

# Edele Family Vacation 2014: Wisconsin

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“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.”

--- Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*

Edele Family Vacations are not for the weakhearted, the easily tired, the unwilling to learn, the picky eaters, or the unadventurous sort of man, woman, or child. Travel begins early in the morning, usually when the rest of the world is still tucked away under their quilts, nightcaps upon their heads, and dreams in their brains. The family piles into the van—in the seats they had reserved many years ago, and still claim today; sitting in anyone’s seat but one’s own would be absurd and as uncomfortable as sleeping in a strange bed at night. Everyone settles into his or her seat, and the van pulls out of the garage and driveway and onto the quiet, dark, residential street where it meets few other cars in the foggy, but brightening morning. By the time the sun has risen enough to cast its light upon the world, the Edele family has been on the highway for several hours. Dad is driving, Mom is leaning her head back with printed directions clasped in her lap, and the four children are in various, cramped positions of sleep, headphone cords dangling from their ears.

It always happens that I bring the largest suitcase out of all six members of my family. My younger brother, Ben, always packs frugally. On occasion he has packed so prudently that he has completely omitted clean underwear. My younger sister, Sharon, stuffs her suitcase with enough shorts and t-shirts to last her a week’s worth of travel. The youngest of us all, Lucy, wears the shortest shorts of us all, so her clothes rarely take up much space. My parents share a suitcase. Yet my suitcase is still larger and still heavier than the combination of both my mother’s and father’s clothing and toiletries. I’m afraid I am a serial overpacker, and while I have improved my packing skills over the years, I have copious amounts of room to improve.

My father, Andy, drives the majority of the way to our destination and back home when our excursions have ended. My mother, Sue, is the navigator and the voice of reason throughout the trip. When my father drives, he has a thermos full of coffee on hand. When my mother drives, she has a bag of beef jerky and a bag of LemonHeads on hand. Not LemonHeads and Friends. She only eats the lemon ones, and she only eats them two at a time. The rest of us have a communal bag of snacks such as minibags of chips and cookies, trail mix, juices, water,



and other goodies to keep us satisfied between stops for meals. My parents have the radio and CDs to occupy them, and the rest of us have various electronics, notebooks, and other objects to keep us entertained throughout the drive to our destination. As far as I can remember, we have driven to every vacation destination except for two: Boston, Massachusetts, and Disney World in Orlando, Florida.

The Edele family is big on museums and tours. We have been to museums about nearly all the American wars, we have been to museums about several presidents, and we have been to science museums and history museums. We have been to a museum for dolls and a museum for shoes. We have been on tours of famous homes and buildings around the nation. We have been to battlefields and prisons, graves and monuments, and been on ghost tours. We have been to several interpretive sites with guides to show us around the historical grounds.

We, the Edele children, have grown into the museum and tour lifestyle, but we did not always embrace the art of reading plaques and peering into glass cases full of artifacts.

There was one trip in particular where Dad wanted to visit nearly every museum in sight. It was in the Museum of the Confederacy where the four of us staged a secession and sat on a bench in the middle of the museum, pouting, waiting for our father to finish reading about Jefferson Davis and the South's plight.

Since then, our parents have been sure to divide up our trips into more equal parts of relaxing and touring. This summer was no different from every other summer before. In July the family and I embarked on our annual adventure filled with Forced Family Fun. This year we were headed to the wildly exotic land of Wisconsin. My mother had learned, through one of her many gossiping sessions, about the land of the cheese. Many other ladies had made the trek there with their families in tow, and they found the trip tolerable and not too lengthy or tiresome, and the accommodations were plentiful and diverse, and as for fun, there was plenty to be had. My father delighted in the prospect of the region's food, and as a true American he wanted to show his family as much of the land of the free as was possible before he sent them off to show their own families this great country.

My only goals for the trip were to remain quietly amused, to read part of that damned novel I had been meaning to read but had been putting off for months, and to find an actual wheel of cheese. Wisconsin is always pictured with wheels upon wheels of cheese, so no slices or cubes would suffice for me—I must have and I would have a wheel of cheese. It did not matter the size of the wheel, but I would find my cheese wheel.

The first day of our trip did not begin as so many had begun in years past. We did not leave until well after the sun had risen. The day



before we were to depart I had been struck with a terrible ache in my back and upset in my belly. I awoke at the appointed time, but I could barely move around and nausea overwhelmed me. Eventually we could not wait any longer for my illness to pass, so my mother helped me down a shot of Nyquil, stuffed me in the car, and we headed on our journey. I do not remember most of the ride there except for the bits where I woke up and demanded more pain medication for my back. Sitting in a strange position in the car was doing it no favours.

After approximately seven hours of driving (not including stops), we arrived at our hotel in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, but my illness had traveled with us. I managed to stumble into one of our adjoining hotel rooms before crashing out for the night.

