

Outdoor activities in the Western Lake Superior region

Duluth offers nearly world-class outdoor adventure without the burden and crowds that come with a world-class reputation. Being remote, technical challenges, and the weather is “what keeps the riff-raff out” as we say, and look at each other knowingly. Frequently named an outstanding hub for outdoor activities, e.g. #2 in the world by Outside Magazine. If you have the interest and schedule/vacation flexibility to stay an extra one to four days, consider the following suggestions.

This note is organized with some basic orientation, followed by a string of half-day and one-day suggestions for outdoorsy trips, with the idea that you might be interested in a one to four night add-on to your MINERvA trip. Following that are a couple intense three-night suggestions, and a few other practical bits of advice and some comments on lodging, health, and safety. In all cases, a local outfitter will offer anything you need to rent, plenty of free advice, and in some cases guides or guided tours.

Many suggestions below are within 30 minutes from Duluth, or within 30 minutes from four spurs each of which is ~2 hours drive from Duluth: Lake Superior North Shore (Tofte, Grand Marais), Ely MN, Lake Superior South Shore (Cornucopia, Bayfield WI), Minneapolis and St. Paul. In addition, Tofte and Ely are two hours from each other, allowing a triangle route.

Full disclosure: I've not personally done all of these, but I know they are popular with other folks.

Within or very near Duluth, MN

Bicycle ride along shore. From downtown to Two Harbors is 26 miles and that much again to return, or whatever fraction is comfortable. The route is a paved trail for bicycles to Kitchi-Gammi (Brighton Beach) park, then wide shoulders on North Shore Road (a.k.a. Congdon Blvd and Scenic Hwy 61).

Mountain biking. Find the COGGS pseudo-urban single-track trails, and ride Hartley Park and Lester Park. At their web site you will see a funded proposal for a Duluth Traverse trail that doesn't really exist yet, but five miles of mixed-use trails and city roads connect Lester and Hartley.

Hiking above the city. There is one compelling section of the Superior Hiking Trail that runs along the ridge above the city, views into the St. Louis River estuary and Lake Superior. Skyline trailhead to Enger Tower, about 7 miles one-way, with two options to shorten the round trip. Also consider a one-hour drive NE to Split Rock River or Crow Creek sections of the Superior Hiking Trail.

Kayaking on Lake Superior. Weather permitting, and probably a wetsuit is required. Rent in Duluth and paddle up the shore.

Deep sea (lake) fishing on Lake Superior.

Birding at the Sax-Zim Bog. “Some say this is the place to bird in Minnesota”, recently featured in the NY Times. Not sure if June is the best time for Birding, but not sure its not.

Throwing rocks and picnic lunch/dinner (half-day) at Brighton Beach, or Canal Park, or Park Point. My family's favorite evening outing, actually.

Grandma's Marathon, June 21 2013. (Or consider the Garry Bjorklund half-marathon.) My family will cheer you on at the 21st mile. This event also means you probably can't arrive the weekend before the collaboration meeting and find affordable lodging in Duluth, though maybe up the shore is OK.

From Tofte and Grand Marais, MN

Hiking along the Superior Hiking Trail. 250 miles completed from Duluth to Canada border, plus a little more under construction south. Several options for half-day or longer trips. Britton Peak and Carlton Peak. Oberg Mountain. Section 13 to the rock climbing cliffs and beyond. North of Grand Marais along a ridge with views of Isle Royale. Also, halfway between Duluth and Tofte are Crow Creek and Split Rock River, which are fine stops along the way or a day-trip out from Duluth.

Day trip canoe into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Leave from either Sawbill or along the Gunflint Trail. Enter with your lunch, do zero or one or two portages, go swimming, then return.

Biking. Hwy 61 beyond Two Harbors is of mixed safety for bicycles, but there are two stretches that have a dedicated, paved cycling trail. There are 14.6 miles between Gooseberry Falls to the town of Beaver bay, and another 10 miles from Tofte to Lutsen. The latter is technically broken in the middle (ride along highway or a county road for a little bit).

Mountain Biking on forest roads, logging trails, and some narrow-path XC ski trail networks in the Superior National Forest.

Rock Climbing at the end of Superior Hiking Trail Section 13, near Finland, MN, and two other locations nearby.

