

The Land of Sky Blue Waters



The Mississippi River

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Tour Guest Feedback

Thank you for my nice tour in and around Minneapolis. Perhaps you will come to Zurich sometime and visit us.

Yvonne U.
 Zurich, Switzerland

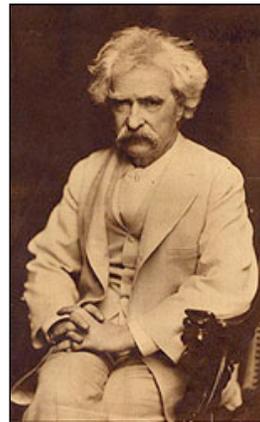
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"The Great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun."

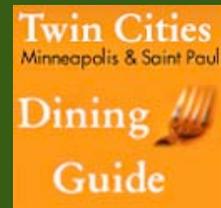
Mark Twain

"A raindrop falling at Lake Itasca (at the Mississippi headwaters) would arrive at the Gulf of Mexico in about 90 days."

National Park Service



Mark Twain



The Mississippi River in Minnesota

No North American body of water has created more legend and lore than the Mississippi River. [Mark Twain](#), himself a riverboat pilot for a time, was the author of such classic river tales as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*. There was the legendary frontiersman, Daniel Boone, who lived in Defiance, Missouri. Then there was the deep-voiced Paul Robeson singing "Old Man River" in Oscar Hammerstein's and Jerome Kern's *Showboat*. As Twain said, the river is "a wonderful book with a new story to tell every day." And there are plenty of them, including your own when you come to visit; so, like Twain always did himself, be sure to bring a journal.

Perhaps you are visiting by way of a Mississippi River cruise aboard the American Queen or Delta Queen; or driving to Minnesota along the [Great River Road](#); or flying in and landing at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, which sits upon the banks of the Mississippi at its important junction with the Minnesota River. Either way, while here do not miss the opportunity to take in as much of the Father of Waters as you can. Read some books ahead of time. When here, take a sightseeing cruise or local driving tour along its banks. Millions have, in one mode or another, for thousands of years.

The present name for the River is credited to the Ojibwe Indians of Northern Minnesota who called it messippi meaning Big River. They also called it Mee-zee-see-bee meaning Father of Waters, so its present name came likely from a combination of the two.

It has its humble beginnings 200 miles north of Minneapolis at [Lake Itasca State Park](#). The narrow stream there is ankle deep and naturally it is a favorite activity of visitors to walk across it. A tad harder to do in, say, New Orleans!

Minnesota and Louisiana are the only states the river passes through, while it becomes the boundary for eight others: Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi. Its entire length is 2,352 miles (4100 km) ending up in the Gulf of Mexico.

In addition to the ten states it directly touches, its watershed is so huge that it drains water through wetlands and tributaries from 32 states and two Canadian provinces, a territory of 1.2 million square miles.

Heading south down the nascent Mississippi River by canoe, or down the Great River Road by car, here are Minnesota towns and cities you will come upon in north to south order:

[Bemidji](#)

Home of the legendary lumberjack, [Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox](#), whose footprints, it is claimed, formed Minnesota's lakes.

[Grand Rapids](#)

Home of [Judy Garland](#), star of *The Wizard of Oz*.

[Aitkin](#)

In the heart of Minnesota's Lake Country

[Brainerd](#)

First class golfing, fishing and outdoor recreation

[Little Falls](#)

Boyhood home of famed pilot [Charles A. Lindberg](#).

[St. Cloud](#)

Largest river city in Minnesota outside the Twin Cities.

[Elk River](#)

Where the Mississippi is joined by this tributary.

[Anoka](#)

aka, Lake Wobegon? Hometown of Garrison Keillor, of [The Prairie Home Companion Show](#).

[Minneapolis](#)

[St. Anthony Falls](#), the only true water fall all the way to the Gulf.

[Saint Paul](#)

Still a major river port city. Also state capital.

[Hastings](#)

Where the Mississippi is joined by the St. Croix River.

[Red Wing](#)

Gateway to scenic [Bluff Country](#).

[Lake City](#)

On [Lake Pepin](#), an unusually wide spot on the river, and where water skis were invented.

