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Minnesota wonder

You wouldn't have to pay visitors to sing the praises of this state. It comes naturally.

By David McGrath

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The golden tips of Aspen trees in fall, shown here sprinkled throughout the boreal forest along the North Shore of Lake Superior. (Brian Peterson/Star Tribune)**Opinion editor's note:** *Star Tribune Opinion publishes a mix of national and local [commentaries](#) online and in print each day. To contribute, [click here](#).*

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Be forewarned, Minnesotans, that you may face a seasonal flood of migration like never before. By which I mean millions of Americans from the other 49 states gravitating to the land of sky blue waters in the summertime.

This is not a travel piece. I am not a paid huckster for the state's tourism agency.

Nor is this essay inspired by Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz's recent ascension as vice presidential candidate; I started writing it before his selection.

I was not born in Minnesota. I do not live here.

In fact, I am a “mature” civilian with enough years under his belt to have visited most of the other states. But a recent family reunion held on the North Shore confirms that Minnesota can make you forget political strife, cellphones, record heat and the devil himself.

Marianne and I and our grown, scattered family of 11 reunited for five days at Bluefin Bay in Tofte. We drove north on Hwy. 61, made famous by native son Bob Dylan’s classic album, “Highway 61 Revisited,” and which is a safer version of California’s Hwy. 1, with 150 miles of mesmerizing views of Lake Superior and dozens of its 200 feeder rivers tumbling into it.

When we arrived in Tofte and entered the general store to stock up on supplies for our vacation, it was like opening the door to enchanted, rural America:

“You don’t have beer?” I asked the jolly bearded man cashing out our groceries.

“Oh, no, ya got to go next door,” he said.

After exiting the grocery store and walking up the concrete steps to the adjacent building, I picked out a six pack of Castle Danger Lager, brewed in Two Harbors, and went to the checkout lane, where an index card directed me to ring the bell for service. When I did, the same bearded cashier from the grocery store pushed through a pair of double doors to wait on us in the liquor store.

Upon your arrival at Bluefin Bay, the view of the immense freshwater ocean fills you with peace and silence and a longing for something you feel you’ve been missing. And we immediately took to the resort lakewalk to get as much of it as possible, before it was time for dinner at the hotel restaurant, where I had the grilled whitefish, spicy wild rice and Minnesota Gold lager.

We skipped dessert, opting instead to conclude our day around the nightly resort campfire, for which the staff supplies s’mores kits for both kids and old-timers with a sweet tooth. The intoxicating maple and oak wood smoke made me nostalgic for canoe camping trips from yesteryear, while Minnesota’s star-saturated sky evoked feelings vastly more ancient and indescribable.

Uniquely, Bluefin Bay does not nickel-and-dime its customers, offering dozens of guided activities free of charge. On Monday, my daughter Janet, her husband, Kevin, and 7-year-old, Summer, along with my elder daughter, Jackie, and her husband, Gene, went on Bluefin’s canoeing excursion on nearby Lake Christine. Marianne swam laps in the indoor pool before relaxing in the hot tub. And I picked out a Trek mountain bike from Bluefin’s large supply for a leisurely ride on Minnesota’s Gitchi-Gami Trail, which crosses a wooden bridge over a stunning Temperance River gorge, while furnishing near and distant views of Lake Superior.

Afterward, we welcomed our son Dr. Mike, who flew in from Phoenix with his girlfriend, Gen, and the entire clan reunited for dinner at Cascade Lodge in Lutsen, where you place your order at the counter for lake trout, walleye, whitefish, barbecue pork or the “Backpacker Pizza,” among other delicious entrees.

Since the North Shore stays light in August until nearly 10 p.m., we drove nine miles after dinner to Grand Marais to watch pleasure craft in the city harbor from the rooftop beer garden at the Voyageur

Brewing Company. While each of us enjoyed one of the brewery's offerings, such as Devil's Kettle (IPA) and Boundary Waters Brunette (brown ale), Jackie started a betting pool on Kamala Harris' VP selection. I bet a dollar on dark horse Bernie Sanders, and Gene and Dr. Mike would eventually tie for the win with Walz.

On Tuesday, after an afternoon sea-kayak trip on the big lake with affable Bluefin guide "Riley," we walked to Bluefin's Tofte Cove, a tiny protected bay, for a dip in the lake. When Jackie and Gene plunged directly into the 65-degree water, their "involuntary exclamations" gave me pause. Yet they stayed in the water, swimming far out to the rocky point, and the joy and confidence in their shouts soon had me diving under.

The shock lasts only a second. Yet soon the initial cold and all your minor aches seem to vanish, as your head palpably clears. Immersed in the crystal cold water, you feel your body's energy and vigor growing. I, too, wanted to swim out to the point, to hail everyone on shore about my miraculous sense of well-being.

No surprise the next day, when Jackie, a long-distance swimmer, and Gene, a fearless Marine, dove into the nearby Caribou River where we were hiking and swam under the spectacular waterfall. Janet, my sister Nancy, Mike, Kevin and Gen followed. Even little Summer took the plunge, darting under and on the surface like a frisky minnow, as Marianne and I and Jay, Nancy's husband, photographed and pontificated from a viewing platform.

Gitchi-Gami, waterfalls, local lager, wild rice, lake trout and whitefish, Dylan and Prince, spruce and hemlock, molten sunrises over the water, smiling Minnesotans — and did I already mention the lake? All of it coalesces for an addiction that will have us returning next year, when the new governor, if luck holds, will be Ojibwe!

Formerly of Hayward, Wis., David McGrath is emeritus English professor, College of DuPage, and author of the recently released "Far Enough Away," a collection of his stories from the heartland. Email him at profmcgrath2004@yahoo.com.