

Exploring Close to Home

At the end of 2019, my husband and I both renewed our driver's licenses. At the time, Minnesota had implemented a new type of license that would allow us to visit Canada or Mexico without a passport. Since we live roughly 50 miles from Canada, we had decided to make use of these new forms of identification to cross the border. The trip we had planned was to work our way to Duluth, Minnesota, hike in state parks along the North Shore of Lake Superior, and cross the border at Grand Portage, Minnesota. Our intention was to spend a day in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and work our way back through western Ontario to the border crossing at International Falls, Minnesota. From there, it is only a three-hour drive home. This trip would have allowed us to explore places we'd never seen while not going too far away. Unfortunately, our shiny new identification cards arrived two weeks before Minnesota implemented COVID-19 restrictions. We decided to modify our trip a little bit simply by staying in Minnesota rather than crossing the border, which had closed.

With all of the potential restrictions in place, I decided to plan the trip completely. I researched locations that were open, reserved hotels, and created an itinerary. We started our journey on July 30, 2020. The mask mandate was still in place, but we found that many people were not following it, particularly at gas stations and restaurants. There was road construction in Duluth, which made us rethink some of the places we wanted to see. Several places we had wanted to see were closed or had severe restrictions in place. Public restrooms were closed as well as some restaurants. We toured the Glensheen Mansion, but COVID restrictions meant that it was a self-guided tour, and we had to be sure to stay six feet away from the next group. This was a little difficult because we didn't feel that we could take our time to read all of the accompanying material in each room. We stopped at a museum, where a few exhibits were open, but it didn't take us long to go through it. We spontaneously opted to take a boat tour of the harbor, which we would recommend to anyone traveling to Duluth.

We began the next day of our journey by heading north to explore the North Shore. We hiked in many beautiful state parks that day, and the weather was perfect. The sky was unbelievably blue, and the water was clear. It seemed, though, that many Minnesotans had decided to take the same trip. It was difficult to take pictures of the amazing scenery because there were so many other people in the same space. We traveled the same well-worn paths as all the rest and marveled at the hypocrisy of needing to wear a mask and keep six feet away from others indoors while crowding together on footpaths through the woods to see a waterfall with strangers was perfectly acceptable. We left the crowds behind as we got further north and truly enjoyed Grand Portage National Monument.

On our third day, we wound our way through the north woods to International Falls, and the drive was wonderful. It was quiet and relaxing, and the state parks we visited were beautiful and peaceful. By this time, we had thrown away the itinerary I had created entirely. It turns out that we

are fairly spontaneous, and the plan was too restrictive for us. After leaving International Falls, we followed the Rainy River as it meanders west, forming the border between the United States and Canada. The closest we came to Canada on this trip was the view across the river as depicted in the accompanying image. It was a truly enjoyable drive. While we had wanted to experience Canada, working within COVID restrictions allowed us the opportunity to enjoy locations we would not have considered that are truly closer to home.