[Wabasha](#)

Historic steamboat port. Filming site of *Grumpy Old Men* films.

[Winona](#)

More stunning Bluff Country and river port.

Below Minnesota, significant towns include: Dubuque, Rock Island, Davenport, St. Louis, Hannibal (home of Mark Twain), Memphis (Elvis!), Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

The Twin Cities

Most visitors erroneously assume that the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul face each other from opposite river banks. However, the truth is that Saint Paul is located thirteen miles down river from Minneapolis.

Without the Mississippi River, Minneapolis and Saint Paul would never have been born. Saint Paul began because of river shipping, as it was located (in the 1800s) at the northern most spot for practical navigation. Minneapolis began by St. Anthony Falls, exploiting its power into lumber and flour milling industries.

A view today from the riverbank in either city is still a picture of both these original



Between Mpls and St. Paul

Minneapolis, the Old Mill District has been restored. You can visit the Mill City Museum or walk across the Stone Arch Bridge which overlooks the upper most lock on the River, St. Anthony Falls, the old mills, and the skyline of Downtown Minneapolis.

Mississippi River Facts

The River has changed considerably since the old steamboat days; particularly with the addition of a system of 29 locks and dams between Minneapolis and St. Louis. This has converted the River into, essentially, a series of pools, each maintaining at least a 9-foot channel, which allows for the passage of barges and large river boats.

Speed: At the headwaters, the average surface speed is 1.2 mph. At New Orleans 3.0 mph. A raindrop falling in Lake Itasca would arrive at the Gulf of Mexico in about 90 days.

Length: It is difficult to pin down because the river is constantly changing. For example, staff at Itasca State Park say it is 2,552 miles long. The US Geologic Survey has published a number of 2,320 miles, the EPA says 2,320 and the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area says 2,350. In kilometers, that is around 4,100.

Width: At Lake Itasca, between 20-30 feet wide, the narrowest stretch for its entire length. It is more than four miles wide at Lake Onalaska. In more modern times, width is greatly effected by locks and dams, which form pools. Historically, before the dams, the widest place was Lake Pepin in Minnesota, which is more than two miles wide. It is a river lake formed by the backup of a natural dam caused by sand build-up at the entrance of the Chippewa River.

Elevation: 1,475 feet at Lake Itasca, dropping to 0 feet at the Gulf of Mexico. More than half of the drop occurs in Minnesota. It drops to 800 feet in the first 200 miles when it reaches Minneapolis, then another 120 feet drop in the next thirteen miles to St. Paul.

Sediment Load: Carries an average of 436 tons each day; over a year about 159 million tons.

Watershed area: Drains 41% of US continent. 31 states and 2 Canadian provinces. Total drainage area between 1.2 and 1.8 million square miles.

Volume: At Lake Itasca 6 cubic feet per second. In Minneapolis 12,000. At New Orleans 600,000.

Wildlife: 260 species of fish. 60% of all bird species in North America use the river basin as their migratory flyway. 38 species of mussel; 50 species of mammals; 145 species of amphibians and reptiles.

Other Facts:

Locks and Dams: There are 29 total between Minneapolis and St. Louis. The lower 27 are numbered, with Lock and Dam Number One by the Ford Bridge between Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Two more were belatedly added in the 1960s in Downtown Minneapolis. Since "One" was already assigned, these two became the Upper and Lower St. Anthony Falls Locks and Dams.

The majority of locks are 100 feet wide, wide enough for double-wide barges. Only the three upper most locks in Minneapolis and St. Paul are 56 feet wide, room enough only for single-wides. The need to break down double wide barges is costly and time-consuming.

Barges: One barge holds the equivalent of 15 jumbo rail hoppers and 58 semi truck trailers. One barge load of wheat is enough to bake 2.25 million loaves of bread. Upriver products include petroleum products, coal, fertilizers, sulfur, cement, aluminum ingots, sugar and molasses. Downriver: grains (corn, wheat, oats, barley and rye) and scrap metal.

Commerce: The fertile Mississippi River valley generates over \$7 billion in agricultural and forest products and \$29 million in manufactured goods per year. Waterfowl hunting in the flyway is valued at \$58 million per year and sport fishing at over \$100 million. International visitors spend an estimated