

Getting into the Christmas spirit

Elkhart Lake transforms for the holidays

By Katherine Rodeghier
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ELKHART LAKE, Wis. — Snow is just starting to fall, puffy white flakes landing on two black Percheron horses pulling our wagon along quiet streets festooned with garlands and greenery. Seated on bales of straw, we sing carols, our voices echoing off houses and storefronts of this tiny Wisconsin town.

It's a scene worthy of a holiday card.

And it's quite unlike the scene in summer when this community of barely 1,000 souls, an hour north of Milwaukee, fills with visitors headed to auto races at the Road America track or to spring-fed Elkhart Lake.

Three grand old hotels perch on the shore like big white birds spreading their wings in the sun. In the Roaring Twenties, gamblers and gangsters were frequent guests. Families arrived by train, escaping the heat of the big cities for a month or more, the fathers commuting on weekends. Now the old resorts have been spiffed up with modern amenities catering to visitors who drive up from Chicago and its suburbs.

Len Wiatr of Mount Prospect says the "small-town feel" attracts him to Elkhart Lake. It's not as well-known as Door County or

Lake Geneva, he says. "It's like a hidden gem. If you know about it you keep coming back."

In summer he packs a wagon with toys and takes the grandkids down to the lake. In December they join in the holiday festivities in town. "I like coming up here and relaxing," he says. "It's beautiful all year round."

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, Elkhart Lake's shops and restaurants are open and ready for visitors. Holiday activities, most on the grounds of The Osthoff Resort, keep kids and adults entertained.

Work on your shopping list

Now in its 16th year, the Old World Christmas Market is not your grandmother's small-town church bazaar. A hundred vendors from around the region and around the world, all vetted for the quality and authenticity of their wares, fill a heated tent the size of a football field. For 10 days you can immerse yourself in the atmosphere of a traditional German Christkindlesmarkt. Father Christmas in red robe and shepherd's staff roams around, while schnitzel, sauerbraten and potato pancakes are served in the food court. A vendor offers samples of hot gluhwein. Another flies in from Nuremberg, Germany, to cook bratwurst made from a secret



Visitors get into the Christmas spirit while caroling during a hayride along the streets of Elkhart Lake.

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recipe that dates back to 1370.

And then there are the shopping booths. The German Christmas Store has been coming from Germany since 2007 to sell nutcrackers and other wooden ornaments. IMEXTA from Plauen, Germany, has lace items. Mozaic Textile from Istanbul, Turkey, sells cashmere shawls, scarves and jewelry.

You'll find several Midwest vendors who specialize in international goods. From Lake Bluff, Alkota Russian Treasures has Russian nesting dolls and Santa figures made in an artist community 40 miles from Moscow. Among the vendors based in Wisconsin are Baltic Inspirations that stocks sweaters from Estonia, The Weather Vane with wood carvings from Africa and Timeless Knits and Crafts offering fair-trade items made of camel wool from Afghanistan.

There's more shopping in town. Take a walk to the downtown business district, covering just a few blocks, and you'll find Two Fish Gallery tucked into an Arts and Crafts style bungalow. There's pottery made by the owner, baskets and jewelry as well as fine art and crafts from around the world, including a big selection of crèches and metalwork from Haiti.

Gina's Fine Gifts, in an old grain elevator and feed mill, has kitchen and home decor, toys, art prints and custom framing. Pick up a pair of clogs or embroidered socks at



The Osthoff Resort is one of three grand resort properties on Elkhart Lake and offers a variety of events and activities for the holidays.

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Nordic Accents, which has a trove of Scandinavian items, such as Norwegian sweaters and Marimekko prints. Rhine Street General is a co-op with handcrafted items made by local artisans.

Catering to kids

Between hayrides, Bud and Ace are happy to have children pet their muzzles, but once the wagon rolls these horses are all business trotting through downtown Elkhart Lake and around its residential neighborhoods. After a half-hour rolling singalong, you can warm up inside the Osthoff with a cup of hot chocolate and nibble a few Christmas cookies.

Your kids can decorate their own cookies at a cookie-decorating workshop or have Mrs. Claus help them make holiday ornaments. She'll even read a Christmas story. Kids dress up in holiday finery,



Shoppers break for coffee, a glass of wine or lunch at Off The Rail in Elkhart Lake.

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the girls in party dresses, the boys with shirttails tucked in, at The Osthoff's grand St. Nicholas Reindeer Buffet. Father Christmas works the room while a live reindeer waits nearby. Load up your plate from the carving and omelet stations, a cold table of shrimp, salads and cheese and a hot table laden with ham, potatoes, sausage, French toast and pasta. Sweets on the dessert table are placed around big jars of old-fashioned hard candies.

