

WISCONSIN TRAILS

## Three Lakes is a Northwoods gem

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You wouldn't peg the small Northwoods town of Three Lakes as a show-biz hangout. Yet in August 2010, a handful of soaps stars and emerging country music trio Love and Theft partied in the town of 2,300. The occasion? A massive block party honoring the "Single Best Town" in America.

Best known as an outdoor haven, Three Lakes beat out more than 400 other communities last year to snag the title of Single Best Town in a contest sponsored by KRAFT Singles and Disney ABC Television Group. Voters were swayed by Three Lakes' natural beauty – the town sits at the confluence of three lakes and is surrounded by the Chequamegon–Nicolet National Forest – and the town's quaint downtown.

### History

Like so many Northwoods towns, Three Lakes traces its lineage to the logging industry. In the 1800s, the area's virgin pine and hardwood forests beckoned entrepreneurs, lumber barons and railroad companies. In 1881, the Chicago & North Western Railroad sent a surveyor to the area who proved to be uninspired in his task of naming the local landmarks. A lake surrounded by maples was named Maple Lake, Townline Lake was located at the town line and Range Line Lake was named for the range line situated to its west. The area was collectively referred to as "3 Lakes," and the name stuck.

Nestled along a chain of 28 lakes – the largest inland lake chain in the world – Three Lakes has long been a vacation destination. According to the Three Lakes Historical Society, Carl Marty established one of the first Northwoods luxury resorts here in 1946 on the shores of Deer and Big Stone lakes. His resort, the Northernnaire, attracted celebrities like Bob Hope, Chevy Chase and Dan Aykroyd.

Today, the [Northernnaire Resort and Spa](#) continues to attract city-weary urbanites who long for lakeside luxury. But more common in Three Lakes are the everyday folk from around the Midwest who return to the area, year after year, to relish the region's relaxed atmosphere and natural beauty.

### Outdoor activities

A trip to Three Lakes without a trip to the water is simply incomplete. Whether you fish, swim, kayak or canoe, Three Lakes offers something for you.

The area is known for good fishing. Musky, northern and walleye chase crappie, perch, bass and bluegill through miles of cool, clear waters. Bring your own bait and boat, or hire a local guide service to help you find the sweet spots. [Ryan Bock Guide Service](#) guarantees a walleye catch or your trip is free; [Musky Mastery Guide Service](#) will up your odds of catching the elusive "fish of 10,000 casts."

If swimming is your thing, Maple Lake Public Beach has a lifeguard on duty in the summer from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday and from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. on Tuesday and Friday. Many of the surrounding lakes and national forest campgrounds have suitable swimming areas as well, but no lifeguards.

[Three Lakes Do It Best Hardware](#) rents canoes, kayaks, bicycles and snowmobiles during winter. A kayak is \$25 for four hours or \$120 per week; 8- and 24-hour intervals are available as well. Canoes are an additional \$10 to \$20 more. Bikes, including bike trailers and smaller bikes for the kids, may also be rented by the hour or by the week. All necessary safety supplies, including life jackets, paddles and bike helmets, are included with equipment rentals.

Bikers will want to explore the [Three Eagle Trail](#), an 8.4-mile trail of crushed limestone that begins in Three Lakes and follows an old railway bed north toward Eagle River. Hikers have plenty of options as well. A variety of trails suitable for all ages and experience levels meander through the [Chequamegon–Nicolet National Forest](#) outside of Three Lakes. Check out the Scott Lake Trail (.5 miles), Sam Campbell Memorial Trail (1.75 miles), Luna–White Deer Trail (4 miles), Nicolet North Trail (15 miles) and others. Complete trail information is available from the local [chamber of commerce](#).

### History & culture

Baseball, architecture and the arts come together in the [Three Lakes Center for the Arts](#). Located in an old Quonset hut-style movie theater that was originally designed by Cy Williams (the National League home-run hitter who spent his later years as an architect in Three Lakes), the center is part art gallery, part movie theater, part performance space. The local arts group moved in two years ago, after a generous benefactor purchased the building for them. Since then, many hours of volunteer work have gone into renovation, and the results are apparent.

"We've been able to bring back the biggest building in Three Lakes," says Gay

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Scheffen, a member of the board. "A lot of people are thrilled that the theater is alive again." Live music acts perform monthly, and the art gallery is open daily throughout the summer.

History buffs will also enjoy the [Three Lakes Historical Museum](#), which includes five refurbished buildings, two exhibit halls and Cy William's uniform, and the [Northwoods Petroleum Museum](#), a free museum with a large collection of gas station memorabilia.

Be sure to check out [Three Lakes Winery](#) as well. Short guided tours are available from May to October – but don't expect to see any grapes or wine cellars. Three Lakes Winery specializes in fruit wines, like cranberry and rhubarb. Sample these and other fine wines in a post-tour tasting before hitting the gift shop on the way out.

**Downtown**

Take some time to wander through the shops of downtown Three Lakes. One of the town's newest shops is [The Choo Choo Store](#), a haven for model-train enthusiasts. A three-tiered layout, complete with a logging area, mountain range, bridges, tunnels and three separate train tracks, occupies an entire corner of the store. Available for purchase are Thomas the Train, Lionel and other train sets, plus HO-, O- and N-gauge track, model railroading books and accessories.

Other fun shops include [The Open Armoire](#) for unique women's handbags, jewelry and gifts; [The Cabin Shop](#) for Up North decor and Used Books, Cards and More for reasonably priced reading material.

For coffee, ice cream, fudge and friendly, hometown service, visit Lick-A-Dee Splitz (1758 Superior St.). While you're there, try tackling the Bidonkadonk: 12 scoops of ice cream and four toppings of your choice, plus whipped cream and cherries. Finish it and your picture goes on the shop's wall of fame.

**Lodging**

Want a true Northwoods experience? Book a housekeeping cabin. The [Three Lakes Chamber of Commerce](#) has a list of nearly 20 resorts that rent cabins to vacationers. Most are on lakes, and many include the use of a rowboat in the price of the cabin. (Boat motors are often available for an extra charge.) Be aware, though, that many cabins are often booked a year in advance.

Another option is the [Oneida Village Inn](#), located in downtown Three Lakes. The inn offers 47 motel rooms, a large reception area and restaurant.

**Dining**

If you like steak, [The White Stag Inn](#) is well worth the 20-minute drive west outside of Three Lakes. Begin with the iceberg wedge salad (you won't believe how big it is), then order steak (or fish) to your liking. The atmosphere is rustic and casual, but the service is attentive and the food, outstanding.

[Patty's Place](#) is the place to go for breakfast or pizza. The three-egg omelets are generous; the pizzas can be made to order and, if desired, picked up to bake back at the cabin. For a casual meal (think pasta, fish fries, sandwiches and burgers), try [The Black Forest Pub and Grille](#) in downtown Three Lakes. Or enjoy a view of Spirit Lake while dining at [Bonnie's Lakeside](#).

Then find a place – preferably near the water – to listen to the sounds of the night. With any luck, you'll hear the call of a loon, echoing off the water. You'll hear the wind softly rustling the branches of the tall pines. And you'll hear – and feel – a quiet stillness that invades your soul. Breathe deeply. Take it all in. Let Three Lakes work its magic. The celebrities have long since gone home, but Three Lakes remains the Single Best Town in America.

*Jennifer L.W. Fink lives near the Horicon Marsh but loves to travel Up North. She highly recommends the wine tasting at Three Lakes Winery. This article appeared in the May/June 2011 issue of Wisconsin Trails.*

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