

February 12, 2006

Next Stop

# In the Frozen North, an Increasingly Cool City

By NEAL KARLEN

## Correction Appended

THE most amusing part of announcing a winter pleasure-trip to [Minneapolis](#) is watching the reaction of travel snobs who spend their last drachmas every February for a shack on the next, next St. Barts. As these dilettantes plan their trips to equatorial locales, they all but chortle at the seemingly clueless traveler heading north to vacation in Minneapolis — a place where people actually say, "you're darn tootin!"

Although these travelers may appear to be dunderheads, they've actually learned to cheat winter by exploiting a maze of indoor "skyways" that makes raising a flag above your hut for another umbrella drink seem antediluvian.

Still, Minneapolis in February? According to the conventional wisdom, one might as well book a trip to the colder side of Pluto as venture off-season to a city where the average low temperature in January is 2.8 degrees, with February's bottom rising to 9.2. But visitors to Minneapolis when it is in the icy grip of winter need not feel like the kind of off-season cheapies who visit [Miami](#) in August: there are a multiplicity of reasons to head by choice to the Twin Cities (with a metropolitan population of almost three million, including [St. Paul](#) and surrounding areas) and some of the toughest urban winter tundra in North America.

The city boasts the Minnesota Orchestra, which, under the directorship of Osmo Vanska, is one of the top dozen symphonies in the country, as well as the Minnesota Opera and two of the best repertory drama companies in the country — the Guthrie Theater and Children's Theater. Fans of woebegone basketball can also head over to the Target Center, home of the often underachieving Minnesota Timberwolves, where the superstar Kevin Garnett is pretty much the lone attraction these days.

Art lovers can check out two Minneapolis museums that in recent years have become must-see destinations for architectural pilgrims. The Walker Art Center, which underwent a complete redesign last year by Herzog & de Meuron, the Pritzker Prize-winning firm, reopened in April 2005. The Frederick R. Weisman Museum, a teaching institution that is connected to the University of Minnesota,

has been housed since 1993 in a [Frank Gehry](#) creation made of aluminum panels. Its collection features 20th century American artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Marsden Hartley, as well as contemporary art.

These attractions, plus a crop of hot new hotels and buzz-worthy restaurants — including Masa, a mostly white minimalist Mexican restaurant that is favored by the moneyed hipsters of Minneapolis — are perhaps why Travel & Leisure recently named the city as one of its five "up and coming destinations to visit in 2006," along with more exotic locales like Montenegro and Gabon.

Those who want to challenge nature at its nastiest will have plenty of opportunities to show their mettle in a city where men sometimes can chip off their frozen beards after only a few minutes outdoors. But even the thin-blooded can make themselves warm and happy in Minneapolis. Over the last 44 years, the city has tried to counter its five months of soul-numbing cold by erecting a game of architectural hopscotch that allows one to skip through town without risking even a wind-burned nose. Glass and metal bridges form "skyways" that allow pedestrians to traverse downtown in their T-shirts, if they so choose. The first skyway was built in 1962, across Sixth Street and Nicollet, with one end at the IDS Center, a shopping and office tower. Today, 63 bridges crisscross 72 blocks of downtown Minneapolis, making it the largest skyway system in the world, larger even than its counterpart in Calgary, [Alberta](#), which covers 64 blocks. Businesses connected by the skyways co-own them, and most try for some originality in appearance, using multicolored glass and metal designs. (You can even go from the opera to the symphony and on to the Target Center without venturing outside.)

The skyways, which are either 12 feet wide by 12 feet high or 16 feet by 16 feet, link grand hotels, restaurants, high-end department stores, a Saturn dealership (at Marquette Avenue), businesses ranging from banks to baseball card and coin boutiques, and even the Hennepin County criminal courts (at Fourth Street). Inside, this Jetsons-like setting creates the surreal illusion of living — no matter the time of day or the wind chill — in a pleasant bubble equipped for almost all of life's exigencies. In winter, it can appear that the cold and snow has emptied downtown — while in fact life has simply moved a story above street level.

But not everyone thinks this is a good thing. "The skyways are making us soft; it's just not right to live in this kind of ant farm," said Bill Hillsman, 51, the chief creative officer of North Woods Advertising in Minneapolis, who has worked for such candidates as [Jesse Ventura](#), [Ralph Nader](#) and the late [Paul Wellstone](#).

However, Amy Klobuchar, 45, the Hennepin county district attorney and a front-runner for the Senate nomination of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party, disagrees. "Visitors may see the skyways as one giant hamster habitat trail, but we see it as the ultimate tunnel in the sky — bright, friendly and above all warm," said Ms. Klobuchar, who was named "Ms. Skyway" for March of 1988 by Skyway News.

The skyways are not antiseptic. In winter, mangy street singers become mangy skyway singers, and police tell beggars to move along a block above street level.