My first full day in Wisconsin was spent watching cheesy local television and sleeping in order to recover from whatever sort of illness I had contracted. My mom stayed with me in the morning to catch up on some of her homework, and the rest of the family headed out to explore the city.

For those of you unfamiliar with Sheboygan, Wisconsin, let me give you a few points of interest. The city is located on the eastern coast of the state with Lake Michigan curled up beside it. There are nearly 50,000 residents of the city, and it is known for its German influence from the immigrants who came to the area in the mid-1800s. This is precisely why Sheboygan is well-known among food connoisseurs as one of the best places to order a bratwurst or other German fare from a traditional restaurant.

This is precisely what prompted my father, children in tow, to stop at a small, highly rated restaurant in town and order lunch for us all.

It was when the travelers had returned and I was sitting up in bed and was eating the soup they had gotten for me, listening to everyone talk about their morning, when my sister, mouth full of a bratwurst sandwich, said, "Yeah ... this place was a bar. Dad took us to a bar."

My father quickly hushed my youngest sister and began to explain that he had not known the place was a bar, and they had all walked in innocently. He said he noticed that there was a bar inside, but they also had seating like a restaurant. He ordered everyone's lunch to go, and the older employees of the bar had not said anything about the 20-year-old, 18-year-old, and 16-year-old standing around with their father. In fact, they even jokingly encouraged my father to buy a drink for Sharon.

"The lady was really nice and we were talking, and she told Sharon that they couldn't offer her a drink, but if her dad bought a drink and handed it to her ... well ... they couldn't do anything about that!" my dad told us with a devilish grin. "But I DIDN'T," he reassured my mother.

While I could not stomach an entire German lunch, I did sample



the bratwurst and cheese curds - another famous fare of Wisconsin—and they were most delicious even in my sickly state. My father and his offspring, my brother, who eat anything in sight, said that it was some of the best bratwurst they had ever had, so I will have to take their experienced words for it.

The next day I felt much better, and I could move about as long as I was able to sit and rest between periods of walking. We headed to a touristy street to do some shopping where a small shop called “Olivü 426” caught our eyes. Well, it caught my mother’s and sisters’ and my eyes. My father and brother groaned, scanned the street for another shop they could browse in, and headed off to a bookstore they had spotted. My fellow females and I entered the shop and looked around. It was a small store whose scent hit you as you stepped inside. It smelled as clean and fragrant as the chunks of soap and bottles of lotions and lip glosses the store sold. We milled around the store, picking up products, reading their descriptions and how to use them, sniffing them, and placing them back in their baskets. The two ladies working in the shop were overly kind and helpful. As we wandered to the back of the shop, we discovered that we could make our own products. We gleefully chose lip gloss colors and flavors as one of the employees melted the premixed ingredients together for us. Once our choices were made, we mixed together our personal flavors and colors and poured the mixtures into the tiny tubes. Sharon picked the brightest shade of pink-red she could find and paired it with a wild, fruity flavor. Lucy chose a sweet pink color and bubbly champagne flavor. My mom and I chose practical rose colors we could actually wear in public and normal flavors like raspberry and mint.

The lip glosses quickly congealed in their tubes. We picked out a few more items to purchase, and made our way to the cash register. We were the only customers in the store, so we politely chatted with the ladies in the shop as one of them rang us out for our purchases. The older woman of the two turned the conversation to the weather, as so many people do in polite conversation. She exclaimed about how hot it was, and mimed fanning herself rigorously. My mom, sisters, and I all plastered smiles to our faces and we kept them tightly fastened there as the woman continued on about how huuuuuumid it was there. She could barely stand the 80-something-degree heat and humidity. We smiled and nodded along with her complaints as we made our way to the door. We thanked the ladies and stepped outside into the cool Wisconsin “heat.” We then burst out into the laughter we had been holding inside the shop.

“I hope she doesn’t come to Saint Louis!” Mom said, referring to the 100-degree heat that was nearly always paired with shirt-drenching humidity. The heat always seems to follow our family from Saint Louis, whether we go north, south, east, or west. The year we traveled to Boston there was a heat wave, and the locals were complaining about



the 85-degree sunshine beating down on their brows. There was a drought when we visited Colorado. Utah was hotter than usual, and South Carolina's humidity was thicker than normal when the Edeles arrived in each state. In "hot" Wisconsin, Mom, Sharon, Lucy and I laughed together at the heat that never failed to meet us as we walked down the street toward the bookstore where Dad and Ben were browsing.

The next stop on our trip was the Wisconsin Dells, which is west of Sheboygan in about the middle of the state. The Dells is a tourist town. I cannot come up with any better words to describe it other than extravagant, family-oriented, and extremely touristy.