Breakfast with Santa is a more casual affair at the Osthoff. The man in red listens to children's

wishes while seated in the lobby. Inside the banquet room, a knee-high breakfast buffet lets children help themselves under the watchful eyes of parents and grandparents.

Let's cook

It's a Christmas meal like no other: classic French onion gratin, fennel and orange salad, gougeres, coquilles St. Jacques, beef au poivre and for dessert a buche de Noel with meringue mushrooms. Most unusual of all — the diners made it themselves. The French cooking school at

The Osthoff, L'ecole de la Maison, offers cooking classes year round, but in December it adds some with a holiday theme, like this five-course French Christmas.

Led by Chef Scott Baker, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America with more than 15 years of experience under his toque, up to 15 students gather in a spotless kitchen for a session of team cooking. Working with ingredients and equipment set up on stainless steel counters, they chop, measure, mix and stir as they follow recipes. Baker is at their elbows helping them work the oven and stove



Downtown Elkhart Lake businesses, such as Rhine Street General, decorate for the holidays.

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and demonstrating just the right technique for rolling a sheet cake into a log shape. When dinner is done, students sit down to a long table set with white cloth and dig into their creations, with a glass or two of wine chosen to pair with the meal.

The French Christmas is one of the school's one-day courses lasting from four to five hours. Workshops, lasting two to three hours, tackle French Desserts and Christmas Truffles & Macarons.

Healing mind and body

Aspira Spa has no holiday theme, unless you consider a day being pampered a present you give yourself or a loved one.

Rated the No. 3 spa in North America by a poll of readers of Condé Nast Traveler magazine, its services embody the spirit of American Indians who lived in the area and considered the waters of Elkhart Lake sacred. Some treatments use ground cedar harvested from trees along the shore.

In addition to incorporating native healing practices, the list of services reflects the cultures of Bali, Thailand, Hawaii, China, India and Morocco. There's a hammam, yoga classes and a candlelit circular meditation sanctuary where guests are lulled by the sound of water trickling down a stone wall into a copper basin.

Spa suites have side-by-side massage tables, whirlpool baths and fireplaces and are ideal for couples — or a holiday girlfriends getaway.

• Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by Elkhart Lake Tourism.

Elkhart Lake

Getting there: Elkhart Lake is about 150 miles north of Chicago.

Where to stay: Rates are for a weekend in early December.

- The Osthoff Resort, 101 Osthoff Ave., all suites with kitchen or kitchenette, from \$240, (855) 876-3399, osthoff.com

- Siebkens Resort, 284 Lake St., standard rooms and condos from \$95, (920) 876-2600, siebkens.com

- Victorian Village Resort, 276 Victorian Village Lane, hotel rooms and condos from \$78, (877) 860-9988, vicvill.com

Where to eat:

- Back Porch Bistro, Victorian Village Resort, 276 Victorian Village Lane, (920) 876-3645, vicvill.com; former speakeasy has shuffleboard, fireplace and menu of steak, fish, poultry and pasta.

- Lake Street Cafe, 21 S. Lake St., (920) 876-2142, lakestreetcafe.com; casual cafe and dining room with California bistro-style fare, wood-fired pizzas, Wine Spectator awards.

- Off The Rail, 44A Gottfried St., (920) 876-3655, offtherailkharlake.com; in a red frame building next to the railway tracks and former grain elevator, serves breakfast and lunch, homemade baked goods, wine and beer.

- Lola's on the Lake, The Osthoff Resort, 101 Osthoff Ave., (920) 876-5840, osthoff.com; elegant dining spot with fresh regional cuisine and extensive wine list.

Old World Christmas Market: Tent on the grounds of The Osthoff Resort, 101 Osthoff Ave., Dec. 5-14, \$6, age 14 and under free with adult, (877) 517-4596, christmasmarketatosthoff.com

Family events: The Osthoff Resort, 101 Osthoff Ave., hayrides, cookie and ornament workshops, Dec. 6, 13, 20, \$12 each; St. Nicholas Reindeer Brunch, Dec. 7 and 14, \$24.95, \$1 per year of child's age, ages 4-12; Breakfast with Santa, Dec. 6, 13 and 20, \$12.95, \$8.95 ages 4-12, (800) 876-3399, osthoff.com.

L'ecole de la Maison: The Osthoff Resort, 101 Osthoff Ave., workshops \$125, one-day courses \$185, (877) 804-8630, cookingschoolatosthoff.com

Aspira Spa: The Osthoff Resort, 101 Osthoff Ave., (877) 772-2070, aspiraspa.com

Information: Elkhart Lake Tourism, (877) 355-4278, elkhartlake.com



Chef Scott Baker shows students how to put the finishing touches on a buche de Noel during a holiday cooking class at L'ecole de la Maison.

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