

National Geographic's TOP TEN Adventure Towns

Weekend Getaway: Ely, MN

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The small town of Ely in northeast Minnesota can be summed up in three words: woods, wildlife, and water. Set on the edge of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area—a wilderness preserve inside the 3.9-million acre Superior National Forest, Ely is home to bear, moose, wolves, and eagles, among other critters. The world's top walleye fisheries are found here, as are a half-dozen regional trail networks for hiking, biking, snowshoeing, and skiing. There are more than 500 lakes within 20 miles of town. The only thing Ely doesn't have is a crowd, "As far as the continental U.S. goes, we like to think we're the edge of the known world," says resident Paul Schurke. "After all, we're at the end of the road in Minnesota and if you head north from here across Canada, you'll find that just a couple lonely strips of asphalt and a half-dozen gravel roads lie between Ely and the North Pole."

Meet the Expert: Paul Schurke, 59, has lived in Ely for 35 years. He and wife Susan operate Wintergreen Dogsled Lodge, and Wintergreen Originals Outdoor Apparel. Along with being an author and outdoor educator, Schurke co-founded Wilderness Inquiry, a non-profit adventure program for persons with disabilities. His work with polar dogsled expeditions earned him the "Explorer Award" from the International Center for Exploration, and the "Adventurer of the Year" from Outside Magazine. He also received the "Environmental Hero" award from The Wilderness Society for securing the protection of old growth forests.

Hike: Located just outside of town, the five-mile Bass Lake Trail is quintessential Ely: stately pine stands, old growth cedar bogs, grassy meadows thick with wildflowers and blueberries, ledge rock overlooks, three quiet lakes, and a waterfall with a pool for swimming or fishing. "And catch this curious backstory," says Schurke. "When a glacial moraine on the lake's east end gave way in 1925, its water dropped 55 feet overnight resulting in the dramatic bowl now ringed by this trail."

Ride: In Ely, the best cross-country ski trails are also the best mountain biking trails. "Our most accessible and varied biking can be found at Hidden Valley Recreation Area," says Schurke. "More adventurous backwoods biking options on old logging road networks can be found at the Nickel Lake, Fenske Lake, and Fernberg Tower areas."

Climb: Ennis Lake, a 14-mile drive (or 20-minute hike) from Ely, is a beautiful and quiet place for easy climbs. Its 30-foot granite face offers numerous 5.7 to 5.9 routes, from crack to overhangs set for top belay or sling-shot belay from solid pines up top. Cool off in the deep aquamarine water below (& swim through the submarine rock arch). "If you want to go for gusto, local rock hounds say that wilderness sport climbing at its very best (80-foot walls) can be found at water-access sites via Crane Lake, MN, a 1.5-hour drive north of Ely," says Schurke.

Ski: Schurke calls Hidden Valley Recreation Area the pride and joy of Ely outdoor enthusiasts, and the envy of other northern Minnesota towns. The network offers twelve miles of hilly, wooded, loop trails on the outskirts of Ely, and a training run for beginners right next to the newly renovated chalet.

Paddle: The hallmark recreational draw to Ely is weeklong canoe trip in the Boundary Waters wilderness. For day trips, the Lake One-Confusion Pond-Kawishiwi River Loop is a local favorite. The four-mile loop includes three short portages, and campsites for campfire picnics. "Another good day-paddle option—with a destination steeped in human history—is the 1.5-mile paddle through South and North Hegman Lakes to view ancient Native American cliff paintings," says Schurke.

Locals' favorite adventure: Minnesota's squiggly northern border follows the water highway made famous in the 17th century by French Voyageur fur traders. Relive this colorful era (minus the misery of their primitive gear) on weeklong canoe trips in summer, or dogsled treks in winter, via the chain of pristine lakes that traverse this 150-mile-long internationally protected wilderness.

Something visitors don't do but should: Late winter thaw/freeze cycles often cap Ely's vast network of lakes with a firm snow crust on which you can catch the perfect edge for skate skiing. In late March or early April, the six-mile wilderness ski trek up Moose-Newfound-Sucker Lakes to straddle the Minnesota-Ontario border at Prairie Portage adds international intrigue to an exhilarating adventure. "With a bit of a tailwind, you'll schuss your way right to Canada," says Schurke.

Where to eat: "Our favored regional entree, walleye with wild rice, is prepared to perfection at Burntside Lodge and the Chocolate Moose from May to September," says Schurke. More standard fare (but done with a flair, according to Schurke) can be enjoyed year-round at the Ely Steak House (where resident raconteur Mike Hillman often spins yarns over a game of pool) and at A Taste of Ely (which is adorned with local art and artifacts). For breakfast, many Boundary Waters expeditions begin with homemade cinnamon-raisin bread and stuffed hash browns at Britton's Cafe. On summer evenings, sunset views of Shagawa Lake while dining on the deck of the Grand Ely Lodge are stunning.

