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Travel

# The Impulsive Traveler: Lake Geneva, Wis., really knows how to spread the wealth



**Correction:** *The Nov. 13 Travel section's Impulsive Traveler feature on Lake Geneva, Wis., incorrectly referred to the Observatory's "refractory telescope." The correct term is "refracting telescope."*



Stone Manor is the largest mansion on Wisconsin's Geneva Lake and you can share in its views, thanks to a requirement that lakeside landowners grant public access. (Robin Soslow/For The Washington Post)

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By Robin Soslow November 11, 2011

I'm traipsing across the lakefront lawns of retail, industrial, brewing and chewing gum tycoons. In broad daylight. With a gang of locals and two hounds that bound in the water near docked boats that cost as much as a house. The chances that we'll get busted for trespassing? Zero.

In the town of [Lake Geneva, Wis.](#), (pop. 7,700, give or take) the law requires landowners to grant lakefront access to the public. Not only do the owners comply, but most also maintain bloom-laden footpaths of pavers, pebbles, bricks and grass that together form the 26-mile Lake Shore Path. It follows a trail used by Potawatomi Indians since 2,500 B.C. to circle crystal-clear Geneva Lake, a 5,500-acre bowl carved by a crawling glacier.

### [Lake Geneva, Wis.: How to get there, where what to do](#)



Gene Thorp/The Washington Post.

This is just one way Lake Genevans share the wealth.

Express interest and they'll tell you about the wealthy Chicagoans who built summer lakeside estates here starting in the mid-1800s; how the local Playboy Club

turned into [Grand Geneva Resort & Spa](#); why it's worth spending \$6,000 a year to dismantle docks each fall (freezing water is murder on wood); and about "hard water" escapades such as ice boating.

Awaiting carryout flatbread at [Sprecher's Restaurant & Pub](#), I'm engaged by a third-generation Lake Genevan who tells me about

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free Saturday tours of [Yerkes Observatory](#), an architectural wonder on the lake's northwest shore that boasts the world's largest refracting telescope. My "Sprechtangle" arrives; he suggests reconvening over coffee or a [New Glarus brew](#) to discuss a conspiracy theory linking Yerkes and the Vatican. Lesson learned: These folks love to share their good fortune — the juiciest apples, the freshest greens, the purest lake, the quaintest and quirkiest antiques.

That civic pride is in full force when I visit the [Baker House](#), a lakeside Queen Anne restored to Gilded Age glamour. There, lifelong Lake Geneva resident Rodney Whetlow and his friends Lorraine, Helen and J.B. regale me with tales of four-season fun at the lake.

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First stop: a hallway with racks of saucy vintage hats. A bystander docks one on my head. All guests must wear a hat; that's dressing for dinner at the Baker House. Meanwhile, the staff wears period costumes complementing the sumptuous interiors of the 1885 turreted Victorian, which owner Bethany Souza revived last year as an inn, the culmination of a lifelong dream.

Over specialty cocktails (star fruit, apple), finger foods and mismatched vintage tableware, local lore flows as the setting sun is reflected in the quicksilver lake that reaches depths of 146 feet. In the background — soon to become the foreground at singalong time — Tom Stanfield, outfitted in ragtime regalia, plays yesteryear standards on piano, pocket trumpet and fluegelhorn.

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