



Proving That Homework Can Be Wildly Fun,
We Bring You Wisconsin Dells



It All Starts with Water

For many cities in Wisconsin, there is one thing that makes their community stand out, the one thing they're known for far and wide. In Wisconsin Dells, it's water. Read on to learn how the Wisconsin River first influenced commerce and tourism in little Wisconsin Dells, and how simple H₂O turned it into the huge draw it is today. So jump in, the water's fine!

500 Million Years of History

Glacial Lake Wisconsin

We'll try to condense 500 million years into a paragraph or two. This is important, though, because you have to look that far back to understand how Wisconsin Dells came to be the vacation destination it is today. During the Cambrian Period, this community was the sandy shore of an ancient sea. Over time, the sand was compacted, and percolating groundwater cemented the sand into rock. That rock went virtually untouched for millions of years.

Fast forward to 19,000 years ago, when a glacier extended to within four miles east of the area, never touching the Dells. That glacier melted about 15,000 years ago and formed Glacial Lake Wisconsin, a lake about the size of Utah's Great Salt Lake and as deep as 150 feet. The last ice that held back the waters of Glacial Lake Wisconsin began to melt. The failed ice dam unleashed a catastrophic flood; the lake's depth dropped to 50 feet. The meltwaters cut deep, narrow gorges and unusual rock formations into the sandstone and formed the steep-sided canyons and bluffs you see

today lining the Wisconsin River. The flood most likely cut the gorges in the Dells in a matter of days or weeks as the swift water eroded away the soft sandstone.



Native American History Worthy of Its Own Book

We wish we could devote an entire book to the history of the Native American culture in Wisconsin Dells. The area has been inhabited by native people for 2,000 years, and probably longer. You see their spirit in ceremonial

burial mounds, and petroglyphs and pictographs carved and painted into the rock. While nearly all of the mounds have been destroyed by farming and floods, you can still find some examples of this ancient culture known as the “Effigy Mound Builders.” One treasure is at the Kingsley Bend Wayside on Highway 16 where there are a group of some 20 burial and effigy mounds, including two 100-foot long bears, a panther with a tail as long as a football field, and an eagle with a 200 foot wingspan. The largest Native American nation in Wisconsin Dells is the Ho-Chunk, first called Winnebago by French explorers to the area.

In 1832, the U.S. Government began its infamous removal policy, stating that all Indians must be moved west of the Mississippi River. A series of deadly conflicts deeply scarred the culture. It wasn't until 1873, when the removal policy was reversed, that the Ho-Chunk could file claims to land in the area. By then, the area had already become a site for Ho-Chunk pow-wows and dancing, with tourists coming to enjoy the festivals.

French Explorers and Fur Trading

The first white man to meet the Ho-Chunk Indians is believed to have been Jean Nicolet, a French explorer. More than 50 years later, Father Jacques Marquette, a Jesuit priest and Louis Joliet followed Nicolet's footsteps, and ventured even farther. They were the first white men to discover the Wisconsin River. During one of their journeys, they came within 20 miles of Wisconsin Dells before encountering the Mississippi River. That was in 1673. Soon afterward, many other French and British explorers came to Wisconsin Dells. Some were missionaries and others were fur traders. Fur trading was a way of life for many of the early settlers. They made their living by trading animal pelts for supplies and food.

Log Rolling

From 1840 to 1890, lumbering became an even bigger business than fur trading. Wisconsin Dells was a busy logging route, with giant pine trees from the north being moved to larger cities in the south. It was dangerous work, given the rapids and primitively designed dams. In fact, at one point, the whole volume of the Wisconsin River was squeezed into a fifty foot wide rocky, narrow gulch.

Wildlife

Many animals live in the woods of Wisconsin Dells. On land, there are deer, rabbit, squirrel, badger, raccoon, chipmunk and fox. In the air, there are eagles and wild turkeys. The river and nearby lakes contain many edible fish including walleye, trout, bass, catfish, northern pike and muskellunge. Wisconsin Dells also has many different species of trees. Uncommon trees like the Hemlock, White Pine, Norway Pine and Bur Oak continue to thrive in the woodlands.

