

## Multigeneration vacation in Lake Geneva: Kids, parents, grandparents find much to love on a Wisconsin getaway



Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, 10 miles north of the Illinois state line, draws many visitors from Chicago and its suburbs. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

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By Katherine Rodeghier

“Two hands, hold the cup with two hands,” encouraged my daughter as her 9-year-old struggled to feed a great horned beast poking its shaggy head toward the lowered window of our car. Screams of apprehension turned to delight at [Safari Lake Geneva](#), a drive-through wild animal park five miles from downtown Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, open May through October.

“This is the opposite of a zoo,” said “Jungle” Jay Christie, owner and founder of the family-run wildlife preserve. Llamas, yaks, emus, oryx, water buffalo and other exotic animals roam free. Visitors remain in their vehicles, feeding them from cups of grain through windows or sunroofs. “People get closer to the animals than in a zoo,” Christie said.



Visitors feed cups of grain to exotic animals at drive-through Safari Lake Geneva. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

### Close to home

The animal encounter was our first stop on a three-generation getaway to this resort area 10 miles north of the Illinois border. Proximity to the Chicago metro area helped make [Lake Geneva](#) a vacation playground for city dwellers and suburbanites.

The first big wave of visitors came by train while fleeing the Great Chicago Fire in 1871. Captains of industry with names such as Schwinn, as in bicycles, and Wrigley, as in chewing gum, built Gilded Age mansions overlooking Geneva Lake, giving the area the nickname “Hamptons of Chicago.” In the decades that followed, more city and suburban folk arrived, some building second homes, others booking rooms at a growing collection of hotels and resorts. [Timber Ridge Lodge & Waterpark](#), the

family-friendly sister property to the luxury Grand Geneva Resort & Spa next door, became our base of operation for our two-night getaway. We had plenty of room to spread out in a two-bedroom, two-bath suite with a kitchen and sitting room with a fireplace.

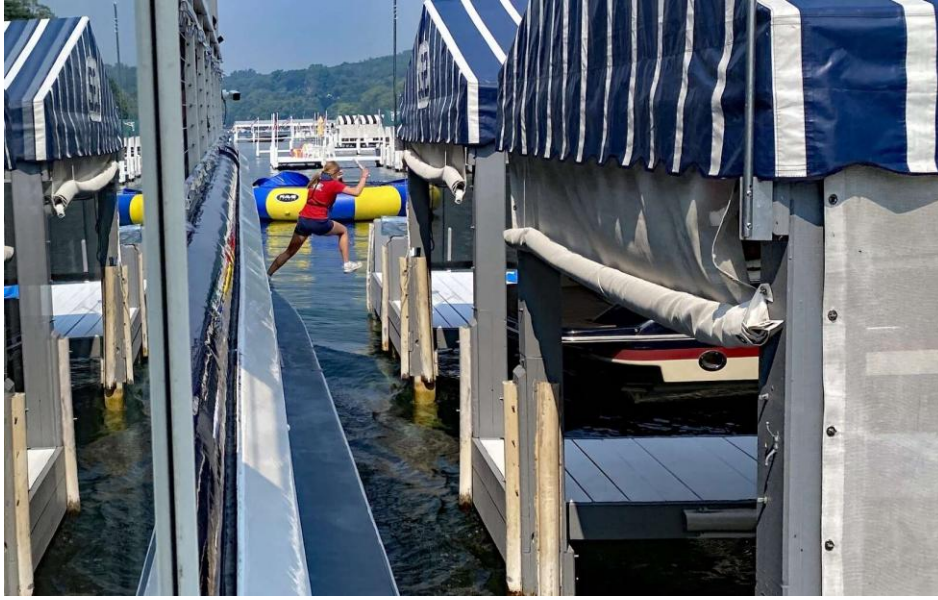


Moose Mountain Falls has water slides and other forms of fun for visitors of all ages at Timber Ridge Lodge & Waterpark. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

While checking in at the Northwoods-style lobby, my grandson made a beeline to a window overlooking Moose Mountain Falls waterpark and begged for a dip before dinner. Its 300-foot-long indoor slides and 500-foot-long lazy river worked up his appetite. At Moose & Maple, the resort's family restaurant, we pondered choosing the Wisconsin Brat & Curd Burger, Timber's Signature Chicken Mac or Moose & Maple Ribs. Next morning, the menu touted a Big Moose Breakfast and, for kids, S'mores Pancakes.

### **Delivering mail by boat**

We pushed back from the breakfast table in time to find parking — a challenge on busy days — for a ride on [Lake Geneva Cruise Line](#). A top attraction here for more than 150 years, it sells a variety of cruises, several including meals. Most launch beginning May 1. Our cruise choice, the popular U.S. Mailboat Tour, runs June 15 to Sept. 15, delivering mail to homes ringing Geneva Lake. It's a tradition dating back to 1916.



