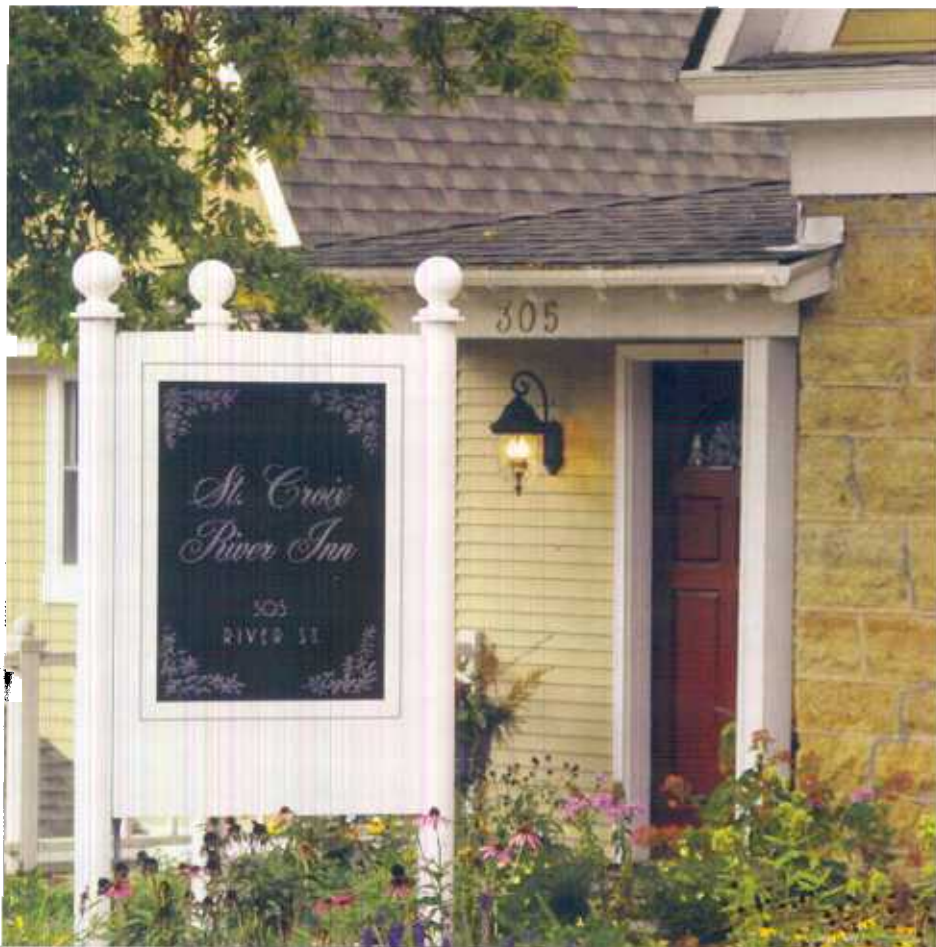


St. Croix River Inn proprietor Ben Bruno (opp., top) and his staff serve meals in style. Cascade Falls (below), sends water tumbling into the river, while wine and chocolate (opp., bottom) taste better with a view.



TRAVEL

scenic st. croix

HOW ABOUT A FEW LAZY, LUXURIOUS DAYS winding your way through a rolling river valley, viewing spectacular scenery, eating chocolates, drinking champagne and soaking in spa tubs? A trip to the St. Croix Valley, in northwestern Wisconsin, will delight your senses, and satisfy your sweet tooth, too!

The St. Croix River stretches 252 miles from above St. Croix Falls down to Hastings, where it merges into the Mississippi River. Along the way, on both sides of the river, are multiple state parks. In Wisconsin's Interstate State Park, near Taylor's Falls, you'll find the Dalles of the St. Croix River, a breathtaking gorge cut into the bedrock by glacier waters pouring out of Lake Superior, some 10,000 years ago. Look up to view towering gorge walls — look down and search for potholes, where whirlpools once existed. The largest, on the Minnesota side, is 25 feet across and 80 feet deep.

Wildlife thrives near the river — lots of it, including bobcats, bears, mink, bald eagles,

trumpeter swans, great blue herons and Wisconsin's heaviest concentration of wolves. To best spot wildlife, consider canoeing through the calm passages, or follow one of the many foot and bike paths in the parks.

When you're ready to return to civilization, you can spend an afternoon exploring the quaint towns along the river. Each has its own charm, but plan on spending an afternoon in Stillwater, Minn., about halfway downstream. You'll find plenty of gift and antique shops, such as Noah's Ark Country Store, Willoughby's Arts & Antiques and Antique Radio Company. Enjoy lunch at the Stillwater Depot Grill or Lily's Grill & Malt Shop, and pay a visit to North Main Studio to check out the pottery crafted by Carl Erickson.

While there's much to see and do in the St. Croix Valley any time of year, one thing that shouldn't be missed is the Chocolate March on March 11, 18 and 25. This delectable event takes place at more than a

Cascade Falls: ©RJ & Linda Miller; above: ©St. Croix River Inn

dozen historic properties, including several B&Bs, in the valley. Each property offers a personalized tour and a sampling of confections in the form of truffles, cakes and drinks, to sweeten your mood for the rest of the weekend. The inns offer overnight or weekend package options for tour participants, including pleasures such as free champagne, dining certificates — even a chocolate milk bath!

The St. Croix River Inn, in Osceola, offers romantic, spacious rooms, each with a view of the river. Their newest room is the Cascade, which offers a two-person spa tub, a multiple-head shower and a charming little dining alcove with a pristine river view. Plus, there are wonderful extras like fluffy robes, bath salts and a wine-and-cheese reception on weekends. After a restful night's sleep, stroll to the downtown observation deck and view Cascade Falls, where Osceola Creek drops 108 feet to the St. Croix River.

If you're lucky, you'll spot a sandhill crane or a belted kingfisher. The stunning natural environment will remind you for months to come of the sweet life in the St. Croix Valley.

©St. Croix River Inn

KACZK

Chocolate March 2007

Enjoy a personalized tour of each B&B and sample their decadent treats. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to Second Harvest Food Shelf.

MARCH 11

AFTON, MINN.

The Afton House Inn

877.436.8883, aftonhouseinn.com

HASTINGS, MINN.

Classic Rosewood

(a Thorwood Property)

651.437.3297, classicrosewood.com

Leduc Mansion

651.437.7055

MARCH 18

OSCEOLA, WIS.

St. Croix River Inn

800.645.8820, stcroixriverinn.com

Pleasant Lake

715.294.2545, pleasantlake.com

HUDSON, WIS.

Escape by the Lake

715.381.2871, escapebythelake.com



Phipps Inn

888.865.9388, phippinn.com

Historic Octagon House Museum

715.386.2654

MARCH 25

STILLWATER, MINN.

Outing Lodge

651.439.9747, outinglodge.com

Water Street Inn

651.439.6000, waterstreetinn.us

TAYLORS FALLS, MINN.

High Woods

651.465.5307, highwoods.net

MARINE ON ST. CROIX, MINN.

Asa Parker House

651.433.5248, asaparkerbb.com

CENTER CITY, MINN.

Summit Inn

651.257.4987

Tickets can be purchased through www.ticketworks.com.

