

# Feeling at home and welcome in Wisconsin

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Special to The CJN

When I was first invited to Wisconsin, I realized how little I knew about the "Dairy State." I'm pleased I decided to explore it because Wisconsin is full of surprises.

It's very much like southern Ontario, with scenic grassy knolls. The landscape and sea-like Lake Michigan made me feel immediately at home and welcome.

Situated on the southeast coast, about a 90-minute drive from Milwaukee airport, Sheboygan and Elkhart Lake feel like old-time American towns. Streets are lined with traditional clapboard houses, and in the centre of Elkhart Lake, the original train station adds a classic touch. Peel back a few layers and you discover diversity, a multicultural population, and a combination of historical elegance blended with native culture.

Booming in the summer primarily with Chicago tourists, Sheboygan has a population of 50,000, 35 per cent of which is made up of fairly recent immigrants, including Asian, Bosnian, Hispanic, Thai and a large Hmong population, with its roots in Laos. At one point, the largest Jewish population outside of Chicago and Los Angeles lived in Sheboygan, which once boasted five synagogues.

I love sailing and was pleased to find that Sheboygan has the perfect conditions for water sports. The world's largest inland surfing event is held in Sheboygan. Fresh-water surfing and kite surfing are popular there as well.

With superb sailing conditions on Lake Michigan, the Sheboygan Yacht Club is now home to one of four U.S. Olympic freshwater sailing centres. The Nation's Cup was held there last month, bringing sailors from all over the world. The day I visited, Anna Tunnicliffe, skipper for Team MacLaren, and her crew, Molly Vandemoer and Debbie Capozzi, braved high, choppy waves and biting winds. They are training for the Olympic Sailing Competition in London, England, the world championships, in 2012.

Shopping in Sheboygan has lots to offer, including an unusual tiny shop, named Olivu 426. It was opened by local entrepreneur Caitlin Brotz after her friend Adam was burned badly while burning brush to build a snowmobile track. Desperately trying to find products that didn't contain alcohol and that had skin-nourishing ingredients to help Adam heal, Caitlin was given a recipe for lip balm and lotion from a nurse. These basic recipes have evolved into a successful line of products with healing qualities. Olivu offers products free from additives and preservatives. Workshops on making your own lip balm, eyeshadows and lotions are offered ([www.olivu426.com](http://www.olivu426.com)).

My interest in interior design was stimulated by a visit to the Kohler Showroom, which featured the latest trends in kitchen and bathroom sinks, taps, furniture and lighting. Kohler, of course, is a well-known brand. The company has more than 50 manufacturing locations worldwide.

The influence of the Kohler family extends to the American Club in Kohler, Wisc., built in 1918 to house single immigrants who came to work in the factory. The brick Tudor-style dormitory was transformed into a luxury hotel in 1981.

Walter Kohler, president of the company and governor of Wisconsin from 1929 to 1931, believed his immigrant workers deserved "not only wages, but roses, as well." His resident workers enjoyed hearty meals, a four-lane bowling alley, a billiard and tap room, and summer concerts on the front lawn. American flags were hung everywhere, a reminder from the company that the workers might want to consider applying for U.S. citizenship. English lessons were held every Tuesday. By 1930, Kohler had convinced nearly 700 immigrant workers to take the annual paid day off to go the county courthouse to take their oath of citizenship. The company offered free transportation to the courthouse.

The American Club (800-344-2838) is now a five-diamond, four-star luxury hotel with four indoor garden



Elkhart Lake shops [M. Wren photos]

courtyards, 12 distinctive restaurants. It also serves as a showcase for the high-end bathroom fixtures, furniture and lighting fixtures Kohler manufactures. Furniture and chandeliers from the Baker line and tiles from Ann Sacks are a hint of fabulous throughout the classic, elegant club. With 240 rooms, there are varying degrees of accommodation to suit all budgets.

While in the village of Kohler, visit the John Michael Kohler Arts Centre, which was the original home of John Michael Kohler, founder of the Kohler Co. The 100,000-square-foot complex blends contemporary architecture with the charming Italianate Victorian home and carriage house built in 1882.

The Osthoff Resort ([www.osthoff.com](http://www.osthoff.com)) is a timeless, rambling resort on the edge of Elkhart Lake, which at first glance looks as if it could be in Ontario, and has a relaxed country feel. I had the Lakeside Deluxe suite, which was well appointed and spacious, with sumptuous touches such as granite counters in my galley kitchen, a fireplace in my sitting room, a furnished balcony and two televisions. There are 23 different room styles. I didn't leave the resort for the first full day as there was so much to do on site.

Five days was enough to have an idea of the bounty



The Elkhart Lake train station

of southeast Wisconsin and to experience the countryside, and to start planning my return journey. The area is pleasing even in the off-season, possibly more so because the crowds are less.

For more information about Wisconsin, visit [www.travelwisconsin.com](http://www.travelwisconsin.com).

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