A Ghost Town

With the coming of early settlers, cities and towns sprung up. Not far from the city of Wisconsin Dells lies the ghost town of Newport. During the raftsmen days, Newport was a bustling city where many people lived. When word got out that a railroad river crossing would be built in Newport, the townspeople were very excited. But the owner of the railroad, Byron Kilbourn, had other plans. In 1856, he secretly built the railroad two miles up river instead. He did this because land costs were cheaper there than Newport. Almost overnight the city of Newport vanished. Buildings were torn down and stores closed. Some people moved to the new city where the railroad crossing was built, named Kilbourn in honor of the railroad's president. And all that remains of Newport is Dawn Manor, a huge mansion.

The Photographer Who Made Wisconsin Dells Famous

Henry Hamilton Bennett (1843-1908) returned from the Civil War with an injury to his hand that prevented him from pursuing his intended career as a carpenter. Instead, he opened a portrait photography studio in Wisconsin Dells in the mid 1800s. Considered among the top 10 landscape photographers of our time, Bennett's beautiful photos of the river and the bluffs tempted tourists from Chicago to travel to Wisconsin Dells for rowboat tours. Bennett even named many of the famous rock formations along the river. Here is another interesting fact about Bennett -- he is credited with changing photography forever with his 1888 invention of the stop-action camera shutter. With it, he snapped a picture of his son Ashley in mid-air as he jumped the five foot chasm from one bluff to another at Stand Rock. When people saw the photograph, they were amazed. Never before had they seen a picture like it.

Today, much of Bennett's equipment and photography is on display at the H.H. Bennett Studio, Wisconsin's 9th State Historic Site, in downtown Wisconsin Dells.



The Birth of the Dells

In the late 1800s, steamboat tours began, followed by hiking excursions on newly improved trails. The first souvenir shops appeared in 1890, selling postcards and Indian dolls. Tourism was taking hold. By the end of the century, a new dam, still in place today, was constructed and the successful destiny of the community was sealed, separating the river into the Upper and Lower Dells. On the other hand, the name Kilbourn City did not stick. In 1931, it was officially changed to Wisconsin Dells, the name the locals and tourists had always used, with "Wisconsin" derived from the Native American

word meaning “dark rushing waters,” and “Dells” mimicking the French word “dalles” that means “layers of flat rock” to describe the bluff rock formations.

A Summer Evening in Wisconsin Dells

During the 1930s and '40s, it wasn't unusual to see tourists and Native Americans line up to watch folks descend on the steamboats for a trip to the Stand Rock Indian Ceremonial. In 1946, Mel Flath brought the first WWII land-to-water vehicles known as Ducks to Wisconsin Dells and set up a tour company. In the 1950s, crowds were first treated to the now-famous Tommy Bartlett ski show. Attractions like Storybook Gardens and Fort Dells entertained thousands in the following decades, the precursor to the Dells as we know it today. In 1994, Stan Anderson, the owner of the Polynesian Resort Hotel, decided to put a roof over a water attraction at his property, and the first indoor waterpark in the country was christened. One year later, both the Wilderness Resort and Treasure Island waterparks opened. A few years after that, Great Wolf Lodge expanded its offerings. Chula Vista Resort overlooking the Wisconsin River added indoor and outdoor waterparks. In 2000, the Kalahari Resort opened and then quickly expanded its indoor waterpark. The rest, as they say, is history.

Pioneers of the Waterpark Craze

Today, Wisconsin Dells is referred to as “The Waterpark Capital of the World!®” There are over 20 indoor waterparks, three outdoor waterparks and hundreds of waterslides that require more than 16 million gallons of water.

Tourism Today

Today, Wisconsin Dells is one of the favorite vacation spots in the country.

This year-round tourism destination now attracts over 3.1 million visitors and over \$1 billion dollars annually to Wisconsin Dells. Half of the people who visit are from out-of-state. About 35 percent come from the neighboring Chicago area alone.

