



34 Things We Love About Winter in Door County

I used to hate winters. Though some friends loved the day when the tourists disappeared, the restaurants cleared out and the shops closed for the winter, I dreaded it. The Monday after Fall Fest was always one of the most depressing of the year.

But after returning to Door County in 2017 after living in Chicago for five years, I've come around. I still miss the crowds, but I love the winter landscape. I've learned to bike through the freezing temperatures with my dog, find the beauty in a snow-swept landscape and enjoy my wife's hunt for winter restaurant specials. (It helps to have more than two open.)

If you're going to stick it out through the winter on this narrow, icy strip of land, you might as well make the most of it. So here's a place to start: 34 things we love about winter in Door County, from the quirky to the traditional.

— Myles Dannhausen Jr.

1. Peddling fat tires over the snow. With wide tires and the right winter gear, a winter ride unveils a new view of trails in Peninsula and Newport State Parks. A favorite: cruising along the shore on the frozen bay.

2. Candlelight skis. Whitefish Dunes (Jan. 26), Peninsula (Feb. 2) and Newport (Feb. 9) State Parks, will offer candlelight skis this winter.

3. Warming up under the tent at Fish Creek Winter Festival. For 30 years, this fest has been a winter highlight, whether you're into tossing bikes or toilet seats, racing minnows or competing in kickball in the snow. Each year brings something weird, but you don't have to get crazy to have fun under the tent that brings locals and visitors alike out of hibernation.

4. Turning ice into art. Watch carvers turn blocks of ice and snow into sculptures at Sturgeon Bay's Fire & Ice Festival on Feb. 16.

5. Trivia challenges. Test your knowledge at trivia nights over local beer at Door County Brewing Co. on select Tuesdays, Brick Lot on Wednesdays or Stone Harbor on Thursdays. That should get you primed for the big night in Northern Door at Peninsula Preschool's annual fundraiser at Alexander's in February,

or challenge city friends at the Sturgeon Bay Breakfast Rotary Trivia Night in March.

6. Evenings at Teresa K. Hilander ice rink. Whether you're watching broomball players swat and flail on Wednesdays, warming up around the fire pit or just going out for a skate, a visit to the Sister Bay rink is like stepping into a painting of small towns past.

7. High school basketball rivalries. Here's one winter sport you don't have to bundle up to enjoy – and when Sturgeon Bay takes on Southern Door, or Sevastopol squares off against Gibraltar, generational intensity is in the air.

8. Hockey on the pond. Well, actually it's Kangaroo Lake, but come Feb. 9, more than 300 players will converge on 15 rinks created on the lake for the Door County Pond Hockey Tournament. Even if you've never slapped a puck before, the tournament offers great action for spectators, and more importantly, a warming tent with food, drinks and a campfire on the ice.

9. Hunting ice shoves. Come winter's end, the sheet of ice covering Green Bay comes hurtling ashore, piling up in dramatic ice mountains that draw photo buffs seeking a perfect shot.

10. The winter fleet. Each winter, more than a dozen lakers make their way into Sturgeon Bay to lay up for the season. During the winter months, Fincantieri Bay Shipbuilding repairs or upgrades them before they return to work on the Great Lakes in March and April. Keep tabs on boatnerd.com to find out when you can see these massive engineering marvels arrive and leave through the Sturgeon Bay Ship Canal.

11. Winter sunsets. Door County is famous for its summer evenings, but winter sunsets may actually bring the most spectacular colors. With less pollution and fewer dust particles in the air, winter colors are brighter and more intense.

12. The morning after a snowstorm. We may not get the 18- or 30-inch dumpings of 2018 (or maybe we will), but there's something special about a drive through the county on the morning after a big snowfall. Once the roads are cleared, the fresh blanket of white stuff leaves the county looking like a Norman Rockwell painting – at least until it all turns to slush.

13. Mid-April snowstorms. (Just kidding. Nobody likes those.)

14. The pace. Whether it's a bar full of commiserating locals or a coffee shop full of friends holding court across several tables, winter gives time for hashing it all out. It's also a time when you can get to know your server, barista or bartender again – when a hello isn't followed by speeding off to take another order or clean a table.