Tour Isle Royale National Park (day trip). Technically its part of Michigan, but you can leave on a boat from Grand Portage, MN.

Birding on the Gunflint Trail. "Nowhere else are Black-backed Woodpecker or Boreal Owl found more often."

Car tour of the most popular of Minnesota's state parks. Make stops at Gooseberry, Split Rock lighthouse, Tettegouche, George Crosby Manitou, and maybe Temperance River, keep going and stay the night in or near Tofte or Grand Marais, or a campground.

From or near Ely, MN

Visit the Soudan Underground Laboratory, take the science tour of the lab (offered twice a day) and the historical tour of the mine (every half-hour). A visit to the NOvA far detector site is also possible.

Day trip to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Several easy routes available.

Fishing. Mostly lakes, and a few rivers. Walleye, Northern Pike, Bass, more.

Golf. Giants Ridge Golf and Ski Resort in Biwabik has two highly-regarded courses. Also, The Wilderness At Fortune Bay (Lake Vermillion), in Tower, MN is supposedly well regarded.

From Cornucopia and Bayfield, WI

The Apostle Island National Lakeshore. Great for a picnic. Could be warm enough for swimming, there is a special shallow section of lake shore right there, but probably not warm enough. Kayaking tour to the sea caves. Other boating options and tours around the islands.

Bicycling. Several 20+ mile loops on relatively new, relatively wide but not super-busy roads.

(In the evening, the Big Top Chautauqua concert season will have just started. They usually have a compelling mix of regional and national acts, with some filler.)

Two ideas for something more backcountry and wildernessy

Overnight backpacking along Superior Hiking Trail. You can't do all 250 miles, but how much would you do? There are individual and group camp sites along the way, or in some cases the trail goes through a state park with campsites. Or lighten your pack and put on more miles each day by using one or two cars or the regular shuttle service to drive to campgrounds or other lodging each evening.

Four+ day canoe trip in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Rent a canoe and some gear and leave from Ely, Sawbill, or Gunflint Trail. Several loop routes, or the outfitter can drop you off and pick you up at different entry points. Suitable for a group of 2 to 6 people. Need to reserve an entry permit in advance (in early spring) for one of the limited spots on a specific date.

Minneapolis and St. Paul

You probably wouldn't go there because you were seeking something outdoorsy. But if you wanted a break from nature (and were flying out of MSP anyway), it has a wide variety of cultural, restaurant, and nightlife options that support the metropolitan area's three-million population. Walker art center sculpture garden? Museums? Mall of America? Baseball game with MN Twins or St. Paul Saints?

Lodging and dining

If you want multiple days of activities, you can base yourself in one location, or travel and spend two days each at two locations. Duluth has major hotel chains. There are lots of independent motels, lodges, condos, B&Bs, vacation rentals, and so on with varying quality and price at the other locations. You could also consider car-camping, there are many state park, national forest, and private campgrounds.

Away from Duluth (and in Duluth too) there are a variety of compelling local places at different price points and elegance. Lake Superior fish (trout, herring, whitefish) cooked fresh a number of ways or smoked is a common menu find. The other common fish from smaller lakes is Walleye; though restaurants usually source it from Canada, its also good.

Health and safety

Lake Superior is probably too cold for swimming even in late June, and can be very dangerous in a storm. For this reason, most kayakers use wet suits for safety. The possible exception is the section of the Apostle Island Lake Shore, there are websites where you can see the water temperature forecast. It is suitable for a “bet you can't stay in for more than 60 seconds” kind of contests. Inland lakes small and large will be more or less swimmable.

The weather is highly changeable, temperature swings from nearly-frost overnight in the north to 80 F afternoons, with scattered thunderstorms or fully severe weather possible. Can have 60 F by the lake and 80 F inland at the same time. Within just ten minutes next to Lake Superior, a change in wind direction can make you run for a warm jacket. All this can happen within the same week.

Especially away from the lake, insects (black flies, ticks, mosquitos) will be numerous. Its the cost of admission. You will want to have repellent available for sure. If your activity involves sitting, you probably want bug nets and appropriate clothing, and certainly do a tick-check when you are done.

Car break-ins in Duluth are not common but not never, so take reasonable precautions.