The vibrant sister ports of Duluth, Minnesota and Superior, Wisconsin are well worth a visit, by boat — or otherwise.

BY HEATHER STEINBERGER
Few cities can compare to Duluth, Minnesota, when it comes to sheer paradox. Located in the far reaches of the Upper Midwest, where Wisconsin’s and Minnesota’s deep, dense North Woods kiss the shores of mighty Lake Superior, this community of nearly 90,000 people still conjures images of a remote, hardscrabble world. After all, this is a land of arctic winters and a frigid, temperamental inland sea. It’s a land of Dakota and Ojibwe legends, prospecting iron men and tough lumber camps. Isn’t it?

Well, yes. Thanks to a colorful heritage, Duluth retains these aspects of its character. But, together with neighboring Superior, Wisconsin, the city has undergone a dramatic transformation in recent years. Fine restaurants, diverse shopping opportunities, art museums and the performing arts are thriving here, as is the festival-mad waterfront. And outdoor competitions have garnered national attention, from Grandma’s Marathon and the Midnight Sun Kayak Marathon & Half-Marathon to the North Shore Inline Marathon for inline skaters and the Trans-Superior International Yacht Race.

In fact, Duluth is one of Money magazine’s top four Midwestern small cities for overall livability, and Outside magazine put the port city in its acclaimed “Top 10 America’s Greatest Outside Towns” list in 2003, where it appeared alongside prestigious destinations such as Santa Fe, New Mexico; Camden, Maine; Bellingham, Washington; and Santa Barbara, California. It earned the latter honor due to its impressive green spaces, easy access to multiple outdoor activities, outdoor music venues, natural food stores, an active arts community and an intact cultural identity.

That last element is perhaps most significant. It may indeed have first-class dining, cutting-edge art exhibitions, exciting outdoor musical performances and nationally acclaimed sporting events. Its population and numbers of visiting tourists may be booming, and its name may be on the lips of travel literati who talk about “the next big thing.” But, at its heart, Duluth remains a quintessential Midwestern small town.

LUMBER, ORE & SHIPPING — OH MY!

In a way, Duluth’s renaissance is simply a return to erstwhile glory days. This Lake Superior port once was the fastest-growing city in America, rivaling Chicago and New York in importance. It had more millionaires per capita than any other city in the world. That could scarcely have been imagined when Pierre Esprit Radisson first explored the area in the 1650s. Fellow Frenchman Daniel Greysolon Du Lhut — for whom Duluth is named — landed in 1679 where the Aerial Lift Bridge now stands, and went on to document the area. Due to its rich natural resources, he hoped to secure trading and trapping rights while brokering an elusive peace between the warring Ojibwe and Dakota people.

Native control over this land was ending, however. In 1854, although the natives had not yet signed the Treaty of La Pointe that would give up their mineral rights, copper prospectors arrived in droves. Two years later, Duluth earned its name and became the designated seat of St. Louis County. When copper resources dwindled, the industrials’ focus shifted to timber, and hopes flourished with the 1855 opening of the Soo Locks. The Panic of 1857 devastated the economy, however, and then a scarlet fever epidemic raged through the community. By the end of the Civil War, most houses stood empty. Then geologists discovered iron ore, and large numbers of Maine lumbermen arrived, seeking to establish a strong lumber industry. Duluth’s fortunes were on the upswing once again. Wealthy Philadelphia land speculator Jay Cooke chose the city to be the terminus of the Northern Pacific and Lake Superior & Mississippi railroads. Their arrival opened northern and western areas to iron-ore mining; plus, Duluth now would be the only U.S. port with access to both the Atlantic and Pacific. For a time, the influx of workers couldn’t keep up with demand.
Hopes for a secure prosperity were dashed after the 1873 stock market crash, but hardly Scandinavian and Finnish immigrants rebuilt the city through a revitalized lumber industry and the grain trade. By the early 1900s, Duluth’s port passed that of New York City in gross tonnage handled.

