

# GENTLE WINTER

The off-season  
in Door County,  
Wisconsin, holds  
unexpected charms  
for nature lovers.

BY CHERYL RODEWIG

BRIAN BEHLING/GETTY IMAGES

Winter brings peace  
and quiet to Ellison  
Bluff County Park.



almost miss it. A pre-dawn excursion is all the harder when the weather is cold and the previous night's revelry—in my

case, a Scandinavian banquet with drinking songs—kept me up later than usual.

But I prevail. Slipping away from the comfort of my bayside inn, I reach the eastern-facing Cave Point County Park just in time to see the early morning darkness recede before a blushing sky. Waves from Lake Michigan batter the shore, where icicles cling to dolomite cliffs carved with sea caves—hidden depths for kayakers and divers to explore. Some of the water escapes through blowholes, erupting into the air like geysers. I get too close for a photo and get doused, but I don't care. I have the place to myself, and it's glorious—the perfect culmination of my trip to Wisconsin's Door County.

I'd spent the previous two days on the peninsula tramping through some of the state's most idyllic winter landscapes. Better known as a summertime retreat, Door County's double-sided shoreline draws sunbathers and surfers June through August, when the weather peaks in the pleasant mid-70s. It's sometimes called the Cape Cod of the Midwest, with the beaches,

---

The rock faces at Cave Point County Park, a symbol of Door County, are made over into ice sculptures when temperatures drop below freezing.



JON JAROSH/DOOR COUNTY VISITOR BUREAU



Sherwood Point Lighthouse, which guided sailors into Sturgeon Bay, was the last in the Great Lakes region to be operated by a keeper.

lighthouses and seafood shacks to prove it. But I like it in the winter—uncrowded, quiet and pristine, especially after the fresh snowfall that arrived on my first night, right on cue.

#### HIKING IN SNOW

My introduction to Door County's very scenic off-season begins at

Whitefish Dunes State Park. The beachfront park turns snowy November through March, when you can trade in your swimsuit for snowshoes. Though when I visit in early December, I'm told it's not yet deep enough for snowshoes. I'm disappointed at first, but only briefly. Once inside the park, I'm surrounded by the postcard

panoramas that I was hoping for: towering hardwoods like oak, beech and maples intermixed with evergreens and all comfortably blanketed in white.

I begin on the Yellow Trail, branching off from the Green Trail to head down to the creek. It's slow going, not because of the terrain, which is fairly flat, but because I

stop every few minutes to snap a photo. The Yellow is one of three cross-country skiing trails and is the longest at more than 4 miles. Ice fishing, another favorite winter pastime, is possible at Clark Lake. The park even has a program to loan out fishing poles and tackle free of charge (be sure to check with the park beforehand).

I stick to hiking, finishing the loop before heading north to an outdoor escape of a different kind. Bjorklunden (meaning "Birch Grove" in Swedish) is the northern campus of Lawrence University. The tranquil setting seems well-suited to contemplation. And if the landscape isn't as dramatic as Whitefish Dunes, Bjorklunden has something the state park doesn't: a replica of a Norwegian stavkirke from the 12th century.

This is what I came for. I follow a short trail from the campus lodge, arriving at a small clearing to find Boynton Chapel, looking every bit the fairy tale with its dark exterior and woodland backdrop. Blue-toned stained glass glimmers in the windows.

The scalloped eaves end in dragon heads, there to ward off evil. It's one of two stavkirkes in the county. The second, located on Washington Island in the far north, is another reproduction that was built to honor Door County's early Scandinavian immigrants.

#### PEACE IN SOLITUDE

If I want to venture further, I'll need skis or snowshoes. While the other trails are open, they are ungroomed in winter. But evening comes early, and I want to make the most of daylight. I still have one final stop on the other side of Baileys Harbor.

At 1,600 acres, The Ridges Sanctuary outdoes my other stops in sheer scale—it's nearly twice the size of Whitefish Dunes and four times that of Bjorklunden.