The skyways even come replete with iconology. On the IDS skyway level is a casual restaurant called Basil's. The food is fine, but Basil's is most noted for a tiny plaque identifying "The Mary Tyler Moore Table." Here, Mary Richards of the fictional WJR-TV dined at the beginning of each episode with a stranger (played by her non-fictional then-husband Grant Tinker) on one of her characteristically hideous dates.

To see the difference between skyway and street in winter, one need only go outside to see a statue of Mary Tyler Moore that stands exactly where she gleefully threw her hat aloft each week to celebrate Minneapolis in winter. Erected by the "Nick at Nite" cable channel, the statue is an artless rendition of someone who could take a nothing day, and suddenly make it all seem worth while. Those who run the IDS must sense the miscue and have decided to break with verisimilitude: a ground-floor notice tells visitors they are free to throw their hats up in the air — inside.

Citizens, meantime, prefer to echo Frances McDormand, portraying Marge Gunderson, the police chief in "Fargo." Looking through the window of her car, not unlike a mini-skyway, at the blue, sunny skies above a snow-covered nose-numbing tundra, Ms. McDormand said simply at the end of the film, "It's a beautiful day."

## WHERE TO STAY

**Graves 601 Hotel**, 601 First Avenue North, 612-677-1100; reservations, 866-523-1100, is the hottest, most fashionable hotel in town. Each of the Graves's 255 guest rooms has a 42-inch plasma screen television, glass-etched, handcrafted headboard and glass pedestal wash basin.

**The Grand Hotel**, 615 Second Avenue South, 612-288-8888 or 866-843-4726; [www.grandhotelminneapolis.com](http://www.grandhotelminneapolis.com), is located in the downtown business district. There are 140 luxury rooms, two restaurants, and a bar inside a neo-Classical building connected to everything else in sight. Rooms start at \$359.

## WHERE TO EAT

**Masa**, 1070 Nicollet Mall, 612-338-6272, which opened in November, features a nouvelle Mexican cuisine . Dinner for two for \$32 to \$50, with specialties including seafood enchiladas and masa boats.

**Mission American Kitchen**, on the ground floor of the 57-story IDS Center, 80 South Eighth Street, 612-339-1000, [www.missionamerican.com](http://www.missionamerican.com), is a top choice for contemporary American comfort food, as well as the power lunch capital of downtown [Minneapolis](http://www.nytimes.com). Chili-coated goat cheese with figs (\$10) is a favorite salad, while entrees include the Kobe pot roast (\$28), 32-ounce bone-in rib-eye steak (\$42), and the grilled tuna loin (\$32).

## WHAT TO DO

**Minneapolis Institute of Arts**, 2400 Third Avenue South, 612-870-3131; [www.artsmia.org](http://www.artsmia.org),

"Papermade Modernism" — furniture, vases, sculpture and lamps, through Sept. 29; "All Shook Up: Modernist Barware;" through March 19.

**Walker Art Center**, 1750 Hennepin Avenue, 612-375-7600, [www.walkerart.org](http://www.walkerart.org). "Andy Warhol/ Supernova: Stars, Deaths, and Disaster, 1962-1964," through Feb. 26.

**Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum**, 333 East River Road (University of Minnesota), 612-625-9494, on the Web at [www.weisman.umn.edu](http://www.weisman.umn.edu). "Home Housing Project: The Future of Affordable Housing"; through April 30.

**Minnesota Orchestra**, Orchestra Hall, 1111 Nicollet Mall, 612-371-5656, [www.minnesotaorchestra.org](http://www.minnesotaorchestra.org). Alfred Brendel plays [Mozart's](#) Piano Concerto No. 25, Feb. 16 and 17.

**Children's Theater Company**, 2400 Third Avenue South, 612-874-0400, [www.childrenstheatre.org](http://www.childrenstheatre.org). "Reeling," a live performance of pratfalls and slapstick in the silent comedy tradition, is appearing through March 4.

**Guthrie Theater**, 725 Vineland Place, 612-377-2224, [www.guthrietheater.org](http://www.guthrietheater.org). "Hamlet," the same play that the theater opened with 43 years ago, is the Guthrie's last production in the current space, running from March 4 to May 7. The theater will move to a new site near the Mississippi River this year.

## HOW TO GET THERE

Most major airlines serve Minneapolis-[St. Paul](#) International Airport, about a 25-minute ride from downtown. In early February, Northwest offered nonstop flights from [Newark](#) for \$209. Light rail service linking downtown, the Mall of America and the airport began two years ago; it also connects with most bus lines.

**Correction:** Feb. 26, 2006, Sunday:

The Next Stop column on Feb. 12, about winter in Minneapolis, referred incorrectly to the first of the enclosed skyway bridges that link downtown buildings. It did not connect with the IDS Center, which had not yet been built.

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