

# Dells, *yeah!*



**GOING PLACES**  
Written by Nikki Best

## Outdoor adventure awaits your family in Wisconsin



If you're tired of the same old summer vacation to Myrtle Beach or Florida, please hold. We've got Wisconsin Dells, Wis., on the line for you.

Padding the edge of the Wisconsin River and many lakes, the former Kilbourn City was officially renamed for the famously rare sandstone rock formations, the Dells. The stacked appearance of the cliffs is as much a gift as an echo of a long-ago era.

**ABOVE:** Children enjoy a ride at Mt. Olympus, the largest water and theme park resort in the world. **LEFT:** Children check out the evolution of photography at H.H. Bennett Studio.

Photos courtesy Wisconsin Dells Convention & Visitors Bureau

According to the official Wisconsin Dells website, the Dells formed 19,000 years ago as a result of catastrophic glacial flooding from the past ice age. The deep canyons and steep bluffs now offer a natural beauty seen few places in the world.

While the original attractions of the town are the Dells, more recently, the town of Wisconsin Dells has become the waterpark capital of the world.

In 1989, the first indoor waterpark was invented and built in Wisconsin Dells. Who knew putting walls and roof around a waterslide would be so revolutionary?

Two notable resorts in the area are the Kalahari Resort and the Great Wolf Lodge.

## African safari

The Kalahari Resort is remarkable. Upon entrance to the main lobby, guests are greeted by a real-feel African theme.

Travis Nelson, spokesperson for Kalahari Resorts and Convention centers, says all their artifacts are real. Management makes regular trips to Africa to purchase decor so the experience is authentic, he said.

“Kalahari believes in the One World spirit of ubuntu or togetherness, which encompasses the idea that we are all connected globally,”

Nelson said. “This is manifested throughout the resort — authentic African souvenirs are sourced from artist communities on the African continent (and) African artifacts adorn the walls.”

The Kalahari offers an elaborate indoor and outdoor waterpark experience, a spa, a golf club, and an enormous arcade. Nine restaurants offer plenty of kid-friendly fare and everything is made fresh daily.

The Kalahari seems to do its best to cater to a guest’s every whim and desire, keeping families swathed in an all-inclusive vacation bubble.

“Waterpark attractions carry the names of similar water entities in Africa,” Nelson said. “The ubuntu philosophy is present in everything Kalahari puts forth.”