Wisconsin's first land trust has miles of trails winding among hearty conifers that form a boreal forest rare for this latitude. White spruce and balsam fir flourish, as do even irises and orchids in warmer months. A naturalist tells me the birdsong is hard to ignore in spring.

But now, all is still, the silence echoing in the stark architecture of the trees and frozen swales.

IT'S SOMETIMES CALLED  
THE CAPE GOD OF THE  
MIDWEST, WITH THE  
BEACHES, LIGHTHOUSES AND  
SEAFOOD SHACKS TO PROVE IT.

JAMES BREV/GETTY IMAGES



I hike to the end of my chosen trail, where two 19th century range lights stand sentinel at opposite ends of a long path.

The lighthouses, which once helped sailors avoid the harbor's dangerous shallows, are rather picturesque today; the boardwalk to reach them is uncluttered by footprints in the snow.

I wish I could stay longer, but it's time to wind down (in true Wisconsin style, with a fish boil at a Victorian bed-and-breakfast). I'll need to rest up for tomorrow when I tackle the western shore, which includes Door County's

This hiker carefully treks through the snow at Cave Point County Park.

largest preserve, Peninsula State Park, prized for its snowmobile trails overlooking Green Bay.

I take one last look at the range lights, snapping one more photo to capture the memory—winter beauty, after all, is evanescent—and I retrace my footsteps toward the trailhead. ☼

# Christmas in Door County

Celebrate the holidays on the peninsula.

## CHRISTMAS IN THE VILLAGE

Stop by this annual daylong celebration in Ephraim for caroling, carriage rides, a tree lighting and the chance to meet Saint Nick. Visitors can also discover the village's rich Norwegian heritage through old-fashioned games and Moravian holiday displays.

[ephraim-doorcounty.com](http://ephraim-doorcounty.com)



## SWEDISH JULBORD

Al Johnson's Swedish Restaurant & Butik is famous for two things: goats on the roof and Scandinavian cuisine. In winter, the goats are replaced with lighted reindeer, but the food is never better than during the julbord in December. The menu serves up herring, lox, potato sausage, cheeses, "julsinka"—the Swedish Christmas ham—and much more. Wash it all down with glogg, a blend of wine, fruit, spices and almonds that is fortified with Swedish vodka. [aljohnsons.com](http://aljohnsons.com)

## MERRY-TIME FESTIVAL OF TREES

Dozens of Christmas trees take over the Door County Maritime Museum in Sturgeon Bay from November through mid-December during the annual Merry-Time Festival of Trees. Along with exhibits on shipwrecks, lighthouses and nautical history, the 101-year-old red tugboat out front is strung with white lights for the season. [dcmm.org](http://dcmm.org)

## PROGRESSIVE HOLIDAY DINNERS

On select weekends in December and January, guests at two of Fish Creek's historic inns can indulge in a five-course holiday feast. The evening begins with hors d'oeuvres and live music at the turn-of-the-century Thorp House Inn and proceeds by horse-drawn wagon to the Victorian-era White Gull Inn. Before dinner, guests are treated to guided tours of this landmark, which is elegantly trimmed for the season.

[whitegullinn.com](http://whitegullinn.com)



WOMAN WALKING: MIKE ROEMER/DESTINATION DOOR COUNTY; WHITE GULL: WHITE GULL/DESTINATION DOOR COUNTY; HOLIDAY SHOP: CHERYL RODEWIG



## TANNENBAUM HOLIDAY SHOP

Housed in a 19th century church, this year-round shop sells every kind of Christmas decoration imaginable: nutcrackers, Nativity scenes, snow globes and hundreds of Santas. Go for the design inspiration. Standouts include trees themed for everything—including music, marine life and monuments—and a few unusual but striking upside-down firs, which take up less floor space and show off your ornaments better. [tannenbaumholidayshop.com](http://tannenbaumholidayshop.com)