Imagine: Duluth was the leading port in the country, despite the fact that it’s farther from the ocean than any other deep-water port in the country. And it welcomed two Great Lakes ports. Approximately 1,000 ocean and lake freighters dock here each year, shipping cargoes of iron ore (taconite), coal, stone and grain. And the city is growing again, although at a more moderate rate than during its boom years. The city population is roughly 87,000, and nearly 185,000 live within a 30-mile radius.

While the mining and paper industries remain active, Duluth also is a regional hub for health care, finance and communications; six colleges and universities call the twin ports of Duluth and Superior, Wisconsin, home. And due to the rise of tourism and the city’s subsequent downtown and waterfront renaissance, the city bears little resemblance to its former industrial self.

And the transformation continues. According to investor Sanford Hoff, Pier B Development will be redeveloping a seven-acre pier on the Duluth waterfront this year. This exciting project will include a 116-room upscale hotel, conference center, waterfront restaurant, residential condominiums and a waterfront pavilion to house activities such as kayaking and canoeing in summer months and ice skating during the winter.

“The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is working in conjunction (with Pier B) to develop a marina on an adjacent parcel,” Hoff reported. “The marina will accommodate boats ranging in size from 26 feet to 60-plus feet.”

Today, with a $250 million annual economic impact, Duluth remains one of the Great Lakes’ most important ports. Approximately 1,000 ocean and lake freighters

**DESTINATION: DULUTH**

When arriving at Duluth, cruising boaters will motor through a cut between Wisconsin Point on the Superior side and Minnesota Point on Duluth’s Park Point sandbar. Veeing to starboard, you’ll motor the length of the Superior waterfront, make a turn to port to cruise beneath the iconic 1905 Aerial Lift Bridge and enter St. Louis Bay. The bridge is one of Duluth’s most popular attractions; originally built as a rare aerial transfer bridge — less than two dozen were ever built — it was reconfigured as a vertical lift bridge in 1930.

“A visit to Duluth isn’t complete without watching a ship travel under the Aerial Lift Bridge,” commented Kristi Stokes, president of Duluth’s Greater Downtown Council. “It’s amazing to stand on the piers and watch the vessel traffic up close.”

Although she grew up in central Wisconsin, Stokes has called Duluth home for 21 years, and her husband serves as the commander of the Duluth Sail & Power Squadron.

“I actually told myself that I would give Duluth about a year,” she recalled. “However, I really fell in love with the place! It has the feel of a larger city, but it retains that small-town charm.”

“I love it! We own a 36-foot powerboat and spend our summers living aboard with our family. It’s our Boating cabin,” Russ Francisco, a lifelong Duluth resident who has owned and operated Marine General on London Road since the 1970s, also chose to remain in what he called “the biggest farm town in the U.S.”

“We have nice restaurants and so many things to do, but everyone still knows each other,” he explained. Francisco says the region has much to offer boaters — from the allure of the Big Lake, to the St. Louis Estuary that dot the surrounding woodlands.

“These is so much water here, and a lot of it’s protected, so people come to use it,” he explained. “Marine General is really where the growth is. I just tell people to find out where the launches are in advance. There are several up the north shore toward Grand Marais, and the same down the south shore. Know where they are, because it would be such a shame to have flat water and not be out on it!”

“A visit to Duluth isn’t complete without watching a ship travel under the Aerial Lift Bridge,” commented Kristi Stokes, president of Duluth’s Greater Downtown Council. “It’s amazing to stand on the piers and watch the vessel traffic up close.”

Although she grew up in central Wisconsin, Stokes has called Duluth home for 21 years, and her husband serves as the commander of the Duluth Sail & Power Squadron.

“I actually told myself that I would give Duluth about a year,” she recalled. “However, I really fell in love with the place! It has the feel of a larger city, but it retains that small-town charm.”