There were giant billboards that line all the main streets of the town boasting about their highly-rated shows, their mouth-watering restaurants, their enormous waterparks, their fast and abundant zip lines, and their bountiful shops and sales. The attractions themselves had even bigger signs around and above their premises advertising their goods. There was a show that took place on the water that involved stunts on water skis and other water tricks; there was a Bigfoot zip line that was the greatest zip line one could ever imagine; there was a zoo with exotic animals on display; there was a Greek-themed amusement park and several monstrous waterparks that adjoined it; there was a Noah's Ark waterpark of biblical proportions; there were boat tours and "duck" boat tours and canyon tours and horse rides and go-karts and mini golf.

There was one particular street we explored on our first day there that contained everything an overexcited tourist could want: multiple fudgeries all claiming to be "the best," several cheese shops, dozens of restaurants all claiming fame for some recipe or dish, a few dark arcades with hundreds of blinking lights racing around, and a handful of those gimmicky tourist traps that I will never understand. One such trap had a giant sculpture of a gorilla fighting an octopus on top of the building. I believe it was a themed arcade and laser tag area, but I was so distracted by the top of the building that I didn't look at what was inside it. A few blocks away from the gorilla-octopus building was the Torture Museum. I'm not entirely sure that I would want to be in a dark museum filled with weapons of torture and the tourists who are actually attracted to such sights, but thankfully we were pressed for time so we had to skip that museum.

Nearly every other shop on this street was a gift shop full of "souvenirs" for tourists to purchase for their families back home, or as mementos of the trip. I have never understood some of the ludicrous merchandise available for tourists to purchase. I know many people who collect small tokens of their travels—snow globes, key chains, decorative thimbles, charms for charm bracelets, shot glasses, and other little trinkets. I know many people who collect t-shirts from the various cities



they visit. These items are plentiful in gift shops, as one can assume they would be. There is a market for them that has existed for generations. However, the other items available for patrons to purchase in souvenir shops are questionable. In each shop we entered, I was left to puzzle over how t-shirts with the poorest grammar and slogans about sluts and weed could count as souvenirs of a trip to the Wisconsin Dells, but perhaps I was missing that section of town.

There was one shop that only sold Hawaiian merchandise—pineapple paraphernalia, loud Hawaiian shirts, leis, and other goods—while blasting John Denver’s “Country Roads.” Multiple shops sported children’s t-shirts emblazoned with characters from the latest Disney film, Frozen, with the words “Wisconsin Dells” printed below the images. For those of you who have not seen the film, Frozen takes place in Norway. Some bigwigs in marketing and advertising clearly knew that if they combined Frozen and tie-dyed tourist t-shirts, children were sure to beg their overindulgent parents to purchase such junk.

The amount of Native American paraphernalia in these gift shops never ceases to amaze me. I’ve traveled to western states and eastern states and southern states and northern states, and they all have gift shops filled with Native American moccasins, gaudy t-shirts with wolves and elk painted on them, dream catchers, beads, statues, feathers, wind chimes, satchels, etc. etc. etc. Yet they hardly ever have any tours or museums dedicated to these people. All of the brightly colored shot glasses and tie-dyed t-shirts seem to mock these “artifacts” of a people who were pushed out of this land to make way for those giant gorillas to fight giant octopuses.

Our second morning in The Dells we awoke, consumed some breakfast, and then headed out to one of the biggest attractions in The Dells: The Mount Olympus Theme & Water Parks. The entire Mount Olympus empire stretched for miles in all directions. There were campgrounds, motels, and hotels each named after a commonly known Greek god, along with multiple water parks and two theme parks. There was also a construction that looked like the Coliseum because apparently Greece and Rome are the same thing. We drove to the theme park, purchased our tickets (which were discounted, as the giant flashing billboard on the way into the park told us, TODAY ONLY, yet we became increasingly jaded as that same TODAY ONLY sign flashed at us from the roads each day that week), and headed into the park. The first roller coaster we came across was the Zeus Wooden Roller Coaster, and so we trudged up the stairs to get to the top of the structure where we would wait quite some time, moving inch by inch, as people entered the cars, flew along the rails of the coaster, exited the coaster, and the next set of people took their seats in the cars. Eventually, we came to a halt. No one



was entering the coaster's cars, and several employees were pressing buttons at the control stand while others fiddled with the cars. It became apparent that the coaster was malfunctioning, and just when we had come so close. We could see the cars, and we had already chosen which ones we wanted to sit in. Another patron of the park asked an employee what was going on. The employee gave a vague answer about how the coaster "wasn't working." When the patron asked how long it would be, the employee shrugged and said he wasn't sure. After a few more minutes of impatient waiting, many patrons huffed and headed toward the exit. We joined the crowd of exiting, annoyed patrons, and we all took it upon ourselves to announce to those poor souls farther down the line that the coaster wasn't working, and that the clueless employees neither knew nor cared to know what the matter was or when it would be fixed.

