

Tucked in a Northwoods Lodge

Like a comfortable old moccasin, a traditional Northwoods lodge feels just right, like you've been there before, like it's happy to have you back

It's the quintessential Badger State vacation: a rustic Northwoods lodge, all brown and forest green and rough-hewn timber nestled in the woods, character emanating from every log and stone.

If you're a born-and-raised Wisconsinite like me, you may have experienced a place like this. Naturally, you'd like to share that experience with your own kids.

And you'd think the old Northwoods lodge would be easier to find than ever: Surf the web and make your selection.

That's what I did recently while planning a short getaway, and here's what I found: *New* versions of the old Northwoods lodge are plentiful. Activity-filled places like the Great Wolf Lodge or Tundra Lodge offer nonstop entertainment, water parks, and theme restaurants for fun-seeking families on the go.

While these modern twists are definitely a trend, there's good news: A handful of *authentic* Northwoods lodges remain.

At Jesse's Wolf River Lodge near White Lake, Stout's Island Lodge (on the charmingly named "Island of Happy Days") near Birchwood, and Seven Pines Lodge in Lewis, this piece of our rustic past is still part of our present.

Lodges like these are purposely peaceful places, as a look at one of their websites will prove. Click on "outdoor activities," then just try not to picture yourself there when you read "sitting on the lawn," "bird watching," and "snoozing in a hammock."

High-energy activities are listed, too, including "hydro biking, sail boarding, and badminton."

Sure — we might choose some of that someday. But I knew Seven Pines was what we wanted for this trip as soon as owner Debbie Murray-John started describing the lodge to me when I called.

"It has a kind of warm, historic, quiet Northwoods elegance," she said. "Our guests tell us they feel very much at home and comfortable. Very little has changed in 100 years."

And, yes, she said graciously when I asked, the Seven Pines does welcome families.

Having now visited, I'll add one caveat: You must be seeking the simple peace and quiet of nature and want to leave the Dells frenzy for another time.

We qualified. Experiencing peace and quiet was our quest for this trip.

Up in a tree house

Photos we'd seen online came to life as we drove up to the Seven Pines main lodge a few weeks later. We parked the car and walked down the path. Debbie appeared instantly and welcomed us into the grand old place.

The warmth of wood was everywhere. From the russet-colored wall boards to the vintage Stickley furnishings, this was one warm and cozy lodge. We walked into the living room, complete with huge brick fireplace and big comfy couch, then out to the porch/dining room overlooking Knapp Creek.

"Wrapping around the lodge of the stream was the dining room," one travel writer quoted on the lodge's website had said. His words came back to me: "You seem to be in a treehouse."

It's the most appealing characteristic of a traditional lodge: You're in the woods whether you're outdoors or indoors. The lines between you and nature virtually disappear.

The first-floor interior hints at the Arts and Crafts architectural movement that took place in this country soon after the building was constructed in 1903. Wealthy Minnesota businessman Charles E. Lewis built his "Southern Pines," as it was originally named, as a second home for his family; it became a fly fishing inn a couple of decades later.

Upstairs, log walls and comforters in the five guest rooms created a feeling we call "comfy-cozy." Two bedrooms have balconies, one a heavenly up-in-the-trees haven overlooking the stream.

Our very ample suite, complete with modern hot tub, was in "the bungalow," a few steps from the main lodge. It's the best setting for a family, at least until the old carriage house becomes a 12- person family building with kitchen, later this year.

Living history, delightful dining

A National Historic landmark, the Seven Pines has a colorful history. Among the many "game" heads mounted on the walls is a buffalo donated by Teddy Roosevelt. An advertising sign preserved from the 1930s proclaims "Cal Coolidge slept here." Like all the lodge's visitors, our 30th president no doubt experienced warm and hearty meals during his visit, another hallmark of the true lodge experience.

The Seven Pines takes that dining history to new heights. Trained chef Mike Murray-John whips up items like toasted bread crostini with tomato confit and chive, roast quail, and Seven Pines's signature maple creme brulee. No, it's not kid food, and that's why Mike regularly prepares simpler fare for younger guests. Our nine-year-old Christopher tried and enjoyed several items from our plates, then devoured the chicken nuggets Mike made just for him.

Dinner is in the \$\$\$\$ price range and truly is a fine dining experience, but families may opt to drive to town for some meals. Breakfast is included with your stay — bed and breakfast style — and fresh fruit, granola, scrambled eggs, and thick bacon make it acceptable to all taste buds.

No phone, no TV — no way?

Yes, way.

While the typical child may find such a notion shocking, those words can be music to a busy adult's ears. And a child can, it turns out, learn to appreciate electronics-free living for a few days.

We substituted several outdoor pursuits, soaks in the hot tub, a few rounds of Rack-O, cards, and conversation for the multiplicity of mind-numbing electronic diversions available at home. (This, and the fact that his two older siblings stayed home with their grandparents, allowing him to receive his parents' undivided attention, caused Christopher to proclaim this the "best vacation ever".)

Let the lodge set the tone for your relaxed get-away, then explore surrounding sites when the spirit moves you. Whether you stay at the Seven Pines, one of the lodges mentioned in the sidebar accompanying this story, or another place, activities are by nature slower paced. You may find horseback riding, mini golf, or apple orchards nearby.

At Seven Pines, the Gandy Dancer Bike Trail can be accessed just minutes away, and several mountain bikes are available for the borrowing. Try fly fishing in the early morning, and hike on the Seven Pines' 12 acres after lunch.

"You can see deer, especially in the spring and fall, that come down in the morning and drink from the stream with their fawns," Debbie says. "From hummingbirds to bald eagles and hawks, many birds are attracted to our pristine stream."

The best old lodges, the ones that have stood for years, exist just that way — in harmony with the nature around them.

The timelessness of the lodge experience is what draws the weary traveler, the 21st Century seeker of solitude, the family with dreams of peace and quiet, to a home-away-from-home nestled in the woods.

(Sidebar)

Northwoods fly fishing: a “reel” sport

Learn how to don waders, walk in water, and “tie and fly.” It's fly fishing, what aficionados consider more sporting than reeling them in from an anchored speed boat.

“You use a bamboo pole and a real technique,” says Seven Pines owner Debbie Murray-John. “You throw out your line, and it must sit on the water, so you're constantly casting. You learn where the trout are, when they're hungry. There are rainbow, brown, and brook trout — 6 to 12 inches long — and it's catch and release.”

Visitors wanting to learn can hire fly fishing guides for about \$60 an hour.