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Romantic Harvest: Escape to the tiny hamlet of Bayfield for a relaxing mini-honeymoon

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Photo by Don Albrecht

An hour into our windy, two-lane-highway drive to Bayfield, I begin to wonder if my husband and I are lost. Cars, once plentiful, are now rarely seen, the twisty road is flanked by thick forest, and the towns and their occupants become fewer: just a couple houses, maybe a restaurant and, if you're lucky, a gas station. It feels like we're at the edge of the world.

A quick check of our map reveals that, thankfully, we're just at the edge of the state. Nestled at the northern tip of Wisconsin, Bayfield juts out into Lake Superior like the arch of a fingertip. The city sits high above the lake, the main roads through town climbing steeply from the water's edge to tree-lined streets dotted with Victorian mansions. Just beyond are the 22 pristine Apostle Islands, the largest of them Madeline Island.

Our journey is well worth it. What awaits us is a romantic paradise: a charming bed-and-breakfast with a crackling wood-burning fireplace and bubbly in-room Jacuzzi; a hand-in-hand water's-edge stroll at twilight; elegant five-course dinners at some of the finest restaurants

in the Midwest; browsing through handmade products from local artisans; and relaxing bike rides and wilderness hikes in the untouched Wisconsin woods.

Bayfield's charms are by no means a secret. Couples have been flocking to Bayfield for mini-honeymoons for years. Christopher and Anne Olson of Eau Claire took an extended weekend here after their March 2007 wedding in Spooner. As a child, Olson and her family traveled to Bayfield every summer. When it came time to plan an excursion after their wedding, Olson chose Bayfield. Christopher is a student in Eau Claire, and their mini-honeymoon fell in the middle of his spring break.

"I have always loved Bayfield," says Anne. "It's such a quaint town. The scenery and everything is just gorgeous."

While Bayfield is a magnet for summer vacationers, locals say the fall and winter months are their favorite times. The summer crowds have gone, the bountiful harvest from the local farms and orchards is in, and the abundant trees are showing off their autumn splendor. "Fall is a lovely time [here]," says LeeAnn Schaub, director of the Madeline Island Chamber of Commerce. "It's a quieter time, but the shops are open and the fall colors are appearing."

Victorian Luxury

A true Bayfield honeymoon begins with a room at the Old Rittenhouse Inn, perhaps the premier bed-and-breakfast in the area. The fully restored Queen Anne-style mansion is an elegant, romantic retreat. Snuggle up with your spouse in front of one of the Inn's many in-room wood fireplaces. Or, better yet, book a room with a fireplace and a Jacuzzi. For honeymooners, the innkeepers will leave a basket of champagne and sweets for you to enjoy.

The main floor of the Inn functions as the dining room and restaurant. You'll want to crawl out of bed by 9:45 so that you don't miss breakfast. There, you'll be greeted by a hot cup of coffee, warm homemade pastries, and your choice of a full or continental breakfast. You'll be delighted with either.

Fruitful Activities

The downtown area is within walking distance of the Rittenhouse doors. You'll most likely receive a map of the city when you check in, and a quick survey will give you the lay of the land. The town is small—600 people live here—but is accustomed to many tourists.

The main streets—Rittenhouse Avenue, Washington Avenue and Manypenny Avenue—feature many of the city's gift shops, java joints, pubs and art galleries. Bikes can be rented at several places throughout the city, as can snowshoes in the winter. Most of the downtown is reachable on foot, and you'll want to take a stroll, especially if it's a nice day. You'll need your car, however, for the drive to Bayfield's famous orchard country just north and west of the city.

The drive to the orchard country is windy and picturesque, the narrow roads lined with orchard after orchard, in season the trees heavy with fruit. Bayfield is a microclimate; the Apostle Islands moderate the typically harsh Lake Superior waters, warming them and smoothing the waves. The lake's moisture, in turn, enables a long growing season in the fall, allowing the orchards a longer and more plentiful harvest and the fall colors a lengthier showcase.

Because of this microclimate, the Bayfield area is known for a wide variety of fruits, including apples, berries, plums and pears. One place not to be missed is the Bayfield Apple Company, located just north of the city on Betzold Road. While their main crop is raspberries, they are well-known for their spreads, including their famous apple mustard. Owner Einar Olsen maintains it's the only mustard of its kind in the world. And it's definitely unique; tangy and a bit sweet, you'll want to sample it at the shop's tasting table. The Bayfield Apple Company is open year-round and, like many of the orchards in the area, also makes apple jam, apple butter and several other fruit spreads.