## Beyond water

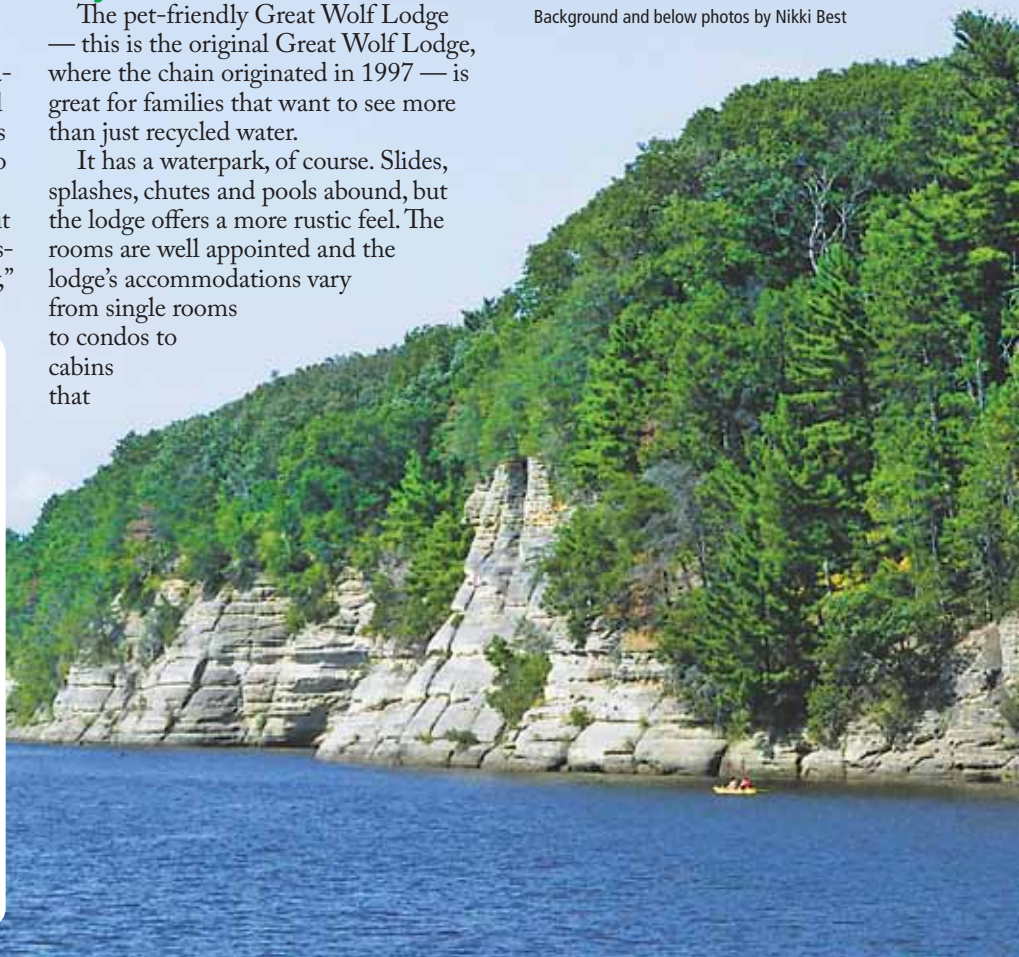
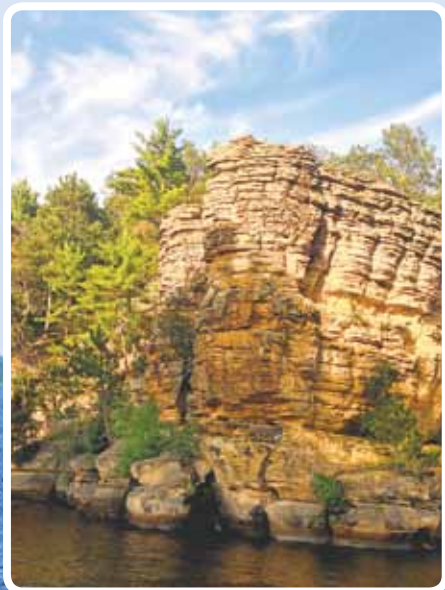
The pet-friendly Great Wolf Lodge — this is the original Great Wolf Lodge, where the chain originated in 1997 — is great for families that want to see more than just recycled water.

It has a waterpark, of course. Slides, splashes, chutes and pools abound, but the lodge offers a more rustic feel. The rooms are well appointed and the lodge’s accommodations vary from single rooms to condos to cabins that



**ABOVE:** Children enjoy the waterpark at the Great Wolf Lodge. **BACKGROUND, BELOW:** The Wisconsin Dells is a 5-mile-long gorge on the Wisconsin River. It is noted for its unique rock formations.

Background and below photos by Nikki Best



sleep eight – 10 people.

There are ongoing activities for children in the lobby and a special adventure scavenger hunt is held each day. Each night there are character meet and greets with The Great Wolf and his friends, and a bedtime story for kids as told through animatronic characters in the lobby. A restaurant, snack shop and souvenir shop are all available in the hotel.

## Getting out

Being in a rustic lodge is great, and the Kalahari Resort or Great Wolf Lodge are excellent choices for families looking for lodging as they explore all Wisconsin Dells and the surrounding area have to offer.

Wisconsin Dells is a small town; the kind where you'd expect to see Andy Griffith and Aunt Bea walking down main street. A group of 5,500 intrepid souls make Wisconsin Dells their home. Parts of downtown still have the feel and architecture of the United States during its western expansion of the late 1800s, while others fell victim to the 1970s and other economic turmoil from the last 150 years.

