North Shore Family ADVENTURES

FAMILY TRAVEL GUIDE

The Definitive First-Timer's Guide to Door County

Everything a Milwaukee-area family needs to plan a Door County trip that actually works — from Whitefish Bay to the last scoop of cherry ice cream on the way home.

SECTION ONE

When Should You Visit?

Door County is genuinely a four-season destination — the right month depends on what your family wants out of the trip.

5	11	300+
STATE PARKS	HISTORIC LIGHTHOUSES	MILES OF SHORELINE

Door County packs five state parks, eleven historic lighthouses, and more than 300 miles of shoreline into a peninsula you can explore over a long weekend, making it Wisconsin's classic road trip from anywhere around Milwaukee.

Summer

Summer is the obvious choice and the busiest. June and early July bring open attractions and slightly thinner crowds than peak season. August is the high-summer sweet spot for swimming, cherry season, and long evenings on the water — with the trade-off of heavier traffic and lodging demand.

Shoulder Seasons

For a first trip with a smaller budget or lower tolerance for waits, **spring and fall** are often the smartest move. Spring brings cherry blossoms, birding, and quieter trails (though some northern businesses don't fully open until around Memorial Day). Fall delivers some of the Midwest's best color and comfortable hiking weather.

Winter

Winter has its own quiet magic — frozen shorelines, fireside meals, and a peninsula almost entirely to yourselves.

> **PLAN AHEAD**
>
> Holiday weekends deserve extra planning. If your trip lands around Memorial Day or Labor Day, book lodging and restaurant reservations as early as possible.

SECTION TWO

The Two Sides of the Peninsula

Understanding Door County's geography will save you a surprising amount of stress. The peninsula has a bay side and a lake side, and they feel very different.

Highway 42 — The Bay Side

Highway 42 runs up the Green Bay side and strings together the livelier, more developed villages: Sturgeon Bay, Egg Harbor, Fish Creek, Ephraim, Sister Bay, Ellison Bay, and Gills Rock. This is where you'll find the classic Door County sunsets, warmer swimming water, dense shopping and dining, and the longest restaurant waits.

Highway 57 — The Lake Side

Highway 57 follows the quieter Lake Michigan side through Jacksonport and Baileys Harbor, with cedar forests, sunrise views, cooler water, nature preserves, and a slower pace. This side gives you easy access to Cave Point, Whitefish Dunes, the Ridges Sanctuary, and Cana Island Lighthouse.

> **FIRST-TIMER MOVE**
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> You're rarely locked in — it usually takes only 15–20 minutes to cut from bay to lake. A classic first-timer route is to drive the full loop: head up one highway and come back down the other along the Door County Coastal Byway.

SECTION THREE

Where to Stay Your First Time

For a first trip, your biggest lodging decision is which town to use as a home base.

Sturgeon Bay — Offers the widest variety of stays, the most year-round options, and the easiest access from Milwaukee. Best choice for practical conveniences and lower prices.

Egg Harbor — One of the easiest first-timer bases for families. Has a beach, marina, playgrounds, restaurants, and the Door County Fun Park nearby — a good balance of convenience and vacation feel.

Fish Creek — Puts you in the walkable center of the classic Door County experience, steps from Peninsula State Park, shops, restaurants, sunset spots, and fish boils.

Ephraim — Quieter, historic, and beautiful, with one of the best waterfront walks on the peninsula.

Sister Bay — Lively and family-friendly, great for beaches, dining, mini golf, and the famous goats on the roof at Al Johnson's.

Baileys Harbor & the Lake-Side Towns — Trade nightlife for nature, quieter mornings, and faster access to Cave Point, Whitefish Dunes, and Cana Island.

> THE ONE RULE THAT APPLIES EVERYWHERE
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> Book early for summer weekends, fall color weekends, and holiday periods. Lodging fills up fast across the entire peninsula.

SECTION FOUR

The Must-Do List for First-Timers

You cannot do all of Door County in one trip, and you shouldn't try. These are the experiences that define the place.

1. Spend a Day in the State Parks

Peninsula State Park in Fish Creek is the crown jewel and the single best introduction to Door County. Its 3,700-plus acres include Nicolet Beach, Eagle Tower, bike trails, hiking trails, camping, a summer theater, and Eagle Bluff Lighthouse. The rebuilt Eagle Tower is 60 feet high, with the observation deck sitting 253 feet above Green Bay — climb 100 stairs or take the 850-foot accessible canopy walk to the top.