Artful Shopping

As you drive back into the city, you'll notice many art studios and gift shops. Artisans have flocked to Bayfield for many years, creating a vibrant artist's community. Eckels Pottery on Highway 13 offers classes and a huge selection of handmade pottery for purchase. Chances are owner Deanna Eckels or one of her apprentices will be working the cash register and they'll gladly tell more about their pieces and when they created them.

Eating Well

Most of the fine dining in Bayfield focuses on the abundant produce in the area. Wild Rice, tucked inside the woods just outside of town off Highway 13 on Old San Road, is Bayfield's landmark restaurant. Open seasonally, the restaurant is known for its elegant presentation of world-class cuisine. In fall and winter, you'll want to indulge in its lamb, Wisconsin bison or Lake Superior herring. Reservations are a must, even in the off-season.

Be sure to grab dinner at least one evening at the Old Rittenhouse Inn. There, Chef David Miller creates award-winning five-course menus each evening. Not to be missed is their slow-roasted pork loin drizzled in a tangy cider gravy. A juicy two-and-a-half inch cut of pork, the loin is roasted for hours at a low heat, ensuring that the meat simply falls apart once your fork hits it.

Lunch spots are plentiful, too, and, in the fall and winter, you'll likely be among many locals, especially at Greunke's First Street Inn and the Blue Horizons café. One place that's hard to miss is Maggie's, a bright pink restaurant near the end of Manypenny Avenue. Owned by the same company as Wild Rice, the flamingo-themed décor reflects owner Mary Rice's love of the pink tropical bird. The menu is equally unique, featuring an innovative mix of soups, sandwiches and fish dishes. Try their garlic polenta fries, a mixture of polenta and garlic cut into rectangles, deep-fried and served piping hot with creamy ranch dressing. Wash the meal down with two local microbrews: South Shore Ale, brewed in nearby Ashland, or a beer from the Lake Superior Brewing Company in Duluth, Minn.

Island Hopping

Leave time in your mini-honeymoon to visit the Apostle Islands, the 22 islands that dot the horizon when looking out to Lake Superior. Only the largest, Madeline Island, is inhabited year-round, boasting many seasonal shops, cafés, restaurants and art galleries. Despite the island's size, much of it is parkland and great for hiking and biking. Depending on the weather, tourists can also rent mopeds for the day or play golf on Madeline Island's challenging Robert Trent Jones golf course. Ferries run from March until freeze-up, and schedules throughout the fall and winter are weather permitting; you'll want to check once you arrive.

Like much of Bayfield, the Apostle Islands are wild, undeveloped and isolated.

Perhaps this is the edge of the world.

GETTING THERE

BAYFIELD IS 320 MILES FROM MADISON AND 370 MILES FROM MILWAUKEE. Depending on how you arrive, there aren't too many major highways—a good thing, considering the local drive you'll be treated to. Make your trip last by stopping at some sites along the way. In Ashland, the South Shore Brewery offers tours and tastings throughout the year. Pick up some homemade mead at the White Winter Winery in Iron River or make a pit stop at Main Street in Hayward, a lovely mix of local shops and eateries. There are plenty of casinos, national parks and wilderness areas along the way, too.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

FALL AND WINTER IS A FESTIVE TIME IN BAYFIELD, with many weekend celebrations and festivals. In particular, Sept. 5–26 is the 12th Annual Apostle Islands Lighthouse Celebration, Oct. 5–7 is the 46th Annual Bayfield Apple Festival, Oct. 20 is the Madeline Island Fall Festival and Nov. 9–10 is Red Wine Tasting Weekend at the Old Rittenhouse Inn. Check with the Bayfield Chamber of Commerce for more information.

During the fall and winter, the weather in Bayfield can be somewhat unpredictable. It's a good idea to bring rain gear, a warm jacket and hiking boots or other outdoor footwear. There are bike trails and golf courses in the area, so you may want to bring your own equipment or you can rent some once you arrive. Bring clothing that can be worn in layers as the temperatures change throughout the day. Dress codes for fine dining are smart casual; while jeans are accepted, it's a good idea to have a couple of nicer things along for evenings out.

GET IN TOUCH

THE OLD RITTENHOUSE INN

www.rittenhouseinn.com

BAYFIELD CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

www.bayfield.org

MADELINE ISLAND CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

www.madelineisland.com

APOSTLE ISLANDS NATIONAL LAKESHORE

www.nps.gov/apis