Like many small towns, Wisconsin Dells is working to get its downtown back. To avoid becoming just another tourist spot filled with rows of T-shirt shops, the Wisconsin Dells Visitor & Convention Bureau has formed a committee a to take a long hard look at what makes The Dells work in the new millennium.

“As far as the revitalization of downtown, we are looking into expanding the downtown dining options,” Sarah Hudzinki, director of marketing and communications for the Wisconsin Dells Visitor & Convention Bureau said. “We’re also looking into a trolley system to accommodate visitors.”

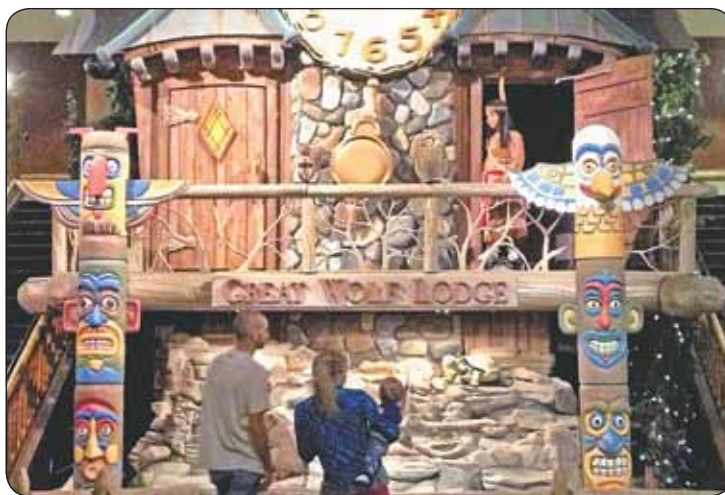
Notable family-friendly attractions in the downtown area are H.H. Bennett Studio, The Lost Voyage boat tour and the Dells Boat Tour.

■ **H.H. Bennett Studio** is a must-see attraction for anyone who enjoys American history or the evolution of photography.

Henry Hamilton Bennett was considered the best landscape photographer of his time — post Civil War to the beginning of the 20th century. An inventor and entrepreneur, he created the shutter that allowed film to capture action shots. The museum is built onto Bennett’s original portrait studio and



**ABOVE:** The Kalahari offers an elaborate indoor and outdoor waterpark experience kids will love.



**LEFT:** Each night there are character meet and greets with The Great Wolf and his friends, and a bedtime story for kids as told through animatronic characters in the lobby of the Great Wolf Lodge.

Photo by Nikki Best

developing lab. Artifacts and photos are all around to satisfy any curiosities about the area and the man who made it famous. Tours are offered May – October. Guided tours can be arranged by calling ahead.

“The H.H. Bennett Studio is the soul of The Dells,” said Alan Hanson, interim director of the H.H. Bennett Studio. “It shows how (his photography) made the Dells a landmark and how it’s changed.”

■ **The Dells Boat Tour** is a great way to see how the Wisconsin River has changed

since the days of Kilbourn City. A relaxing cruise and a short walk into Witches Gulch is a rock formation that changed photography forever: Stand Rock. Experienced guides narrate the trip so you can take everything in at your own pace. It’s a great way to start or wind down the day.

## Beyond downtown

Just a few miles outside of Wisconsin Dells, your inner adventurer can run free. Paddle boarding, kayaking and hiking, are



## Getting there

Wisconsin Dells, Wis., is a great vacation spot for families looking for outdoor adventure. The town is located just north of Madison, Wis. By car, it's about a 15-hour drive, so unless you're up for a long road trip, plan on flying into Madison, Milwaukee or even Chicago. A quick check on Kayak.com showed round-trip flights from Greenville for \$306.