Where to drink: At the Boathouse Brewpub, the craft beer menu meanders with the seasons but their gentle, balanced Blueberry Blonde is a perennial favorite while their Muzzle Loader lager packs more of a punch. Looking for laughs with your liquor? The full bar at the Ely Steak House bar offers lively evenings with karaoke, open mic and joke nights, and a host of games.

Where to sleep (budget): The Adventure Inn is priced similarly to Ely's chain motels, but offers "eco-friendly lodging" (solar-heated hot water) and a variety of rooms to fit single persons or large groups, as well as kitchen suites and Jacuzzi rooms. Pets welcome.

Where to sleep (splurge): The Blue Heron B&B offers end-of-the-road solitude and lakeside views of a million-acre front yard: the Boundary Water wilderness. Wildlife abounds, including wonderful bird watching. Plus canoes, snowshoes, and a wood-fired Finnish sauna for your use, along with trails right outside the door.

ELY, MN -- A VERY EXTRAORDINARY PLACE

Fun Facts to Know & Share

Ely is the entry point to the world's premier lakeland wilderness area and is considered to be the "Canoe Capitol of the World." National Geographic designated the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness as one of the world's "Top 50" scenic places that everyone should visit at least once in their lifetime. The BWCAW is the largest wilderness preserve east of the Rockies and the nation's most popular one, hosting a quarter million canoeists each year.

Ely has a greater concentration of dogteams and dogsled racers and outfitters than any other community in the continental U.S. and is often referred to as the "Sled Dog Capitol." (Ely is the only Minnesota city in the "Ontario Snow Powder Belt," meaning that we have the most consistent snow cover November-April.)

Ely is surrounded by 2 million acres of national forest and protected wilderness. Over 500 lakes lie within 20 miles of Ely and the adjoining forest system includes over 2000 lakes. These lakes offer some of the world's best smallmouth bass, walleye, northern pike and lake trout fishing and have produced many records. (A 6-foot, 187-lb sturgeon was once caught in Namakan Lake west of Ely.)

Ely's watershed lies just north of the continental divide and its waters flow to the Arctic via Hudson Bay. Ambitious canoeists have made the trip from Ely to the Arctic in less than a month. Journalist Eric Severeid made such a trip when he was 17 and wrote his first book about it, "Canoeing with the Cree."

The Ely area's recreational resources include over 100 miles of hiking & ski trails, 200 miles of groomed snowmobile trails, 1500 miles of canoe routes and 2 golf courses.

The world's richest deposits of iron ore were discovered in the Ely area which led to 80 years of mining in 11 area mines, including the state's first and deepest underground mine. Two-thirds of the iron used for US armaments in WWII came from this area. Top among communities nationwide, Ely sent the highest number of men & women per capita to the WWII armed forces (over a fourth of our young people enlisted).

Protected by a picket fence on an Ely side street are Greenstone lava pillows which, at 2.7 billion years old, are considered to rank among the oldest exposed rock in the world. In the 1970's NASA astronauts, including Apollo 15's Jim Irwin (first man to walk on the moon), trained on this lunar-like rock formation.

The area's serenity and beauty have lured many renown writers, photographers and artists. The Northern Lakes Arts Association benefited from the sale (for a half million+ dollars to a New York collector) of a 'long-lost' American impressionist painting that had been humbly hanging for years in Ely's library.

Ely had the 1st high school band in the state and the first snowmobile club in the country and was once said to have the highest number per capita of college-educated residents in the state.

Ely-area wildlife includes bald eagles, moose, black bear, deer, beaver, lynx, cougar, otter and the largest timber wolf population in the continental U.S. (about 3000 animals). Ely is home to the International Wolf Center, a world-class research and education facility that includes a woodland enclosure where visitors can observe both timber wolves and arctic wolves.

Ely is the home base for world experts in various fields (Lynn Rogers: black bears, Dave Mech: wolves, Jim Brandenburg: outdoor photography, Will Steger: polar exploration). Ely's Bob Cary ran for U.S. President in 1980 under the "Independent Fishing Party."

Three U.S. Presidents have vacationed in the Ely area (so has James Taylor). "On the Road" Journalist Charles Kuralt considered Ely his top vacation spot and featured Ely in his book "Charles Kuralt's America."

During the 1930s and '40s, Ely-area fly-in resorts were a hide-out for gangsters and bootleggers and hosted a cast of characters. During frontier times, Ely had 30 bars and a dozen bordellos -- famed evangelist Billy Sunday claimed that the only difference between Ely and hell was that Ely had a railroad to it. Times change -- nowadays Ely has a dozen churches, 6 bars and one steambath (but no bordellos).