“I love it! We own a 36-foot powerboat and spend our summers living aboard with our family. It’s our Boating cabin,” Russ Francisco, a lifelong Duluth resident who has owned and operated Marine General on London Road since the 1970s, also chose to remain in what he called “the biggest farm town in the U.S.”

“We have nice restaurants and so many things to do, but everyone still knows each other,” he explained. Francisco says the region has much to offer boaters — from the allure of the Big Lake, to the St. Louis Estuary that dot the surrounding woodlands.

“These is so much water here, and a lot of it’s protected, so people come to use it,” he explained. “Marine General is really where the growth is. I just tell people to find out where the launches are in advance. There are several up the north shore toward Grand Marais, and the same down the south shore. Know where they are, because it would be such a shame to have flat water and not be out on it!”
Another tip: Bring a full jacket, and keep a weather eye on Lake Superior’s moods. “The weather here changes in a blink, and you’ll go from 80 degrees to 50 degrees,” Francisco said. “That’s because Lake Superior is big, and deep, and cold. And always look over the hill. That’s where the weather comes from.”

That hill is one of Duluth’s three distinctive natural features. Boaters will encounter the two within immediately: The natural deep-water harbor, which the city shares with neighboring Superior; and the 14-mile-long Park Point sandbar, which is one of the longest freshwater sandbars in the world. Then there’s that steep, rocky, 800-foot-plus hill that dominates the city and creates its distinctive, helter-skelter, San Francisco-esque streetscapes.

The hill that dominates the city and creates its distinctive, helter-skelter, San Francisco-esque streetscapes.

“Get a trolley!” said Francisco. “The weather here changes in a blink, and you’ll go from 80 degrees to 50 degrees,” Francisco said. “That’s because Lake Superior is big, and deep, and cold. And always look over the hill. That’s where the weather comes from.”

The area known as “Old Duluth” lies along Superior and near the Lake Superior Zoo, Lake Superior Marina lies up the St. Louis River, seven miles from Lake Superior, and even vegetarian cuisine. Boaters will encounter the two others immediately: The natural deep-water harbor, which the city shares with neighboring Superior; and the 14-mile-long Park Point sandbar, which is one of the longest freshwater sandbars in the world. Then there’s that steep, rocky, 800-foot-plus hill that dominates the city and creates its distinctive, helter-skelter, San Francisco-esque streetscapes.

Lakehead Boat Basin is just three blocks south of the bridge on Park Point; Harbour Cove Marina is four blocks past the bridge on the point, and Spirit Lake Marina lies up the St. Louis River, seven miles from Lake Superior and near the Lake Superior Zoo, Lake Superior & Minnesota railroad station and Munger Trail.

EXPLORING A RENAISSANCE TOWN

The area known as “Old Duluth” lies along Superior Street from Lake Avenue to Fourth Avenue East. This is the city’s birthplace — along with Canal Park, site of Duluth’s 1679 landing. The renewed downtown features red-brick streets and convenient skywalks, while Canal Park’s thoroughfares are traversed by horse-drawn carriages. Restored waterfront warehouses house a myriad of shops, cafes, bakeries and restaurants. In fact, more than 50 restaurants lie within Duluth’s downtown and Canal Park areas, ranging from popular American fare such as seafood and steaks to Mexican, Italian, Asian and even vegetarian cuisine.

“If people are looking for a night out, downtown tends to be the destination,” Stokes observed. “One of the first things that people think of when they think about the downtown Duluth area is the variety and quality of our unique restaurants.”

Each year, the Greater Downtown Council shines a spotlight on those venues with “Eat Downtown Duluth Restaurant Week,” during which restaurants offer fixed prices for three-course lunches and dinners. In 2012, the event takes place March 1-15. Francisco said transient boaters don’t have to worry if the distance from dock to downtown seems a bit long for walking.

“We’ve got great bus service and taxis,” he said. “We also have a trolley that carries people from Canal Park to the waterfront to downtown.”

