



**Day Tripper**  
Wisconsin Dells

# A Day Water, Water Everywhere In The Dells





BY ALISA CLICKENGER

I grew up in the South, and now live in the Northeast. Middle America has always been a bit of an enigma to me, and I confess that prior to crossing the country on my BMW R1150 GS Adventure last summer, I'd never even been farther than Ohio. So I was pleased when a break in my schedule allowed time for a leisurely ride around a small section of our 30th state — Wisconsin.

The timing coincided with breakfast, and when I got off Interstate 90 at exit 87 in the Wisconsin Dells, the first thing that caught my eye was Paul Bunyan's Lumberjack Meals. You guessed it: all-you-can-eat and geared-up for the masses. I won't say it's the best coffee I've ever had, but the food was tasty and plentiful. Be forewarned: you must be comfortable eating with strangers and you must be hungry in order to enjoy Paul Bunyan's to the fullest. You prepay for your meal in the gift shop, and then are seated "family style" on one of the benches at a picnic table complete with a plastic checkered tablecloth. Each party is delivered a pot of coffee and homemade doughnuts, and you're offered juice or milk. A few minutes later you're brought individual platters of scrambled eggs, breakfast meats, home fries, and as if that wouldn't fill you up, pancakes and syrup as well (which, for me, wholly made up for the bad coffee).

In my mind, Wisconsin is known for its cheese. I also knew about the Green Bay Packers, Milwaukee breweries, and Frank Lloyd Wright, yet I'd never experienced the state as a traveler before. It was a delight — beautiful farmland, lush forests, and a plethora of rivers, lakes, and streams to explore. In fact, Wisconsin is bordered on three sides with water: Lake Michigan to the east, the Mississippi River to the west, and Lake Superior to the north. It was the water that drew me in, and, it turns out, it was the water that forced me to leave. Ah, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

The name "Dells" comes from the French fur traders who first settled the area in the 1800s — *delles* are layers of flat rock. The Chippewa Indians referred to the area as *Misconsin*, from which the name Wisconsin was derived, so the Wisconsin Dells literally are "where the dark waters gather at the flat layers of rock." Central to the Dells area is Lake Delton, the man-made lake formed in 1927 to attract tourists.



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It turns out that the Wisconsin Dells are now a major destination spot of the Midwest. Just 188 miles north of Chicago, and 55 miles north of Madison, the Dells are a mixture of rural escape, outdoor heaven, and tourist kitsch. When touring the area on a motorcycle, I'd suggest visiting in the shoulder seasons if you're not fond of crowds; more than 2.8 million visitors visit the Dells annually

and 1.2 million of them come in the summertime.

Mighty full after breakfast, I headed to downtown Wisconsin Dells, where the streets are laid out neatly in a grid. There are myriad shopping opportunities, restaurants, and enough attractions to amuse you for at least a week. If variety is your thing, there is an FX Theatre, the Dells Mining Company, the Haunted Mansion, Dells Top Secret, Wild Thing Jet Boat, the Wisconsin Opry, and the unforgettable Tommy Bartlett Show. And, if you have an ironic sense of humor like I do, you might wander up Eddy Street, where you can make or renew your wedding vows at the Dells Bells Wedding Chapel. You can't miss it; it's just across from the Torture Museum.

The ladies at the information kiosk were very helpful, and sent me back toward Paul Bunyan's, where I took a right turn on Routes 12/16 north. (One could also take the first right just over the Wisconsin River on Route 13 West onto Stand Rock Road, which bypasses the busy intersection of 12/23/16 and also connects to the N Road). My destination was Rocky Arbor State

Park, which turned out to be a lush oasis compared to the busy downtown area. Moss-covered rock outcroppings greet you at the entrance; ferns, conifers and a multitude of deciduous trees represent every green in the spectrum. A beautiful spot for a picnic or to set up your camp for the night, the tree canopy is a welcome respite from the hot sun. Rocky Arbor is a great place for a picnic; the park also has a one-

mile nature trail where you can stretch your legs.

Headed north again on 12/16, I stopped at the Memory Park Memorial, dedicated to all those who have served. The landscape became increasingly bucolic the further away I rode from down-



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## TRAVELERS TIPS

- ▶ Camp sites in Rocky Arbor or Mirror Lake state parks costs \$14-\$17 per night; expect to pay extra for electricity (\$5) and for a water view (\$3). [www.MirrorLakeWisconsin.com/Camping](http://www.MirrorLakeWisconsin.com/Camping)
- ▶ Free online coupons available in exchange for your e-mail address at [www.Dells.com](http://www.Dells.com).
- ▶ A handy list of "Ways to save in the Wisconsin Dells" can be found at [www.WisDells.net](http://www.WisDells.net).

town Dells. Although I did not see any cows grazing as I expected, to my amazement I did see a flock of Sandhill cranes foraging in a distant field. I stopped to watch them feeding on insects and grain in and out of the tall grasses. While I did not know of it at the time of my trip, the International Crane Foundation visitor site and headquarters are close by in Baraboo. Other winged creatures seen along the way were red-tailed hawks, a grouse, bluebirds, sparrows, and a few other songbirds.

I made my way over to County Road HH through Lyndon, then on to State Road 82E, and back to 13 South, completing a loop that brought me back to downtown Dells. Traversing Main Street again, I followed 12/23 South to County Road A, where I was advised that Lake Delton, centerpiece of the Dells and victim of the Midwest floods, had washed out. Evidently a portion of the A Road gave way on June 9, 2008, and the entire lake emptied within about two hours.

I confess to a certain amount of morbid curiosity regarding the dynamic nature of Mother Nature, but seeing an empty lake was disconcerting. Boating regulations posted at what was once the water's edge were a testament to how quickly things can change. Docks stood aloof in a grassy field that should have been a clear lake bottom. Worse, whole marinas remained where they'd been pre-flood, with boats lying askew. Tourists, like myself, followed the detours through residential



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areas and snapped pictures of the peculiar tableau. (Editor's Note: Reconstruction has been completed; Lake Delton reopened in June.)

And so it happened that as I stood taking pictures of the non-lake, the very rains that had caused the lake to fill and then empty came once again. A torrential downpour soaked me within seconds, even under canopy of trees, allowing me no time to put on rain gear. Chuckling to myself, I mounted up and carefully rode, pummeled by rain, through the suburban streets and back to the highway. My day in the Dells included the water everyone journeys there for — my water just happened to be experienced on the back of a motorcycle. **RB**

## INFO

### Wisconsin Dells

[www.WisDells.com](http://www.WisDells.com) or  
[www.Dells.com](http://www.Dells.com)

### Paul Bunyan's Restaurant

[www.PaulBunyan.com/WisDells.htm](http://www.PaulBunyan.com/WisDells.htm)

### Rocky Arbor State Park

[www.DNR.State.WI.US/Org/Land/Parks/Specific/RockyArbor](http://www.DNR.State.WI.US/Org/Land/Parks/Specific/RockyArbor)

### International Crane Foundation

[www.SavingCranes.org](http://www.SavingCranes.org)



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