

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

Fantastic Sandstone Cliffs Draw Visitors To Wisconsin Dells

(NAPSA)- Situated in the nation's heartland is a stunning stretch of river way that has beckoned to sightseers since the 1850s. Towering sandstone cliffs line its banks, monuments of nature's glory; silent sentinels of time. These spectacular layered rock formations are "the Dells" of the Wisconsin River-a 7½ mile route that winds through lands once inhabited by Native Americans, explored by fur traders, maneuvered by lumber raftsmen and settled by early pioneers. Today, the route is probably best viewed by way of a Dells Boat Tour.



Sightseers aboard Dells Boat Tours get an up-close view of the picturesque sandstone rock formations that are the signature attraction in Wisconsin Dells, Wis.

"River tours are what first drew visitors to Wisconsin Dells more than 150 years ago and today the unique sandstone formations are just as breathtaking," said Dan Gavinski, general manager of the tours.

In the beginning, tours were offered by way of rowboats-guides would do the talking while passengers did the rowing. Eventually, steamboats plied the river before giving way to today's double-decker steel vessels that carry thousands of visitors each season.

A variety of excursions are offered, allowing visitors to get out on the water and see nature's impressive works of art. The most popular tour takes sightseers through the glorious Upper Dells, with its striking rocky cliffs and mysterious canyons, to explore on foot. Sandstone rocks along the Upper Dells tower more than 75 feet above the river, showcasing beautiful hues that change with the sunlight. The cliffs take on eerie shapes, their history reflected in their names, many given to them by native people or early explorers to this region.

"Wisconsin Dells has a rich past, and we weave much of that early history throughout our narrated tours," Gavinski said.

One of the area's early pioneers was H.H. Bennett, a landscape photographer whose photos are credited with winning the interest of travelers to seek out the beautiful scenery they portrayed. Historians today consider Bennett "the man who made the Dells famous," most notably by the first-ever stop-action photo he captured of his son leaping in midair from a rock ledge 47 feet off the ground to an incredible rock outcropping five feet away. Stand Rock is a 12 by 20 slab supported by a tapered pillar of layered sandstone. Bennett's photo of this amazing column went around the world and thus began Stand Rock's moniker as the "Trademark of the Dells." Only on a Dells Boat Tour can visitors take a short stroll into the woods to see the impressive Stand Rock and watch specially trained dogs leap the chasm.

Another exclusive shore landing takes visitors along a boardwalk into a shady cavern known as Witches Gulch. Hugged by steep cliffs on either side, Witches Gulch captures the essence of the Dells' abundant scenic treasures. What you see is indicative of Wisconsin's Driftless Area, the southwest one-third of the state that was untouched by glaciers. However, as the glaciers slowly melted, water dammed up to the north of this region. About 14,000 years ago, the glacial lake let loose, sending floodwaters gushing out and cutting out the eerie and beautiful shapes of the Dells.

Today, Wisconsin Dells is a popular family vacation spot about halfway between Chicago and Minneapolis. Although the river has long been the natural attraction, the destination is also bustling with man-made activities. The area boasts go-karts, waterparks, Original Wisconsin Ducks amphibious tours and thrill rides, including Dells Jet Boat Adventures, a fast-paced tour.

Visitors can enjoy Dells Boat Tours from mid-March through early November. Group excursions are also available to those who call (608) 254-8555. Beautiful photos and a video can be viewed at dellsboats.com.

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