## Where to stay

The two resorts featured in this article are excellent family-friendly options to consider:

- **The Kalahari:** [www.kalahariresorts.com/wisconsin](http://www.kalahariresorts.com/wisconsin); 608-254-5466. Rates vary.
- **Great Wolf Lodge:** [www.greatwolf.com/dells](http://www.greatwolf.com/dells); 608-253-2222. Rates vary.
- **Black Hawk Motel:** It's another good option; [www.blackhawkmotel.com](http://www.blackhawkmotel.com); 608-254-7770. Not a chain hotel. Rates vary; call or check online.

## Where to eat

There are plenty of restaurants in the Wisconsin Dells area. Here are three that offer a variety of family-friendly fare.

- **Paul Bunyan's Cook Shanty** offers great breakfast options. Meals are served family-style, with plenty of refills. Try the doughnuts — their own recipe. Doors open daily at 7 a.m. Visit [www.paulbunyan.com](http://www.paulbunyan.com).
- **The Moosejaw Pizza & Dells Brewing Co.** is an affordable, family-friendly lunch or dinner spot. Offering a bit of everything and the best pizza in the Dells, the ultimate complements on the menu are the microbrews, which might interest moms and dads. Visit [www.dellsmoosejaw.com](http://www.dellsmoosejaw.com).
- Time for date night? Add **The Del-Bar Prime Steak House** to your list. One of Wisconsin's surviving supper clubs and an upscale casual dining restaurant, The Del-Bar will not disappoint. Touting the "Best Steaks in Town since 1943" and an extensive wine list, this experience will be the cherry on top of a wonderful trip to Wisconsin Dells. Visit [www.del-bar.com](http://www.del-bar.com).

a few of the great outdoor adventures that await inside the state's parks.

Paddle boarding and kayaking on Mirror Lake in Mirror Lake State Park could be the highlight of your family's vacation.

The calming serenity of the reflective lake is surrounded by a number of smaller cliffs, and it's an easy hike from the lake to the top of aptly named Echo Rock.

"The lake is a small-to-no-wake lake, so it's excellent for paddling," said Mirror Lake State Park manager Becky Green.

The rental concessions at the lake are open between Memorial Day and Labor Day weekend for bicycle, paddleboard, canoe,

kayak, pontoon and small fishing boat rentals.

There are 158 family campsites in the park and 60 of those are electric, but think ahead unless you want to sleep under the stars. There are no camping equipment rentals offered by the park. Pets are welcome in most outdoors areas in the park, but they must be leashed.

Add in 17 hiking trails, and your family's outdoor adventure is complete. And don't worry: It's warm enough in summer to enjoy the outdoors, even by South Carolina standards.

"The warm season starts in June," Green said. "That's when we can start swimming in the lakes, and it stays that way through September."\*



A not-to-be-missed attraction with historic significance is the duck boat tour. The Original Wisconsin Ducks have been providing a singular experience of the area on land and water for nearly 70 years.

## If you go: Here are two can't-miss attractions

A not-to-be-missed attraction with historic significance is the duck boat tour. Make sure to choose the right one, however. The **Original Wisconsin Ducks** have been providing a singular experience of the area on land and water for nearly 70 years. The ducks are a piece of history themselves. Designed in 1942 for the military by General Motors, their Army-issue name is DUKW — six cylinders of power, six-wheel drive and they work in water, too.

Used all over Europe, the USSR and the Pacific for the remainder of World War II, the surviving DUKWs went back to their respective homes, honorably discharged and

retired to civil service all over the world. History is fun.

Visit [www.wisconsinducktours.com](http://www.wisconsinducktours.com).

Beginning its 62nd season in summer 2014, the **Tommy Bartlett Show** is almost like being caught in a time warp. The acrobatics and ramp jumps of water-skiers will amaze, just as it did the audiences of past generations. To keep things fresh, the show has evolved to include hang gliding and some other surprises. For less than the cost of a movie, it's good, clean fun for all ages just down the street from most hotels, situated on the Wisconsin River.

Visit [www.tommybartlett.com](http://www.tommybartlett.com).