

**EXPLORE
MINNESOTA™
m**

CHALLENGES >

OBJECTIVES >

TACTICS >

EXECUTION >

RESULTS >

Travel Organization Name:
Explore Minnesota Tourism

Website URL:
[ExploreMinnesota.com](https://www.exploreminnesota.com)

Category:
Travel Website

**“TO WALK IN NATURE
IS TO WITNESS A
THOUSAND MIRACLES.”**

-Mary Davis



CHALLENGES

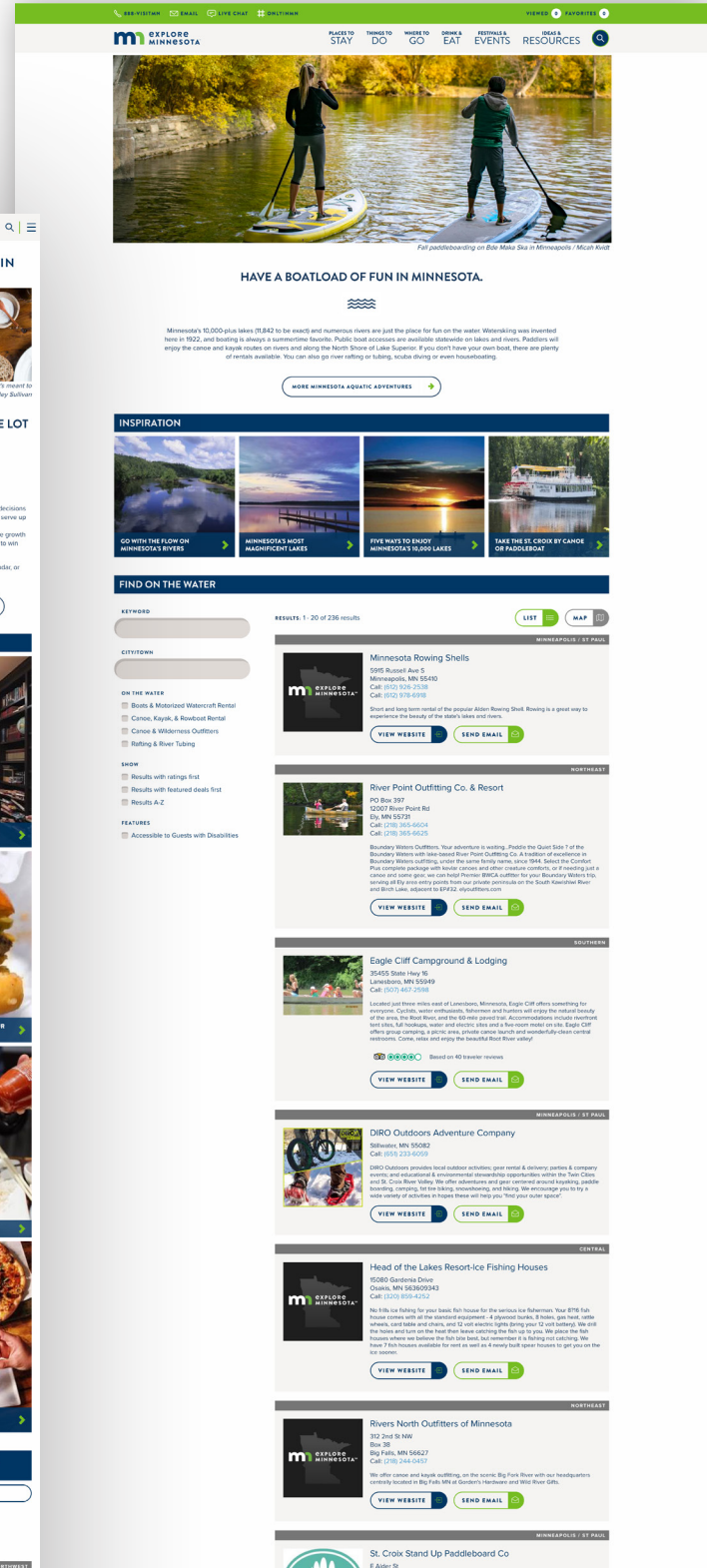
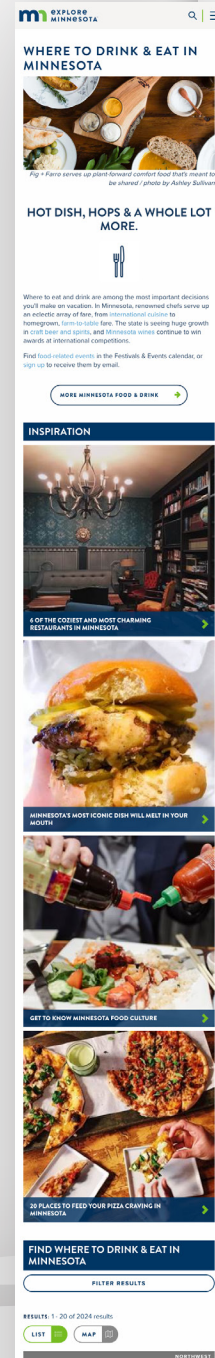
AN AGING PLATFORM