Jumpers leap between pier and boat during the U.S. Mailboat Tour on Lake Geneva Cruise Line. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

My grandson thought it sounded boring until I explained the boat does not stop at each pier. Instead, a runner jumps off the side of the boat, puts the mail in the mailbox, then runs down the pier and jumps back on board. We made a game of watching runners make the leap, usually about 3 feet. At one pier, a runner kissed a statue of a goose, a tradition said to thwart bad luck. At another, a golden retriever took a newspaper in its mouth, then trotted back to shore to deliver it to its owner. Several times, runners sprinted to shore, ran along the waterline and dashed down a neighboring pier back to the boat.

While the lake's 1,300 piers serve multiple homes, only about 55 owners request mail service. The jumpers aren't post office employees, but young residents who prove their agility by trying out for the job. A runner on our cruise, 19-year-old Michaela Fletcher, is a college student majoring in nursing.

Between piers, Captain Ray Ames, a music director at an elementary school when he's not at the helm, talked about local history, geology and points of interest we passed on the 2.5-hour excursion. Yerkes Observatory, he said, dates from 1897 and houses the world's largest refracting telescope. The Spanish palazzo-style Casa del Sueno was the home of Lee Phillip Bell and Bob Bell, creators of soap operas "The Young and the Restless" and "The Bold and the Beautiful." Black Point Estate was commissioned by beer baron Conrad Seipp in 1888 and is open to the public. It's accessible only by boat. The cruise line sells a 3.5-hour tour.

### **Native American path**

The little guy had to burn off excess energy, so we took a walk on the Geneva Lake Shore Path, a 21.9-mile footpath circling the lake and connecting the towns of Fontana, Williams Bay and Lake Geneva.

Used by members of the Potawatomi tribe in the 18th and 19th centuries, the path remains in the public domain. Owners of luxury homes overlooking the lake are responsible for maintaining the portion crossing their property. Some put out water and snacks sold on the honor system. One homeowner set

up a little library. The terrain varied from flat to steep, traveling over wood or stone steps, gravel, freshly mowed lawns and footbridges.



The Geneva Lake Shore Path, a footpath used by the Potawatomi tribe, runs around the shoreline for 21.9 miles. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

It takes eight to 10 hours to walk the entire path — time we didn't have — so we parked our car at the Linn Road access point, walked until my legs started to ache, and doubled back. Other walkers join the path at the Lake Geneva Public Library, hike about 7 miles to Williams Bay, then board the Lake Geneva Cruise Line for a ride back. The boat also runs in the opposite direction; reservations are required either way.

Back at Timber Ridge Lodge, my grandson insisted we return to the waterpark. This time, we relaxed in a rented cabana, a good place for Grandma to rest after multiple rounds on the lazy river. We bought food and drinks at Hungry Moose, a grab-and-go eatery inside the waterpark, and took turns lounging in the hot tub and exercising in the lap pool. The lodge also has minigolf, mini-bowling and an arcade, plus a program of crafts and other activities for families.

### **Magic and memories**

After dinner, we took in a show at the 175-seat [Tristan Crist Magic Theatre](#). I expected it to be corny but found it as polished as shows I've seen in Las Vegas, though cleaned up for a family audience. The skimpy costumes on the magician's female assistants were an exception.

Crist, a master illusionist of the year, performed standard tricks — levitations, sleights of hand, knife throwing, sawing a woman in half — plus jaw-dropping spectacles that still have me wondering how he pulled them off. Combining comedy and magic with audience participation — including a brief stage appearance by our little rascal — the show ran 90 minutes with intermission. Snacks and drinks, alcoholic and otherwise, were sold in the lobby along with magic paraphernalia and souvenirs.

We had fun reliving our Lake Geneva getaway while reviewing our photos and videos, most of which were taken at Safari Lake Geneva. There was a bison as big as a full-size SUV, a deranged ostrich that pecked on the car window frame, and an eland that made my daughter shriek in surprise when it poked its snout through her window.

Only specially formulated grain sold at the park is allowed for feedings. Timed-entry admission tickets limit crowds so animals are not overfed. There's a separate area for giraffes and a windows-up no-feeding area for camels and zebras. Visitors who buy the extra-cost Capybara Experience enter an enclosed space where they may hand-feed lettuce to two of the world's largest rodents. Their names: Cathy and Barbara. Get it?

Once they pay for admission, visitors may drive through the preserve as many times as they wish. We could have stayed all day, but I was anxious to move on to our next stop. Still, when I asked, "Want to go around again?" there came a resounding "YES!" from the back seat.

- *Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by Visit Lake Geneva.*

### **If you go**

Visit Lake Geneva: [visitlakegeneva.com/](https://www.visitlakegeneva.com/)

Safari Lake Geneva: [safarilakegeneva.com/](https://www.safarilakegeneva.com/)

Timber Ridge Lodge & Waterpark: [timberriidgelodge.com/](https://www.timberriidgelodge.com/)

Lake Geneva Cruise Line: [cruiselakegeneva.com/](https://www.cruiselakegeneva.com/)

Lake Geneva Shore Path: [visitlakegeneva.com/things-to-do/shore-path/](https://www.visitlakegeneva.com/things-to-do/shore-path/)

Tristan Crist Magic Theatre: [lakegenevamagic.com/](https://www.lakegenevamagic.com/)

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