Luckily we found a second (operational) coaster nearby, and we waited in line to ride the Hades 360 Rollercoaster. The ride was great, but it jostled my still-slightly-unwell head too much, so I opted to sit out the next round while the rest of the family drove on the Trojan Horse Go-Kart Track. (Yes, here in the Greek-themed amusement park was a Trojan Horse. I suppose they dragged it back from Troy.)

Meanwhile, I purchased a wildly expensive bottle of water and sat in a nearby plaza at an umbrella-clad picnic table. I was not alone for long; I was soon joined by an overexcited mother, father, and young daughter who was perhaps 10 to 12-years-old. The mother politely asked if they could join me at the table, and I conceded. I do not normally engage in conversation with strangers, but because I was in a strange place I might as well chat with some strange people. The mother wore a swim cover-up over her swimsuit, and a visor peeked out of her mass of frizzy hair. The balding father wore shorts, a t-shirt, and a pair of dark sunglasses. The young girl also wore a swimsuit and cover-up, but she sported a pair of goggles around her neck as well. Between bites of her chicken tenders and fries, the young girl cheerfully chattered about going to the next door waterpark and all the slides she would ride on. The mother chattered about all the things the family was going to do while in The Dells, and the father mumbled under his breath about how expensive the family's lunch was, how expensive the park was, and how expensive this vacation was. I politely nodded along and answered the standard questions people always ask at touristy venues and cities: How was I doing? Where was I from? Who was I traveling with? What had we done thus far that we had enjoyed?

After consuming barely half of her pricey chicken tenders meal, the girl excitedly dragged her parents away toward the water park. Thankfully my sister Sharon took their place while the rest of the family opted to go on another ride. We discussed the absence of the majority of the Greek pantheon. Apparently the only gods and goddesses Mount



Olympus' creators knew included Zeus, Hades, Poseidon, Apollo, and Hermes. Oh, and let's not forget about Aphrodite. There was a clothing store named after her, because women (even goddesses) are not powerful, and they only care about fashion. You can forget about Hera, Artemis, Ares, Athena, Demeter, and the rest.

After our initial confusion and then slight outrage at the ignorance surrounding us, (clearly it was all Greek to the park's creators ... hah hah!) Sharon and I sat in the shade and watched the people traversing the park. People-watching is always one of my favourite parts of vacations. It's fascinating to see the extremely wide array of folks from all around the world who are touring the same spots we are. From the different clothing choices to the language used, the people are just as fascinating as the surroundings.

After a day at the amusement park, the family took a slower day. We lounged around the cabin we had rented for our stay in The Dells, and in the afternoon we booked a boat tour of the Wisconsin River. The day was overcast and a little chilly, so we grabbed our jackets and headed to the meeting point for the tour. The river was especially low that day, so the eight of us – the family and the elderly couple who had also booked a tour at that time – hopped aboard the bus the tour company provided for us, and we were driven to a higher point on the river where we would begin our journey. We climbed aboard the boat and chose seats on the exposed top level where there were chairs set up in rows facing the bow (front) of the boat. Our tour guide – a charismatic older gentleman – joined us up top where he grabbed the microphone and took a stance at the front of the boat. As our journey commenced, he pointed out the local names of the bluffs and rock formations around the river as we chugged along. There were stories and lore about different areas – one area where a preacher tried to convert everyone, another area where someone dropped a piano off a bluff, another outcropping where one of the Native American tribes held trials. Our guide was a gifted storyteller, and he both knew and loved the Dells area and the river well.

Even though the day was cloudy and grey, the wind gushing around the boat and the churning of the water with us were peaceful. The locals fishing on the riverbanks raised their hands in salutation as we passed, and other boat tours hooted and hollered and waved enthusiastically. Even an eagle was spotted soaring above us. The scenery may not have been as spectacular as The Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls, but it was beautiful in its understated, undisturbed way.

It was on our final day of exploring The Dells that we stopped in a cheese and gift shop we had passed a few times while traveling to other destinations in town. It was inside this glorious shop that I found my wheel of cheese. There it was, sitting amongst its brothers Havarti and Gouda





and Swiss, propped up in a refrigerated display. I immediately ran to the cheese wheel, that wonderful, delicious cheese wheel, and grasped it to my chest. I had found my souvenir. It was the most clichéd item I could get from the land of Wisconsin, and I was overjoyed. My trip was complete.

While my quest for my wheel of cheese was mightily frivolous, the rest of my trip was memorable and not without depth. It is always an experience to travel to an unknown city and sit amongst its population, just watching people pass by. Tasting the local flavor, both literally through restaurants, and figuratively through historical monuments and museums, local flora and fauna, and talking to inhabitants, is essential in growing and learning as a human being and resident of the earth – expanding our own little corners of the earth.

