

[http://www.twincities.com/travel/ci\\_24081605/elkhart-lake-wis-race-over-road-americas-fast](http://www.twincities.com/travel/ci_24081605/elkhart-lake-wis-race-over-road-americas-fast)

# In Elkhart Lake, Wis., everything from turquoise waters to racing

By Ruth Chipps

Special to the Pioneer Press Posted: 09/14/2013 12:14:39 PM CDT |



A fall aerial view of Osthoff Resort and downtown Elkhart Lake, Wis. (Murphoto Photography)

If you dream of stretching out the summer and slipping away into turquoise waters, set your GPS for Elkhart Lake, Wis., a secluded valley about five hours southeast of the Twin Cities.

The petite lakeside village is rich with motor-racing history and has blossomed into a premier destination big on gourmet restaurants, luxury resorts, hiking, biking, fishing and more -- the perfect get-away for the whole family.

A few minutes away from the town is Road America, a world-famous four-mile race circuit nestled on the edge of Kettle Moraine State Park with gorgeous natural terrain and rolling hills. Championship drivers like Mario Andretti, Emerson Fittipaldi and his nephew Christian have frequented this track. -

The first auto races circled the turquoise lake along town streets in the 1950s. Later, a permanent road course was built that now hosts more than 450 events a year, including the American Le Mans and Grand-Am races, vintage auto racing and even a Ferrari weekend with 350 incredible autos.

The SCCA Runoffs at Road America on Sept. 19-22 should prove exhilarating on one of the longest and fastest tracks in the U.S., boasting more than 14 challenging turns and some extraordinary high-speed straight-aways. Spectators can even take their daily driver for a "tour" of the curvy course or enroll in hands-on driving classes with a professional instructor.

The classic racing movie "Winning" (1969) with Paul Newman and the IMAX documentary "Super Speedway" were filmed here, as well as "Driven" (2001) with Sylvester Stallone and Burt Reynolds. Fast forward to the Ron Howard film "Rush," an action-drama about European racing in the 1970s expected to open nationwide Sept. 27. The new release is likely to supercharge the sport for dedicated race fans as well as the general public.

## FINE FOOD

People in Elkhart Lake are as serious about eating as they are racing.

Even the Road America track concessions are scrumptious -- from RGPs (Really Good Potatoes) to sriracha chicken bites to beef brisket stacked on a ciabatta -- slow-smoked at the Gear Box concession at turn five. There are 12 concession stands at the track, all run by local community groups -- such as Lions, Optimists and Kiwanis -- all competing to serve the best-tasting fare.

Venture a few miles into town for a frenzy of dining options featuring local farm-fresh ingredients prepared by culinary artisans and chefs. The quaint and non-commercialized area has three resorts and more than 20 restaurants.



The specialty breakfasts and baked goods at Off the Rail are just the ticket in this original railroad depot location. Camaraderie and creative cuisine are the rule at the Paddock Club, where award-winning executive chef Lynn Chisholm features a juicy hanger steak with skinny fries and roasted red onion, enveloped in red-wine veal sauce. As folks spill out from the bars and restaurants into the city square during certain track days, the race cars are often police-escorted in a parade, culminating in the ultimate car show. It's the Midwestern version of a Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance -- by a lake instead of the coast in Carmel, Calif.

Vintage postcard from Otto Osthoff's Hotel.

## RESORT LIFE

For visitors looking for luxury, the Osthoff Resort is poised right at the edge of crystal-clear Elkhart Lake. In 1886, it was a getaway for Milwaukee entrepreneur Otto Osthoff, whose ailing wife, Paulina, was rejuvenated by the spring-fed lake and calm. As her health improved, he built a seasonal resort during the Gilded Age.

Today, the resort is a sprawling showpiece a few hours north of Chicago and Milwaukee and a popular location for weddings, family vacations and conferences. The Osthoff is a AAA Four Diamond premier vacation destination and was voted the top resort in the Midwest in a 2012 Conde Nast poll. It also is ranked in the top 50 resorts in the continental U.S. in this year's Travel & Leisure Magazine poll.

With sandy beaches, boat rentals and a lake deck bar that is more Bahaman than Wisconsin, the resort is ideal for groups and families. Many rentals have multiple bedrooms and are equipped with full kitchens.

The resort's signature restaurant, Lola's on the Lake, offers an eclectic menu in a relaxed waterfront setting. Savory smoked roasted corn soup and lobster bisque were pure velvet sophistication. The free-range chicken

A relaxing Chroma bath at resort's award-winning AspiraSpa. (Courtesy photo) setting.

breast and cedar-wrapped salmon was superb, and the locals have raved about the caramelized scallops with citrus supreme and champagne orange sauce. Decadent desserts are all made in-house.

The resort offers an extensive cooking school in L'ecole de la Maison (School of the House). I attended the Bistro class in the exquisitely designed French country kitchen classroom with executive chef Scott Baker and honed my skills in classic Italian and French cuisine.

We prepared a six-course meal of polenta with gorgonzola antipasti, a fennel and orange salad with parmesan crisps and a seafood cannelloni. These accelerated to the main course, classic osso buco with garlic rapini and saffron-infused risotto, including a fresh-baked rosemary ciabatta and a mind-blowing tiramisu for dessert. The food was delicious, and the chef's guidance was exceptional. Students certainly don't need lunch afterward.



Visitors may want to indulge in some tranquil time at the resort's Aspira Spa, ranked No. 3 in Conde Nast Traveler Magazine spa poll this year. The 20,000-square-foot facility is centered on a soothing meditation room with water trickling over a primitive stone sculpture. Each year, a new indigenous spa treatment is developed and debuted, using local ingredients, such as fresh native cedar and elderberry. It has been rumored that certain race-car drivers schedule a massage prior to a race.

## TRAILS AND MORE

The northern end of Kettle Moraine State Park is minutes from Road America and offers an opportunity to explore remnants of the ice ages. Elkhart Lake and other nearby waters are "kettles" that were carved out by glaciers and evolved into spring-fed lakes with soft white sand, ideal for swimming, sailing, fishing and water sports.

Hiking trails, camping and scenic views abound. The region is also home to numerous golf courses, including Quit Qui Oc, a short walk from the Osthoff.

Elkhart Lake is a top contender for America's Coolest Small Town and offers something for everyone. It's a small community with an international resort atmosphere at the edge of a Caribbean-blue lake and filled with fine food and fast cars.

Best of all, the friendliest folks you could meet are awaiting your visit.

And don't be surprised if you end up rubbing elbows at a local pub with acclaimed international drivers like I did. It was pure nostalgia chatting with Englishmen David Hobbs and Brian Redman -- both Formula 1 McLaren drivers -- from the same era as Niki Lauda and James Hunt, who are featured in "Rush."

As for me, I'm in a rush to see the movie and probably will race back to Elkhart Lake sometime soon.



*Ruth Chipps is a culinary traveler, car and cuisine aficionado. Reach her at [lahmayer.com](http://lahmayer.com).*

Elkhart Lake's Road America, one of the world's fastest and most challenging road racing tracks. (Road America)