Today, there are over 80 exciting attractions to see in Wisconsin Dells and about 90 area restaurants. There are also over 8,000 rooms and close to 3,200 campsites where up to 55,000 people can stay overnight.

The Story of Belle Boyd

Belle Boyd was born in West Virginia and grew up in the town of Martinsburg during the Civil War. At age seventeen, she became a spy for the Confederate Army and was nicknamed the “Siren of Shenandoah.” After the war, she would travel from town to town and talk about her adventures as a Confederate spy. On June 9, 1900 she came to Kilbourn, now called Wisconsin Dells, to give a recital for the local Grand Army of the Republic Post. Shortly after her arrival, she became ill and suddenly died. Belle Boyd is buried in Wisconsin Dells and throughout the years, relatives and other interested people have come to visit her grave.

You Can Step Inside a Russian Space Station without Leaving Earth or the Dells

Wisconsin Dells may seem an unlikely spot for a piece of Russian space hardware. But at the Tommy Bartlett Exploratory, there is a 43-foot-long MIR core module, acquired from a Moscow museum in need of money. It is one of only three made by the Russians. One of the other two is warehoused in Russia and not on public display. The most famous MIR module once orbited Earth as part of the MIR Space Station. It disintegrated in 2001 as it passed through the atmosphere. That leaves the Exploratory's MIR as the only such exhibit on earth where visitors can step inside and experience the module that served as the heart of the famous MIR space program.



You Can Stay Overnight in a Cottage Designed by Famous Architect Frank Lloyd Wright

Mr. Wright spent many years in Wisconsin, so much so that some claim him as a native of the state. In Wisconsin Dells, his mark is unmistakable. He designed the Seth Peterson Cottage on nearby Mirror Lake, the only Wright-designed home available for rent to the public. One prominent Wright student, James Dresser, designed two Wisconsin Dells restaurants, Field's at the Wilderness and the Del-Bar. These buildings are examples of Wright's style of architecture called Prairie-style.

Just the Facts

- Area: 19.5 square miles.
- Counties: Sauk, Columbia, Juneau, Adams and Marquette counties all intersect in Wisconsin Dells.
- Population: 5,184 (Wisconsin Dells & Lake Delton combined).
- Main industry: Tourism, with visitors spending in 2007 topping the \$1 billion mark for the first time ever.
- Employment: During the busy summer months, more people work here than the entire population of the two communities combined. In fact, tourism creates more than 23,500 full-time jobs each year.
- Lodging: Wisconsin Dells has more hotel rooms than any other city in the state, at just over 8,000. There are also 17 campgrounds with close to 3,200 sites.
- Dining: There are more than 90 restaurants in the area with lots of food choices to keep visitors satisfied.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Exactly where is Wisconsin Dells?

A. Wisconsin Dells is in the middle of the southern half of Wisconsin. It's about 115 miles northwest of Milwaukee and about 50 miles north of Madison, the state's capital. People refer to this area as "Wisconsin's Heartland" because of its location near the "heart," or middle of Wisconsin. Wisconsin Dells is also centrally located in the Midwest – less than three hours northwest of Chicago and just over three hours southeast of Minneapolis.

Q. How do I get there?

A. There are airports in nearby Baraboo, as well as Madison, Milwaukee, Chicago and Minneapolis. Major highways leading into the area include Interstate 90/94 and U.S. Highways 12 and 16. State Highways 13 and 23 also come to a junction in the Dells. Greyhound and Amtrak have service to the area as well.

Q. What is the weather like in this part of Wisconsin?

A. In the spring, temperatures average 45 degrees. In summer the average temperature is 73 degrees, although temperatures can reach into the 90's or even close to 100. In fall, when the leaves change color, the temperature cools to about 50 degrees. Winter temperatures hover around the 20 degree mark, sometimes dropping below zero, with annual snowfall averaging 30 inches.

Q. What is the climate inside the waterparks?

A. It's always a balmy 85 degrees inside the waterparks.

**Wisconsin
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701 Superior Street, PO Box 390
Wisconsin Dells, WI 53965
800.223.3557
wisdells.com • info@wisdells.com