Beer aficionados will get a kick out of Tiger’s Brewhouse Brewery & Grille, a city mainstay for more than a century. It incorporates a museum that tells the story of northern Minnesota brewing, and on Wednesday nights you can watch the weekly sailboat races from the courtyard.

Those who seek to stretch their legs will delight in Duluth’s more than 105,000 acres of green space and many parks, particularly the Waterfront Sculpture Walk. The sculpture walk is an impressive display of international art reflecting the social, cultural and historical values not only of Duluth, but also of its sister cities in Sweden, Russia, Japan and Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Loh Erikson Park, with its celebrated Rose Garden, is another favorite. The Rose Garden hosts a weekly concert series during the summer, and this is not the only spot to enjoy live music in the cool evening air. Downtown Duluth also hosts a summer concert series, and the two performances are within easy walking distance.

And don’t forget the Lakewalk, which stretches more than six miles along the Lake Superior waterfront. “The Greater Downtown Council, along with other sponsors, actually implemented an event in 2009 to celebrate Duluth’s Lakewalk,” Stokes said. “Our Lakeswalk Festival attracts thousands of residents and visitors to the shores of Lake Superior for a day of free family-friendly activities, from face-painting and balloon animals to train rides, treasure hunts and ice cream.” This year’s event is scheduled for September 8.

Also woven into the fabric of Duluth’s summer life are the performing arts, from the outdoor concert series to the Minnesota Ballet, the Duluth-Superior Symphony Orchestra, the Lake Superior Chamber Orchestra and a number of community theater organizations. These include the Duluth Playhouse, the Duluth Festival Opera and the Renegade Comedy Theatre. Music enthusiasts will relish the opportunity to attend the Sieur Du Luth Summer Arts Festival. Hosted by the University of Minnesota, Duluth, festival events include theater, opera, jazz, big band and chamber music performances.

The city boasts three art museums: The Duluth Art Institute at The Depot, the Tweed Museum of Art at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, and an impressive selection of smaller galleries throughout the city. Then there are the other museums.

The Great Lakes Floating Maritime Museum is a major highlight, as it incorporates the William A. Irvin,
camping supplies, winter clothing and boots, Carhartt work clothes, snowshoes, hunting clothing and ammo."

This is indeed a city geared to the outdoors, and the essence of that outdoor spirit lies in Duluth’s favorite season, which stretches from June into September. Spring kicks off with Lake Superior Family Fun Fest, the Homegrown Music Festival and Duluth Dylan Fest; and summer moves into high gear with such highlights as Duluth Fourth Fest, Downtown Duluth Sidewalk Days, the Bayfront Reggae and World Music Festival, Twin Ports Bridge Festival, the Bayfront Blues Festival, Glensheen’s Festival of Fine Art and Craft, Art at Bayfront Park Art Fair, Duluth Trail Fest, and Lake Superior Dragon Boat Festival.

Music festivals, art fairs, holiday celebrations — according to Francisco, there is something going on literally every weekend. "It’s a big town with a small-town character," he said. "Everyone gets together at the waterfront. I tell people to come visit in July and August; the weather’s stable, the fishing’s good, and there are all the festivals!"

Fall and winter have their redeeming features, too. "Obviously we see our largest influx of visitors in the summer months, but the fall colors attract people, and the snow attracts folks in winter," Stokes said. "Don’t miss the Bentleyville Tour of Lights at Bayfront Festival Park during the holidays. More than 3 million lights serve as a beacon on the waterfront."

MEET SUPERIOR, THE SISTER PORT

Lest anyone forget that Duluth is part of an entity affectionately known as the Twin Ports, don’t miss taking a trip over to the other half of that equation: The friendly city of Superior, Wisconsin, which is bordered by St. Louis, Superior and Allouez bays, as well as the Nemadji and St. Louis rivers. While the city has a significantly smaller population at roughly 27,000, it shares Duluth’s world-class, deep-water port. These cities truly are sisters. "The marina is a jumping-off point for the Superior National Forest, as well as for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness."

