

StarTribune

Exploring Mankato's deep valleys

Article by: LISA MEYERS McCLINTICK

Special to the Star Tribune

August 12, 2013 - 7:43 AM

Driving through the densely wooded Minnesota River Valley as it deepens north of Mankato, I've always kept a keen eye on scenery zipping past — especially pretty ravines sliced into limestone hills and bluffs.

In July, slowed down to the speed of a kayak, I found out what I had been missing on a paddle down the Blue Earth River, which converges with the Minnesota near downtown Mankato. Our guide, Dain Fisher with Bent River Outfitter, pointed out bald eagles, their massive nests and gentle waterfalls wedged into the shady woods.

The fresh-from-the-earth springs that flow into the river felt shockingly cold on our feet as we stepped ashore to see Triple Falls tucked into a towering bowl of limestone. The silty Blue Earth River, by comparison, felt as comfortable as bathwater. That's a good thing since most of us were soaked from rolling through 11 rapids on a 9-mile stretch from Rapidan Dam to Mankato. We laughed and shot past rocks with a mumbled, tight-lipped thanks for remaining upright.

Shoreline waterfalls and streams usually dribble or dry up by midsummer, but we didn't mind a bit as we detoured downriver to Devil's Gulch. In this lush grotto, thick with lichen and moss, we picked our way single-file through the chiseled, enchanting passages.

It was our highlight of the evening and a good example of how Mankato is luring adventure lovers to the area, especially serious bicyclists who whir along the rivers and across 50 miles of paved trails intersecting scenic parks.

My advice? Head for the burgers and pie at the sweetly nostalgic Dam Cafe on Mankato's outskirts. It's a great destination for a weekend of camping, an ideal stopping point for a day of biking and a handy spot to kick off a kayak trip.

WHAT TO DO

See the Vikings in action: Close to 40,000 people visit Mankato to see the football team at its 48th annual training camp late July through mid-August. The public is welcome to watch most practices at Minnesota State University-Mankato, which includes a tailgate zone with vendors, some free football training or cheerleading sessions for kids 17 and under, and an area to seek autographs. Remaining camp dates are Sunday through Wednesday; Aug. 13-14 are fan appreciation days (952-828-6500; www.vikings.com).

Bike the valley: Take a leisurely loop from downtown's Riverfront Park to Sibley Park or Minneopa State Park or try the 13-mile Red Jacket Trail that traverses railroad trestles (including one that's 80 feet high) to the Rapidan Dam. Go for a bigger challenge with the 39-mile Sakatah Singing Hills Trail that stretches to Faribault and cuts through Sakatah Lake State Park (www.startribune.com/a2416).

Paddle happy: It's best to have a guide who knows the rivers' water levels, hazards and scenic detours. Bent River Outfitter leads Happy Hour tours twice a month, full moon floats and teaches stand-up paddleboarding. (1-507-388-2368; www.bentriveroutfitter.com)

Find a favorite waterfall: Minneopa State Park southwest of Mankato claims southern Minnesota's largest waterfall, which



Kayakers take a break in Devil's Gulch during an evening paddle on the Blue Earth River with Bent River Outfitters.

LISA MEYERS McCLINTICK • Special to the Star Tribune,

flows across sandstone ledges and drops into a lush, wooded gorge. Go after a rainfall or in September and October when the hardwood forest shows off fall colors. (1-507-389-5464; www.startribune.com/a257)

Along Judson Bottom Road, on the opposite side of the Minnesota River, stop at Minnemishinona Falls, a gentle 45-foot drop into a gorge below a footbridge. (1-507-931-1760).

Take the kids: Mankato can claim one of Minnesota's coolest playgrounds with Sibley Park's imaginative farm-themed play areas and a free petting zoo with pigs, goats, ponies, goldfish and peacocks to feed. Take a pocketful of quarters.

Other kid-focused destinations include Saturday tours of Betsy-Tacy, the modest Mankato homes that inspired author Maud Hart Lovelace's partially autobiographical early 1900s children's series (1-507-345-9777; www.betsy-tacysociety.org).

Stroll Old Town: The "Old Town" stretch of N. Riverfront Drive includes the kind of small shops that helped Mankato become Minnesota's first Fair Trade Town. Among the standouts: Nicollet Bike Shop, Mary Lue's Yarn and Ewe, and Salvage Sisters. Cool off with more than 30 flavors of Chocolate Shoppe premium ice creams at Mom and Pop's in Old Town (629 N. Riverfront Dr.). Rotating flavors include darkly decadent Zanzibar chocolate, Fat Elvis (banana, peanut butter and chocolate), carrot-mango Italian ice, and a handful of soy-based or no-sugar options (www.momandpopsicecream.com).

Grab a brew: Mankato Brewery in North Mankato offers free Saturday tours and tastings of beer that taps the area's German heritage, including Organ Grinder amber ale, Haymaker India pale ale and Mankato Original (1-507-386-2337; www.mankatobrewery.com).

See a powwow: Sept. 20-22 marks the 41st year of the Mahkato Wacipi, a powwow at Land of Memories Park. It honors 38 Dakota who died in the largest mass hanging in U.S. history following the 1862 U.S.-Dakota War. (www.mahkatowacipi.org).

WHERE TO EAT

Grab an easy, tasty meal at Tandem Bagels, where you'll find breakfast bagels and bike-themed sandwiches including the tasty Bent River with a slab of fresh mozzarella, roasted red pepper, tomato, spinach and a tangy vinaigrette (200 E. Walnut St.; 1-507-720-6533; www.tandembagels.com).

Number 4's temptations include the Hot Mess (a slab of meatloaf on grilled sourdough topped with beer cheese soup, bacon cracklings and fried onions), a molten butterscotch cake with caramelized bananas and chunks of cashew brittle, and weekend-only Bloody Marys so packed with cheese, meats, shrimp, pickles and vegetables that it's basically a sandwich in a glass (124 E. Walnut St.; 1-507-344-1444; www.number4mankato.com).

WHERE TO SLEEP

The Hilton Garden Inn sits in the heart of downtown near the riverfront (1-507-344-1111; mankatodowntown.stayhgi.com) while the Butler House Bed and Breakfast is tucked among the historic hillside homes on Broad Street (1-507-387-5055; www.butlerhouse.com).

Campers can find 61 sites on a bluff above the Minnesota River and one camper cabin at Minneopa State Park (1-507-389-5464). County-run Rapidan Dam Park and Campground includes 20 rustic sites with several on the Blue Earth River (1-507-546-9997). The state park offers fishing rods and tackle (no fishing license needed), birding kits and kids' activity bags.

IF YOU GO

Get more travel details from Visit Mankato: 1-800-657-4733; www.visitmankatomn.com.

St. Cloud-based Lisa Meyers McClintick (lisamcclintick.com) wrote “Day Trips From the Twin Cities” and the travel app Minnesota Lake Vacations.

© 2013 Star Tribune