On the lake side, pair **Whitefish Dunes State Park** with **Cave Point County Park**. Whitefish Dunes has sandy beach access and the Red Trail to Old Baldy, a 93-foot dune. Cave Point is a free county park where Lake Michigan waves crash into limestone ledges and underwater caves — dramatic, photogenic, and easy to pair with Whitefish Dunes in one visit.

2. Climb a Lighthouse

Cana Island Lighthouse near Baileys Harbor is the iconic choice — cross the stone causeway (or take the seasonal wagon ride) and climb 97 steps to the gallery deck for sweeping Lake Michigan views. **Eagle Bluff Lighthouse** inside Peninsula State Park is the easiest to combine with a park day.

3. Watch a Fish Boil

Fresh Lake Michigan whitefish, potatoes, and onions cook in a massive kettle over an open wood fire, building to the "boilover" — when fuel is tossed onto the fire and the flames surge as the pot boils over. Two reliable first-timer choices, both in Fish Creek, are **White Gull Inn** (a tradition dating back to 1959) and **Pelletier's Restaurant & Fish Boil**. Reservations are recommended at both, especially in summer.

4. Eat Your Way Through Cherry Country

Door County's cherry heritage is real — Montmorency cherries grown here account for roughly 95% of tart cherries grown in Wisconsin. It shows up in everything: pie, salsa, brats, wine, donuts, jam, and ice cream. **Wilson's Restaurant & Ice Cream Parlor** in Ephraim, open since 1906, is the classic first-timer stop for an old-fashioned soda fountain and waterfront village charm.

5. Take the Ferry to Washington Island

If you have an extra day, the ferry from Northport Pier takes about 30 minutes across the Death's Door passage. Highlights include **Schoolhouse Beach** (a rare smooth-limestone beach), **Fragrant Isle Lavender Farm**, and the **Washington Island Stavkirke**, a Norwegian-style chapel tucked into the woods. The island's year-round population is roughly 700–800 people, and it feels much quieter than the main peninsula.

6. Catch a Sunset Over the Bay

Because the developed villages face west across Green Bay, Door County is one of the few places in Wisconsin where you can watch the sun drop over open water almost every clear evening. Harbor View Park in Egg Harbor, the Ephraim waterfront, Fish Creek, and Sister Bay Beach are all easy, family-friendly choices — and grabbing a cone before sunset is exactly as good as it sounds.

SECTION FIVE

Practical Tips First-Timers Always Wish They Knew

- ☐ **Download directions before you go.** Cell reception can be spotty in northern Door County and on Washington Island.
- ☐ **Bring a little cash.** Some farm stands and small shops may still prefer it. Stock up on groceries and essentials in Sturgeon Bay or Sister Bay.
- ☐ **Book reservations early.** Fish boils, fine dining, popular waterfront patios, and weekend breakfasts fill up fast in summer and fall.
- ☐ **Time your drive.** Traffic into the peninsula is heaviest Friday afternoons and evenings, with return traffic building Sunday afternoons. Drive up earlier or come home later if your schedule allows it.
- ☐ **Pack layers.** Even in summer, evenings near Lake Michigan turn cool. Lake Michigan water also stays colder than the bay side — for warmer swimming, try Nicolet Beach, Sister Bay Beach, Egg Harbor Beach, or a resort pool.
- ☐ **Wear sturdy shoes.** Cave Point, Whitefish Dunes, and Peninsula State Park have slippery rocks and uneven roots — flip-flops are a bad idea on the more rugged trails.

SECTION SIX

A Simple First-Weekend Itinerary

If you want a starting framework, here's a low-stress first Door County weekend.

FRIDAY

Arrive in the afternoon, check in, and ease into the trip with an early dinner and a sunset in Egg Harbor, Fish Creek, Ephraim, or Sister Bay.

SATURDAY

Spend the day in Peninsula State Park. Walk or roll up the Eagle Tower canopy walk, bike or drive through the park, and spend time at Nicolet Beach. Explore Fish Creek afterward, then book a fish boil that evening — and save room for cherry pie.

SUNDAY

Save the day for the lake side. Start with Whitefish Dunes and Cave Point, then visit Cana Island Lighthouse if it's open. Stop for ice cream or an orchard market treat before heading back toward Milwaukee.

OPTIONAL DAY THREE

Families with a third day should consider Washington Island — but give it a full day. The ferry, island driving, Schoolhouse Beach, the lavender farm, lunch, and the return ferry will fill it quickly.

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For deeper season-by-season planning, town guides, and our full round-ups of restaurants, hikes, lighthouses, and ice cream stops, visit **northshorefamilyadventures.com**.