

Time traveling: Minnesota has many historic — even prehistoric — sites worth seeing

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By *Christopher Bahn*

You don't have to be Indiana Jones to be an archaeologist, and you don't have to be Marty McFly to travel back in time. Minnesota is rich with its own treasures from antiquity, with sites across the state that tell the story of American Indian and European settlement in the region.

Visiting these historic places is not without controversy, as shrinking state budgets and a growing respect for the sanctity local Indians hold for some locations have led to restrictions and even some closures. Most notably, Grand Mound near International Falls, a prehistoric burial ground older than the Roman Empire, has been closed since 2007. But there are plenty of wonders still to be seen, none more than a few hours' drive from the Twin Cities. For an archaeological tour of the Upper Midwest, consider these sites:

JEFFERS PETROGLYPHS

There's a palpable aura of mystery around this red rock outcrop surrounded by prairie and farmland in southwestern Minnesota, where thousands of petroglyphs - rock carvings depicting hunters, abstract shapes and animals like bison and snakes - tell tales of long-ago days.

"There's a wonderful story here," says site manager Thomas Sanders, who adds that the carvings may represent protective helper spirits important to the ancient people who traveled through here.



Jeffers Petroglyphs

"This place was old when Stonehenge was made," Sanders notes. "It was old when the pyramids were built."

It can be difficult to see the petroglyphs, which are carved so shallowly they seem to disappear in the wrong light, so visiting near dawn or dusk is highly recommended. Around 3,000 petroglyphs can be seen, including nearly 1,000 discovered last year during a project to clean damaging lichen off the rocks, and Sanders says he suspects there are many more waiting under the earth to be found.

27160 County Road 2, Comfrey; 507-628-5591;
www.mnhs.org/places/sites/ip



PIPESTONE NATIONAL MONUMENT

For more than 3,000 years, the Pipestone quarry site in southwestern Minnesota has been a sacred place for American Indians because of its abundance of catlinite - a soft, easily carved red stone used across North America for calumets (ceremonial pipes).

Because of the high quality of the rock found here, Pipestone came to be considered sacred neutral territory, where warring tribes would call a truce while they dug for the rare stone. Fifty-four quarries are still in use today by Indian stone carvers, for whom the physically demanding work is considered a spiritual tradition.

The pipestone is painstakingly dug out by hand, using only traditional methods, from beneath layer upon layer of hard quartzite. Then, it's shaped into beautiful artworks by carvers like Travis Erickson, a member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux nation who has been working with the stone for 32 years. "When I get good, I'll let you know," he says.

Erickson and other carvers demonstrate their craft daily at the monument's visitor center, where you also can take a short hike through the quarry sites and tallgrass prairie.

36 Reservation Ave., Pipestone; 507-825-5464; nps.gov/pipe

GRAND PORTAGE NATIONAL MONUMENT

When Europeans first began traveling through this region in the 1700s to trade furs and other goods, the Great Lakes were the royal road. And Grand Portage, on the eastern tip of the arrowhead where Minnesota meets Lake Superior, was the key hub in that route, connecting the Eastern Seaboard with the heart of North America's interior.

"In terms of European history, that's the earliest spot in Minnesota," Mather says. "It's crazy to think about it, but that's where the first farming and livestock in Minnesota happened, because people were coming in from Canada, from New France, and establishing these posts. That's where everyone met every year to trade."

Today, Grand Portage National Monument boasts a painstakingly reconstructed 1780s-era log-built stockade and garden area, as well as a spacious Heritage Center, opened in 2007, featuring exhibits and artifacts covering Ojibwe culture and the history of the fur trade.

170 Mile Creek Road, Grand Portage; 218-475-0123; nps.gov/grpo



Rainy Lake

RAINY LAKE

It's no secret northern Minnesota is rich with mining history, but tucked away on the west end of Voyageurs National Park is the site of a lesser-known nugget: Minnesota's own gold rush, which briefly tried to give the Klondike and the Black Hills a run for their money.

When a gold-bearing quartz vein was discovered in 1893, prospectors flocked to Little American Island near what's now International Falls, but dreams of riches went unfulfilled.

"The hope was that there would be a lot of gold, but it never really happened," said Laura Chick Drum, lead interpreter at the National Park Service's Rainy Lake Visitor Center. "It only made the town about \$5,000."

By 1898, Rainy Lake City became a ghost town. Today, you can walk an interpretive trail on Little American Island and visit the remains of the boomtown city about a mile away, which also includes the shell of a Prohibition-era saloon called the Blind Pig.