GREAT OUTDOORS MEETS BIG CITY

Yet you don’t need to leave the metro area for outdoor adventures. For visiting enthusiasts, outfitters and rental companies provide bicycles, skates, canoes and kayaks for exploring every nook and cranny the city has to offer. An active charter fleet can satisfy the most avid fishermen seeking walleye, trout and salmon, while those who prefer to stay ashore with their gear will find that 12 of 23 city streams have natural — and fishable — trout populations. And miles of trails are easily accessible to hikers, bikers and skaters, offering countless opportunities for wildlife-watching as well as outdoor recreation.

If you need anything, make sure to visit Francisco at Marine General, which really is a one-stop store — and not just for powerboats, sailors and anglers who need parts, accessories and gear.

"We have hundreds of items for all types of outdoor enthusiasts," he said. "Over the years, we have added onetime flagship of U.S. Steel’s Great Lakes fleet and a stately ore carrier that hosted many dignitaries and VIP guests during her lifetime. The museum also includes the U.S. Coast Guard vessel Sondra, responsible for many search-and-rescue missions on the lakes.

Other educational activities include visits to the Lake Superior Maritime Visitors Center, the Lake Superior Railroad Museum and the St. Louis County Heritage & Arts Center at The Depot, the Lake Superior Zoo and the Great Lakes Aquarium, which explores Lake Superior and surrounding habitats. Glensheen, an historic 7.6-acre estate that incorporates a 39-room, 1908 Jacobean mansion, is another worthy stop.

For exploring every nook and cranny the city has to offer. An active charter fleet can satisfy the most avid fishermen seeking walleye, trout and salmon, while those who prefer to stay ashore with their gear will find that 12 of 23 city streams have natural — and fishable — trout populations. And miles of trails are easily accessible to hikers, bikers and skaters, offering countless opportunities for wildlife-watching as well as outdoor recreation.

If you need anything, make sure to visit Francisco at Marine General, which really is a one-stop store — and not just for powerboats, sailors and anglers who need parts, accessories and gear.

"We have hundreds of items for all types of outdoor enthusiasts," he said. "Over the years, we have added

Save fuel... learn to sail

After 30 years and 11,000 graduates, Lake Superior Sailing School has proven its ability to turn students into sailors in just three days.

Learn safety basics, seamanship, navigation and boat handling. There is a two-hour classroom session and 22 hours of on-the-water training aboard a 30-foot yacht.

Competing the course will give you all the skills necessary to become your own skipper.

lakesupersailingschool.com 800-826-7010
Barker’s Island Marina also offers a recently constructed 24,000-square-foot heated indoor winter storage building for boats up to 60 feet.

When you’re ready, head into town. Visit the SS Meteor museum ship, the 1890 Fairlawn mansion and the Old Firehouse and police museums. Peruse the Lake Superior Council for the Arts & North End Arts Gallery, the Harrington ARTS Center and several private galleries featuring work in all media, from pottery to silver.

Some summer events in Superior are the JAWS Fishing Derby the first weekend of June, Woodies on the Water: Lake Superior Wooden Boat Festival (July 28), and the Lake Superior Dragon Boat Festival (August 24 – 25).

SWEET HOME DULUTH/SUPERIOR

You’ll find that many native Duluthians also dock their boats at Barker’s Island or anchor on the Superior side. Really, it’s not that far. And many also enjoy anchoring out on the Wisconsin side. Francisco observed that there are many good anchorages there, throughout the bay and up the St. Louis River.

“It’s great to hang out on the boat during the festivals,” he said. “You can listen to the music and enjoy being out on the water.”

There it is again: That sense of community, of coming together to simply celebrate being in this vibrant, cosmopolitan place that perches confidently at the edge of North Country wilderness.

“There are so many reasons Duluth and Superior are so special to those of us who live here,” Stokes reflected. “Topping the list is its quality of life.”

The many paradoxes of these twin ports, it seems, are irresistibly sweet.