15. The food scene. Things (luckily) aren't what they used to be, when winter dining options north of Sturgeon Bay were limited to fish fries and a few taverns with pub fare. More restaurants are staying open for much of the offseason, offering everything from ramen bowls and sushi to soup and juice bars.

16. Hitting the hills. You don't have to be a kid to get a thrill from a few runs down Hill 17 in Peninsula State Park, or you can take a scenic drive to Kewaunee to try the man-made snow on the hill at Winter Park.

17. Snowmobiling. The Door County Snowmobile Club marks and grooms 250 miles of trails from Gills Rock to southern Door County, giving snowmobilers plenty of terrain to explore when the snow falls.

18. Ice fishing. There's something special about a day at the ice-fishing hole. Maybe that's because, as a fisherman once said, "People pay millions for the waterfront, and in the winter we get it all for free."

19. Snowshoeing the Ridges. The preserve is most famous for its ridges and swales, but after a winter snowfall, the boughs of the trees lining the boardwalks and trails form a snow-capped canopy.

20. Getting creative. Time to check out all those creative retreats that tourists enjoy all summer. Try your hand at art and DIY projects at Hands On, Clink!, Reclaimed or Stone Silo. Pause to reflect on the grounds while taking a class at The Clearing; test your prose at Write On; or take the kids for a Family Art Day at Peninsula School of Art.

21. Hot yoga on a freezing day. When the temperature plunges and chills your bones, a hot-yoga session restores fluidity to locked-up joints and flexibility to the entire body. And if you've indulged in a few too many winter warmers, it's a great way to sweat out the toxins as well.

22. Plunging into the new year. There's no way to wash off the remnants of 2018 like a plunge into the freezing waters of Jacksonport at the annual Polar Plunge on New Year's Day.

23. Free lectures. The Door Community Auditorium and the University of Wisconsin –

Green Bay have teamed up to offer a lecture series on civility; the Door County Maritime Museum hosts speakers discussing the county's storied maritime history; and local historical societies present stories of our past throughout the winter.

24. Winter weeknight specials. Half-price wines, pop-up menus and cozy restaurants full of friendly locals make it easier to fight cabin fever.

25. Chilling with a good book by the fire at the Kress Pavilion. If you haven't yet checked out Egg Harbor's spectacular, new community center, take a morning to explore it this winter.

26. Leaving. Yes, we love it here, but when cabin fever sets in, nobody appreciates heading for the sun down south more than a cooped-up Door Countian (especially if the destination offers a decent old fashioned).

27. Hitting empty, mosquito-free trails. Winter reveals new versions of our parks and preserves. Sugar Bush Trail at Newport State Park, Three Springs Preserve in Sister Bay and Door Bluff Headlands are favorites. Or hit the beach at Whitefish Dunes State Park, where dogs are welcome through March.

28. Hiking over the ice in Ephraim. For a new vision of Eagle Bluff and the village, embark on a trek over the ice (but only if it's solid!).

29. Driving 35 mph in Ephraim!

30. Treasure hunting. Be patient, and search for vintage finds and other goodies on a peninsula rich in second-hand stores and thrift shops.

31. Warm beverages in cozy coffee shops. Tea, coffee, hot chocolate and mulled cider are all welcome staples when the snow starts falling.

32. Soups and Crock-Pot cooking. It's nearly unbearable to simmer a made-from-scratch broth in the hot, humid months, but winter allows for so many nights of soups and warm, steaming Crock-Pots.

33. Sound extremes. Winter brings moments of incredible stillness and silence, but also the unsettling roar of Lake Michigan. Both inspire awe.

34. Friend season. If you have a lot of friends in the service industry, you know how it goes: You hang out for a few great summer days in May and June and make plans for the best summer ever ... and then you don't see each other for four months. Whether it inspires gathering for drinks or dinner parties, winter is when you get your friends back.