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Places To Go: Lake Geneva

This small resort city in Wisconsin, southwest of Milwaukee convenient to Chicago, boasts natural beauty and a wealth of Victorian architecture. By [Regina Cole](#)

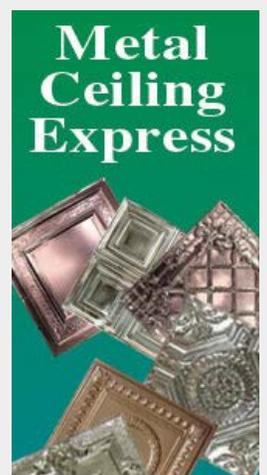


The paddlewheeler "Lady of the Lake" takes visitors on tours across Geneva Lake, its shoreline dotted with grand estates built in the 19th century. Photo: Lake Geneva Visitors Bureau

A Chicago surgeon built the first grand summer house on the shores of Geneva Lake in 1856. Nine miles long, exceptionally deep, with sparkling clean spring-fed water, the southern Wisconsin lake is conveniently accessible to the Second City. Chicago worthies with names like Wrigley followed Dr. Maxwell after the Civil War; the Chicago Fire of 1871 sent them up in a hurry. The city's elite became known as the Newport of the West.

The construction and maintenance of these large summer homes contributed to the economy of the town, which is called Lake Geneva (on Geneva Lake). Their owners also employed locals as help. Just as architecture-loving tourists now flock to Newport, visitors come to Lake Geneva to look at the houses. Unlike in Newport, however, Lake Geneva's estates are still home to a Midwestern glitterati, while the town thrives in support.

Among the several dozen lakeside houses are the 1900–1901 Beaux-Arts Stone Manor (officially Younglands), Villa Hortensia, constructed by Edward Swift in 1906 and named after wife, and Robinswood, a beautiful 1889 Shingle Style house. The magnificent Queen Anne-style Black Point, built in 1888 as the summer home of a Chicago beer



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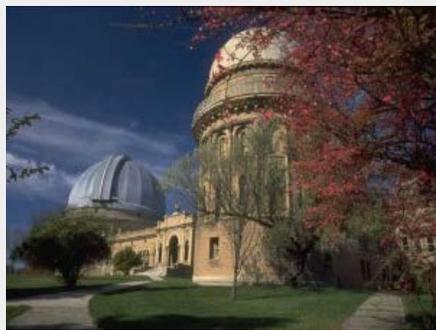
magnate, is now a house museum and open to the public.

The best way to see the houses is by boat, especially on the famous U.S. Mailboat Tour. Between mid-April and mid-November, the boat never stops—the letter carrier jumps from the boat to the pier and back again to deliver the mail to lakeside residents. Lake Geneva attracts

old-boat lovers as much as old-house lovers, because the mail might be delivered by the steam yacht Louise, built in 1902, or by the 1898 yacht Polaris. And the lake is heavily populated by exquisitely maintained, antique wooden runabouts. On the third weekend of each September, their numbers balloon at the Antique and Classic Boat Show.



Built by beer money, the 1888 Queen Anne style Black Point is open as a house museum. Photo: Lake Geneva Visitors Bureau



Romanesque Revival style suits the Yerkes Observatory, which was built in 1897. Photo: Walworth County Visitors Bureau.

Another way to explore is via the 21-mile Geneva Lake Shore Path. When it was created in the mid-19th century, the area 20 feet up from the shoreline was deemed public domain. To this day, anyone can walk through the yards of all the great lakeside houses.

In the village of Williams Bay, the 1897 Romanesque Revival Yerkes Observatory overlooks the lake. Operated by the University of Chicago, the observatory calls itself “the birthplace of modern

astrophysics,” a claim supported by Albert Einstein, who asked to visit when he first came to the U.S. The Yerkes Observatory boasts the largest refracting telescope successfully used for astronomy and is open for free public tours every Saturday throughout the year.

In 1885, a Racine widow built a 17,000-square-foot Queen Anne vacation house on fashionable Geneva Lake, calling it Redwood Cottage. The great good fortune of what is now known as Baker House is that it has retained its original layout, floors, redwood sheathing, and interior millwork. This includes all the original fireplaces, complete with surrounds, aprons, and hearths fashioned from Lowe



Trolleys operate at the Grand Geneva Resort & Spa in Lake Geneva.

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