Rainy Lake Visitor Center, 360 Highway 11 East, International Falls; 218-286-5258; nps.gov/voya



Fort Snelling

HISTORIC FORT SNELLING

In some ways, it's difficult to believe that Fort Snelling once defined the frontier as the westernmost government outpost. Today, the 1820-era structure is surrounded by two busy highways and an international airport, an ever-present reminder of how much things have changed. By the time the fort closed after World War II, its strategic location at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers had become a burden, placing it directly in the path of urban expansion. The fort came close to disappearing entirely, Mather says.

"It was pretty hammered," he explains. "It was one of the first real historic preservation battles in Minnesota, because it's near all those highway interchanges and it was going to be destroyed."

Little more than the fort's central round tower has survived, but thanks to a comprehensive archaeological survey begun in the 1950s, the fort was rebuilt to its original glory. Now, it's a thriving celebration of Minnesota's past in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with a wealth of exhibits, demonstrations and costumed interpreters eager to talk about the days when future president Zachary Taylor commanded the fort in 1828 and 1829. (Taylor was less enthusiastic, calling Minnesota a "most miserable and uninteresting country.")

200 Tower Ave., Fort Snelling History Center, St. Paul; 612-726-1171; historicfortsnelling.org

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EFFIGY MOUNDS NATIONAL MONUMENT

About 1,000 years ago, a mysterious culture living in what's now Iowa and Wisconsin grew corn, hunted, traded - and built gigantic, spectacular earthwork mounds in the shapes of bears, birds and other animals.

Many mounds were later destroyed by agricultural development, but Effigy Mounds National Monument, about four hours south of the Twin Cities, is home to the largest surviving group of mounds in the country and is still considered sacred territory to nearby Indians.

Visitors will want to wear sturdy hiking boots, since most of the mounds are hidden down extended and somewhat steep trails, but the beauty of the natural scenery should make up for the exertion. There's also a visitor center featuring a kid-friendly museum and exhibits on the ancient mound builders.

151 Highway 76, Harpers Ferry, Iowa; 563-873-3491; nps.gov/efmo

FRANZ JEVNE STATE PARK AND KAY-NAH-CHI-WAH-NUNG HISTORICAL CENTRE

At the Rainy River's Long Sault rapids on Minnesota's northern border with Ontario, sturgeon come each spring to spawn. And for centuries, humans have followed. First came Indians, for whom this was a vital link in their continent-spanning trade network. Later, voyageurs used the river as their main link between Lake Superior and the Rockies. Four thousand years ago, a fishing village straddled both sides of the river, and what remains are some of the biggest burial mounds in the region.

Today, the small, secluded and rustic Franz Jevne State Park looks out across the river, offering a splendid view of the mounds. To get a closer look, head into Canada to visit the Kay-Nah-Chi-Wah-Nung Historical Centre, operated by the Rainy River First Nations, which features a museum and interpretive tours. Don't get fooled by the drive: The two sites are just a few miles apart, but the nearest bridge is in the town of Baudette, Minn., making it an hourlong trip.

Despite the remoteness, Mather cites the park as one of his favorites. "You have to really want to go there to get there," he says. "You're not passing there on the way to or from anywhere else. But people who make the effort are not going to be sorry. It's really remarkable."

Franz Jevne State Park: 42 miles west of International Falls; 218-783-6252;

www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks/franz_jevneKay-Nah-Chi-Wah-Nung: Stratton, Ontario, Canada; 807-483-1163; manitoumounds.com



As part of Mille Lacs Kathio park's annual Archaeology Day, guides Jim Cummings and Dave Mather lead a team on an excavation.

MILLE LACS KATHIO STATE PARK

With 19 sites including ancient Indian dwellings and burial mounds that date back 9,000 years, this park in central Minnesota should be high on the list of anyone interested in the past.

"It's probably the best place in the state for the public to experience archaeology," says David Mather of the Minnesota Historical Society.

There's a huge range of history to be seen here, from prehistoric copper and stone tools to later settlement by the Dakota and Ojibwe. It's an important landmark in European exploration: Father Louis Hennepin lived here with the Dakota for six months during his 1680 visit to Minnesota, writing one of the first chronicles of the region.

Visitors today can hike the park's landmark trail and take a 90-minute canoe-driven tour of archaeological sites. The park's annual Archaeology Day, Oct. 1 this year, includes demonstrations and exhibits and a guided tour by Mather and naturalist Jim Cummings of an active archaeological dig, studying the remains of a house that burned down around the time of Hennepin's visit. (Don't worry, he's not a suspect.)

15066 Kathio State Park Road, Onamia; 320-532-3523;

www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks/mille_lacs_kathio