ExploreMinnesota.com plays a huge role in helping Explore Minnesota fulfill its key mission— attracting leisure travelers to visit the state. In 2019, after **10 years on the same custom-developed CMS platform**, the organization’s marquee web property was not as agile as it once was, and wasn’t able to keep up with the changes we’ve seen in visitor and industry expectations for a modern DMO website experience.

The platform’s **rigid page templates** made it hard for editors to prioritize inspirational content, and the site structure and content strategy were designed around delivering directory-style listings, not destination storytelling.

Responsive design had been retrofitted into the design, and while the site’s brochure fulfillment and customer service integrations were commendable, the highly customized, monolithic system made it **difficult for the organization to be agile** in its response to a rapidly changing tourism environment. **It was time for a total overhaul.**

EXPLOREMINNESOTA.COM BEFORE REBUILD >



OBJECTIVES

AGILITY & FLEXIBILITY

While **quick and easy access to business-level information** remains an important part of Minnesota's UX strategy, we know that the role of a statewide DMO reaches far beyond that, into **brand-building, inspiration and education** about the destination. Doing that on a website like ExploreMinnesota.com takes **flexible, robust content management**, and a diverse array of building blocks editors can use to tell the **right story at the right stage** of the visitor journey.

We also wanted to **enable more flexibility** in purchasing, management and evolution of Explore Minnesota's digital applications and services. To achieve this, we moved from a highly customized, monolithic solution to a network of popular off-the-shelf solutions integrated using APIs.

OUR MARKETING OBJECTIVES INCLUDED:

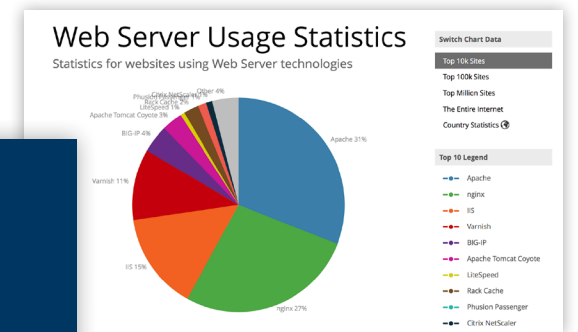
- 1** **Engage and support** travelers in the **inspiration and consideration** stages of their travel journey – specifically those who have not yet made a destination decision.
- 2** **Empower Explore Minnesota's team** to make quick and easy changes to page layouts, accommodate a variety of media formats, and respond to changing situations with agility – with minimal need for developer intervention.
- 3** Reflect the **diversity, inclusivity and accessibility** of Minnesota's brand in the website experience.
- 4** Provide **robust, relevant and equitable advertising opportunities** for Minnesota's industry partners to showcase their businesses and destinations to a highly qualified audience.
- 5** Ensure that each stage of the website journey contains avenues that allow visitors to move laterally (related content) or vertically up and down (to broader, more dreaming-centric or more focused, booking-intent-driven content) within the travel planning process.
No dead ends.

TACTICS

A FOUNDATION ROOTED IN DATA

This project followed completion of an in-depth audit of Explore Minnesota's digital marketing systems, applications, content and strategy, which included the creation of a **prioritized performance framework** to help focus and align efforts across the organization, an in-depth **content and SEO audit**, a **user experience and user interaction audit**, a **systems and technology audit**, and partner **advertising program optimization analysis and strategy**.

The outputs of this work, alongside existing user data, web analytics and industry research, guided the technical and creative approach to the new site.

The image is a screenshot of a data table with columns for Date, Page Type, Current Page, New Page, Region(s), Photo Quality (G, B, M), Photo Quantity (G, B, M), Copy Volume (Light, Medium, High), H1, H2, Links, PDF/Fax, and Action. The table contains several rows of data, including entries for "Outdoor Rec", "Biking Family Fun, Small Teen Chum", "Rise America's First LA Server Downer Winter Blue Trail in Death", "Northwoods League Baseball in North a Trip", "Hot Tips for Cold Weather Trail Riding in Minnesota's Driftless Area", "Theater and Antiques on Charlestown Drive", and "Hear Ya, Hear Ya Get Them in the Minnesota Renaissance Festival".

