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Grab a Big Slice of Serenity

These seven destinations give travelers the chance to recharge the mind, body and senses

(April 27, 2010)—Don't settle for the same-old boring vacation. This summer, go on an adventure. Here are two of the Midwest's best opportunities for a vacation that's out-of-the-ordinary and doesn't require a heavy investment—just time and a willingness to explore.

American travelers are increasingly aware of the health benefits that travel can provide them. To maximize the renewing benefits of their vacation time, many travelers are looking for places where they can truly recharge.

Here are some destinations that offer outstanding opportunities for meditation, contemplation and relaxation.

Lake of the Clouds

The [Porcupine Mountains](#) of Michigan's Upper Peninsula are timeless. The hills and ridges you see today are remnants of an ancient mountain range dating back more than two billion years. The old-growth forests that are protected by the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park represent the largest tract of old-growth deciduous forests east of the Adirondacks.

In an area renowned for profound natural beauty, it's hard to pick one single place as the most beautiful. But Lake of the Clouds is a blue gem amid the ancient forests. It is perhaps the most photographed feature in the Porcupine Mountains region. No matter what the season, it is a truly inspiring. The best view of the lake and the surrounding hills is from an easily accessible boardwalk just off 107th Engineers Memorial Highway.

Other serenity inducing sights in the Porcupine Mountains include dozens of waterfalls and 21 miles of sandy beaches on Lake Superior. Wherever you go in the Porcupine Mountains, you're sure to find one thing—peace, quiet and natural beauty.

Peace in the Pines

The [Rhineland Area](#) has long been a popular Northwoods destination, offering lakeside resorts, restaurants and shopping. It's a great place for nature lovers to stay and stock up on supplies before heading out to the area's vast wilderness areas, such as the Willow Flowage, Nicolet National Forest and Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest.

But just minutes from the Rhineland Area's bustling center, you'll find a surprising piece of untouched wilderness. The Holmboe Conifer Forest is a 32-acre natural area that protects a beautiful section of old-growth forest along the south bank of the Pelican River. Visitors can walk trails through a variety of conifer species, from dark hemlock forests to towering white and red pine groves. Closer to the river, you'll find black spruce and tamaracks.

It is an outstanding place for a morning walk when you're in the Northwoods. And any time of the day, it's a good place to just be still, listen to the sound of the river and enjoy the cool shade beneath the pines.

Wetland Wonderland

[Dodge County's](#) Horicon Marsh offers tens of thousands of acres of protected wetlands to explore. It's the largest freshwater cattail marsh in the United States.

The vast size of the marsh makes most people opt to experience the marsh via an auto tour or taking a pontoon boat tour from Horicon Marsh Boat Tours. But to really immerse yourself in the tranquility of this lush green wetland, hop in a kayak and start paddling.

The Horicon Marsh Boat Tours rents kayaks from their Blue Heron Landing at the south end of the marsh in the City of Horicon. A short paddle up the Rock River takes you to the marsh. From there, you can get lost—quite literally—in a maze of sloughs and channels. Birds are literally everywhere—from ducks and geese to redwing blackbirds and bank swallows. Surrounded by green cattail stalks and other lush aquatic vegetation.

Fantastic Felsenmeers

The Blue Hills region of [Rusk County](#) and the [Rice Lake](#) area offer a number of surprises, none more breathtaking than the felsenmeers.

A felsenmeer is quite literally a “sea of rocks.” The annual freeze-thaw cycle works its magic on surrounding rocks for thousands of years until you get a vast field of sharply broken rocks and boulders. Coming upon these formations, one is filled with the sense of being in a very special place.

If you’ve never heard of a felsenmeer, that’s understandable. They’re very rare in Wisconsin. In fact, there are only three. One that you can visit is the Rock Creek Felsenmeer, which is open to the public via the Felsenmeer Trail Loop.

Jump River – Magic Waters

One of the best kept secrets in the Midwest, the Jump River is not only one of the best paddling experiences, it’s also one of the cleanest riverways in North America.

For the solitude seeker looking to get away from the sights and sounds of civilization, a trip down the Jump River as it flows through [Rusk County](#) is unmatched. The stretch from Highway 73 to Sheldon offers 9 miles of natural beauty. Clean banks of river-rounded stones invite you to take a break and enjoy the scenery.

The deep pools of the river teem with fish—the secluded river receives very little fishing pressure. But the biggest catch for the adventurous paddler is the peace, quiet and pristine waters. It’s a mind-cleansing experience you’ll never forget. Stop by the Rusk County Visitor Center in Ladysmith for a waterproof river map and paddling information.

Black River State Forest – Another World

The Black River State Forest in Jackson County, Wisconsin, is a lot bigger than it looks on a map. The forest makes up about 68,000 acres of a wilderness area totaling nearly 200,000 acres.

What makes [Black River Country](#) so spectacular is that it sits along the border between the Driftless Area—a portion of southwest Wisconsin that didn’t get plowed smooth by ancient glaciers—and the rolling landscape that makes up the rest of Wisconsin. Sandstone rock formations, rugged savannahs of scattered oaks and yellow pine trees and fast-running brooks give the area an atmosphere that is unique in Wisconsin.

The protected lands of the Black River State Forest are home to a wide variety of flora and fauna, from timber wolves to the rare Karner blue butterfly. Hiking trails that run through the forest are well planned, keeping you far from civilization and close to nature.

Onalaska - The Seven Bridges

To wrap up our list of seven great destinations to find serenity, we have the Seven Bridges of the Van Loon Wildlife Area, known by locals in [Onalaska](#) as the McGilvray Bridges.

Take a fifteen minute drive north from Onalaska's giant sunfish sculpture and follow the Wisconsin Great River Road until you come to Amsterdam Prairie Road. Turn right and head north to a parking lot. From there, you'll follow the trail to the first of a series of bridges.

These bridges are not only interesting structures, they are important for their innovative engineering. The arch-truss design dates to the late 1800s and these bridges represent some of the last existing examples of the design.

The forest you walk through here is also special. It is part of the floodplain of the Black River before it flows into the Mississippi River. The bottomland forest supports a number of species of birds and other animals that depend on the intermittent flooding for survival. Several species of woodpeckers take advantage of standing dead timber to make their homes. The relatively rare Massasauga rattlesnake makes its home here as well, though few people ever see this small and elusive relative of Wisconsin's timber rattler.

Each bridge along the trail gives you a chance to stop, reflect and take in the natural beauty of a place that has survived development and remains today a haven for plants and animals that need protected wilderness to survive. Don't miss this incredible piece of natural serenity.

Get more information on the Porcupine Mountains at www.porcupinemountains.com.

Find more Rhinelander Area trails and attractions by visiting www.explorerhinelander.com.

Additional Dodge County birding information can be found at www.dodgecounty.com.

Learn more about Rice Lake at www.ricelaketourism.com and more about Rusk County at www.ruskcountywi.com.

Information on Black River Country trails, wildlife and other attractions can be found at www.blackrivercountry.net.

Trip planning resources for visiting Onalaska are available at www.discoveronalaska.com.

For more information on these peaceful places and other relaxing Wisconsin destinations, contact Susanne Thiede-Barnet at 608-242-8895 or Susanne@pilchbarnet.com.