

From Duluth to the Border, and Beyond: Ride Minnesota's North Shore Scenic Drive

Lee Radzak

On a motorcycle there is not a bad direction to ride into Duluth but if you really want to know what they mean when they say, "you know you're not in Kansas anymore", ride north on I-35 from the Twin Cities. Just outside of Duluth you top Thompson Hill near Spirit Mountain Ski Resort and the ports of Duluth, MN and Superior, WI, the St. Louis River estuary, and the whole expanse of western Lake Superior opens up 500 feet below you as you descend through some pretty nice curves to the lake basin below.

This is just the beginning of the ride northeast up the North Shore Scenic Drive, better known as Highway 61. Yup, the same Highway 61 that Bob Dylan sang about in the Sixties. This route hugs the shoreline of the big lake for its entire 150 miles between Duluth and the Canadian border. Today it's a scenic byway, and has even been accorded status as an All-American Roadway, the cr me-de-la-cr me of scenic motorcycle roads. It is also a segment of the 1300-mile Lake Superior Circle Route. On a bike, this trip is best taken in July, August, or early September for obvious reasons. This far north and this close to this vast body of water (Superior's water temperature averages 39 F) have your leathers handy.

If you do start up Highway 61 from Duluth you will want to spend some time taking in the sights of this hillside city. Canal Park is the waterfront destination in downtown Duluth. Waterfront hotels, coffee shops, trendy stores, plenty of restaurants and micro-breweries, the Lakewalk, and of course the Aerial Lift Bridge and Park Point are all



there. A lot of bikers make a stop at Aerostich in west Duluth to stock up on riderware and an amazing assortment of riding gear.

The real ride begins where I-35 ends in east Duluth. It turns onto London Road, a 3-mile ride through a lakefront neighborhood of spendy homes, including the tourable Glensheen mansion. Once you cross the Lester River you are out of town and have the option of taking the North Shore Drive along the lake shore or the quicker expressway to shorten up the first 25 miles to the city of Two Harbors. Get off of 61 in Two Harbors and head down to the real waterfront downtown, complete with thousand-foot ships loading taconite at the massive ore docks, a railroad museum, and a lighthouse bed and breakfast.

Beyond Two Harbors, heading northeast on Highway 61, you will begin to see how the rocky north side of Lake Superior differs from the sandy southern shore in Wisconsin and Michigan. Towering basalt cliffs on your left hand and shimmering Lake Superior off your throttle hand make this ride special. Now you rumble

through Silver Creek Cliff and Lafayette Bluff tunnels and beyond that the little hamlet of Castle Danger (time for pie?), and then Gooseberry Falls State Park.

Seven miles beyond Gooseberry is Split Rock Lighthouse. Most everyone makes a quick stop to see the waterfalls at the Gooseberry River and a then a longer stop at the historic Split Rock Lighthouse.



Lafayette Bluff Tunnel

Sitting atop a 130-foot cliff, from the top of the lighthouse you can see deep into the clear water and look across the lake to Wisconsin and the Apostle Islands 30 miles away. The lighthouse is now a state historic site and you can learn how the keepers and their families lived on this cliff top 100 years ago, when only a boat could get you here. So many motorcyclists stop at the lighthouse that you can even buy a Split Rock Lighthouse-Hwy. 61 motorcycle t-shirt to add to your collection.

Another stop you won't want to miss is Shovel Point, about 12 miles up the shore from Split Rock. A quarter-mile paved road will take you to a small parking area atop this 300 foot cliff used by rock climbers, and noted for blueberries at the right time of year. Shovel Point is a part of Tettegouche State Park, just one of seven state

parks along the shore between Duluth and the border. That means plenty of good camping for those with a tent and a bag to throw down.

The little towns of Beaver Bay, Silver Bay, Schroeder, Tofte, and Lutsen, offer plenty of great dining and lodging options, but remember that summer on the North Shore is prime travel time so plan ahead. It's best to get a reservation or to check in early in the day.

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Picturesque Grand Marais is the last sizable town along the shore south of the Canadian border and worth a stop for pizza at Sven and Ole's, or poking around Joyn's Ben Franklin variety store or the Lake Superior Trading Post, all right downtown on the waterfront.

If you continue north, about five miles south of the international border is the small Ojibwe community of Grand Portage. This was the starting point for the nine mile long canoe portage from the big lake inland to the Pigeon River and points west for the voyageurs of old. Check out the historic fort, the visitor center, and the nearby casino.

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Two Harbors Ore Docks

