnr.wi.gov; daily entrance, \$8–\$16 a vehicle

H.H. Bennett Studio

215 Broadway, Wisconsin Dells; 608-253-3523; hhbennettstudio.wisconsinhistory.org; adults, \$7; children 12 and under, \$3.50

International Crane Foundation

E11376 Shady Lane Rd., Baraboo; 608-356-9462; savingcranes.org; adults, \$9.50; children 6–17, \$5; children 5 and under, free; daily, April 15 through October 31

Mirror Lake State Park

E10320 Fern Dell Rd., Baraboo; 608-254-2333; dnr.wi.gov; daily entrance, \$8–\$16 a vehicle

New Life Lavender & Cherry Farm

E10766 County Rd. W., Baraboo; 608-477-4023; newlifelavender.com; tours, \$10 a person

Original Wisconsin Ducks

1890 Wisconsin Dells Pkwy., Wisconsin Dells; 608-254-8751; wisconsinducktours.com; adults, \$30; children 4–11, \$15; children 3 and under, free; daily, mid-March through mid-November

Wisconsin Dairyland Fudge

216 Broadway, Wisconsin Dells; 608-254-4136; wisconsin dairyland fudge.com

Wollersheim Winery & Distillery

7876 State Rd. 188, Prairie du Sac; 800-847-9463; wollersheim.com

STAY

RCI® affiliated resorts in Wisconsin Dells include:

Timbers At Christmas Mountain Village 3662

Deer, wild turkeys and other animals roam the grounds of this 800-acre property. S944 Christmas Mountain

Member Review: "Quiet and away from it all."

Peppertree at Tamarack 1439

Games from pinball to Dance Dance Revolution ensure guests have fun no matter the weather. 874 Xanadu Rd.

Member Review: "Very thoughtful staff."

Bluegreen Odyssey Dells A853

Bring the whole family—there's an indoor water park next door. 1701 Wisconsin Dells Pkwy.

Member Review: "There's a wonderful water park included in the stay."

Mirror Lake Resort 5599

A family-friendly retreat, halfway between Chicago and Minneapolis, with plenty of outdoor activities. 1701 Wisconsin Dells Pkwy.

Member Review: "Just like home, and close to everything."

For complete member reviews (as member reviews have been condensed) and additional resort listings, visit RCI.com or call 800-338-7777 (Weeks) or 877-968-7476 (Points). Club Members, please call your specific Club or RCI telephone number.

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Non-RCI affiliated resorts in and near Wisconsin Dells include:

Bowman's Oak Hill Bed & Breakfast

A 1960s-style ranch with peaceful grounds that's conveniently close to the area's main attractions. 4169 State Hwy. 13, Wisconsin Dells; 608-253-5638; bowmansoakhillbedandbreakfast.com; doubles from \$135 a night

Ringling House Bed & Breakfast

A Georgian Revival residence once owned by Henry Ringling, of the Ringling Bros. Circus. 201 Eighth St., Baraboo; 608-356-4229; ringlinghousebnb.com; doubles from \$109 a night

The White Rose Inns Motels & Suites

Enjoy river views and the on-site spa. 910 River Rd., Wisconsin Dells; 608-253-1999; dellswhiterose.com; doubles from \$125 a night

*Some attractions, tours and accommodations are open during the summer season only, so it is advisable to call ahead.

**Estimated meal prices do not include drinks, tax, or tip.

NOTE: Information may have changed since publication. Please confirm key details before planning your trip.

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