EXPLORE MINNESOTA m

CHALLENGES >

OBJECTIVES >

TACTICS v

DATA

> STORYTELLING

DIVERSITY & ACCESS

DESIGN

PANDEMIC RESPONSE

EXECUTION >

RESULTS >

TACTICS STORYTELLING AS DNA

ENCOURAGING EXPLORATION

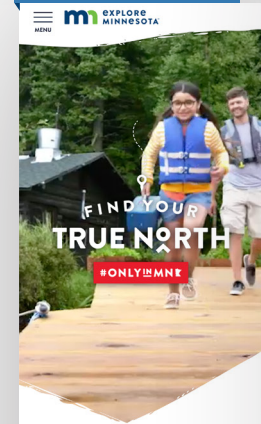
We created snackable content experiences and curated 467 inspirational travel articles, listicles, and itineraries and surfaced them across 124 different topically or geographically focused pages. Our goal was to **create a powerful sense of place** and **spark emotional connections** to spur interest in travel to Minnesota, then **provide clear avenues to connect that inspiration to action.**

MODULAR DESIGN

To design each page, editors have access to a **menu of 22 building blocks** they can combine in any sequence or order they like. Every page is customized to its content, with components available for various layouts of video, photography, social media embeds, maps, photo collages and text. Rigid page templates are nowhere to be found.

EXAMPLE MOBILE
USER JOURNEY FROM
HOMEPAGE ENTRY >

HOMEPAGE



YOUR TRUE NORTH ISN'T ON A MAP.

There's no simple way to find it, no compass to lead the way. Because your True North isn't a place, it's a feeling. A state of mind filled with adventure, culture and curiosity.

Minnesota invites you to discover something new in the world and in yourself. Somewhere that still feels wild and pure, where your story can flow like the Mississippi River and shine like the northern lights. No matter which route you take, they can all lead to your True North. And it's only in Minnesota.



Hike to the scenic overlook at Hennepin High-Army in the Superior National Forest / Big Sky

FUN ADVENTURES IN YOUR TRUE NORTH

From relaxing canoe trips in the Boundary Waters to bike tours along the Mississippi River, adventure is always on the horizon in Minnesota. With more than 10,000 lakes, immense forests and rugged bluffs, Minnesota is an exciting outdoor playground for outdoor lovers of all kinds. Or head to cozy restaurants and food halls, renowned museums, intimate live music venues, exciting shopping areas and more to get a taste of the state's vibrant cities and towns.

SEE THINGS TO DO

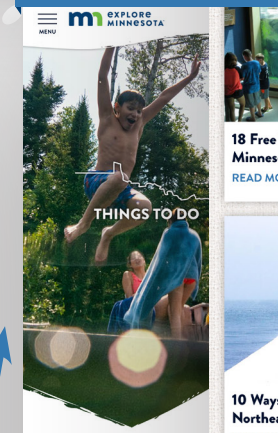


The MacShaw Theater brings world-class live performances to the heart of downtown Duluth / Paul Vincent



Crossing the Mississippi Headwaters at Jesse State Park is a beautiful view tradition for many / Democratic Travelers

LANDING PAGE



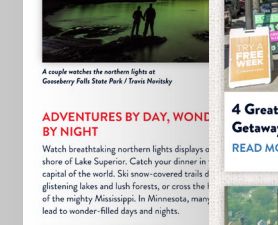
18 Free Things to Do in Minnesota

READ MORE >



10 Ways to Embrace Winter in Northeast Minnesota

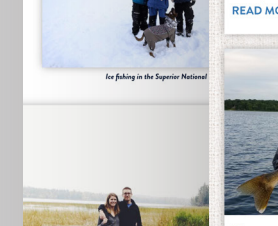
READ MORE >



ADVENTURES BY DAY, WINE BY NIGHT

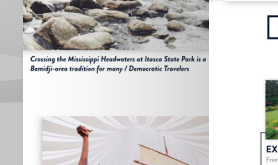
Watch breathtaking northern lights displays on the shore of Lake Superior. Catch your dinner in the capital of the world. Ski snow-covered trails through glistening lakes and lush forests, or cross the mighty Mississippi. In Minnesota, many adventures lead to wonder-filled days and nights.

EXPLORE THE GREAT OUTDOORS



5 Ways to Do Duluth

READ MORE >



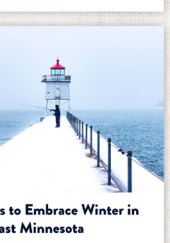
How to Catch Walleye, Minnesota's State Fish

READ MORE >



WALK IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THESE FAMOUS MINNESOTANS

SCROLL TO READ



1 | BOB DYLAN

What do Bob Dylan, Judy Garland and F. Scott Fitzgerald have in common? Besides being household names around the world, they have all, at one point or another, called Minnesota home. Walk in their footsteps at these sites that honor their lasting legacies.



2 | F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Before he wrote 'The Great Gatsby,' Fitzgerald spent much of his early life in St. Paul. The Minnesota Historical Society offers walking tours of the neighborhood where he lived, including the home where he wrote his first successful novel, 'This Side of Paradise.' Tours depart from the James J. Hill House on Summit Avenue. Also in St. Paul, the Fitzgerald Theatre is the city's oldest theater, staging live music and other events year-round.



3 | JUDY GARLAND

How to Catch Walleye, Minnesota's State Fish

READ MORE >



EXPLORE ON A BUDGET

Free (ish) things to do in Greater St. Cloud

ARTICLE



WALK IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THESE FAMOUS MINNESOTANS

SCROLL TO READ

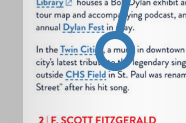
By Erica Wacker

SEE PLACES ON A MAP

What do Bob Dylan, Judy Garland and F. Scott Fitzgerald have in common? Besides being household names around the world, they have all, at one point or another, called Minnesota home. Walk in their footsteps at these sites that honor their lasting legacies.

1 | BOB DYLAN

Born in Duluth, raised in Hibbing and spending his college years in Minneapolis, Robert Allen Zimmerman is one of Minnesota's biggest cultural icons. The Hibbing Public Library houses a Bob Dylan exhibit and offers a walking tour map and accompanying podcast, and Duluth hosts an annual Dylan Fest in July.



2 | F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Before he wrote 'The Great Gatsby,' Fitzgerald spent much of his early life in St. Paul. The Minnesota Historical Society offers walking tours of the neighborhood where he lived, including the home where he wrote his first successful novel, 'This Side of Paradise.' Tours depart from the James J. Hill House on Summit Avenue. Also in St. Paul, the Fitzgerald Theatre is the city's oldest theater, staging live music and other events year-round.



3 | JUDY GARLAND



WALK IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THESE FAMOUS MINNESOTANS

SCROLL TO READ

PROFILE



ST PAUL SAINTS PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL CLUB

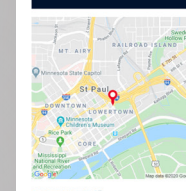
THINGS TO DO // PROFESSIONAL SPORTS TEAMS



Contact Information

St Paul Saints Professional Baseball Club
350 Broadway St
St Paul, MN 55101, US
(651) 644-6259 (Phone)
(651) 644-3272 (Fax)

VIEW WEBSITE
SEND EMAIL



About

Outdoor summer entertainment since 1993, American Association professional baseball club. Games played at CHS Field from May through September. Known for outlandish promotions and family fun that won't break the budget. Excellent group options including pre-game games and specialty seating areas. Advance ticket purchase recommended but not required.

Hours & Dates

SEASONAL HOURS (MAY 6 - SEPTEMBER 12)
Monday 9:00am - 6:00pm Thursday 9:00am - 6:00pm
Tuesday 9:00am - 6:00pm Friday 9:00am - 6:00pm
Wednesday 9:00am - 6:00pm Saturday 10:00am - 2:00pm

April through Sept: M-F 9a-6p, Sa 10a-2p/Sept through April: M-F 9a-5p

Rates
General admission: \$6 adult, \$5 youth/senior. Outfield reserved: \$14 adult, \$13 youth/senior. Infield Reserved: \$18 adult, \$17 youth/senior.

More Information

What's Nearby

REFINE RESULTS
Places to Stay Things to Do Dining
Festivals / Events



BIRCH'S LOWERTOWN TAP ROOM & BARREL HOUSE



HATT PLACE SAINT PAUL DOWNTOWN

St. Paul
Hatt Place Saint Paul Downtown is a great venue with...

LEARN MORE

LEARN MORE

MENTIONED IN

ARTICLE
Cher for the Vikings, Twins & More Minnesota Sports Teams

ITINERARY
Ride Your Bike to These St. Paul Breweries

LIST
Walk in the Footsteps of These Famous Minnesotans

ARTICLE
Where to Eat & Drink Before a Day in...

CONTINUED >

TACTICS

STORYTELLING AS DNA

CONTENT IN CONTEXT

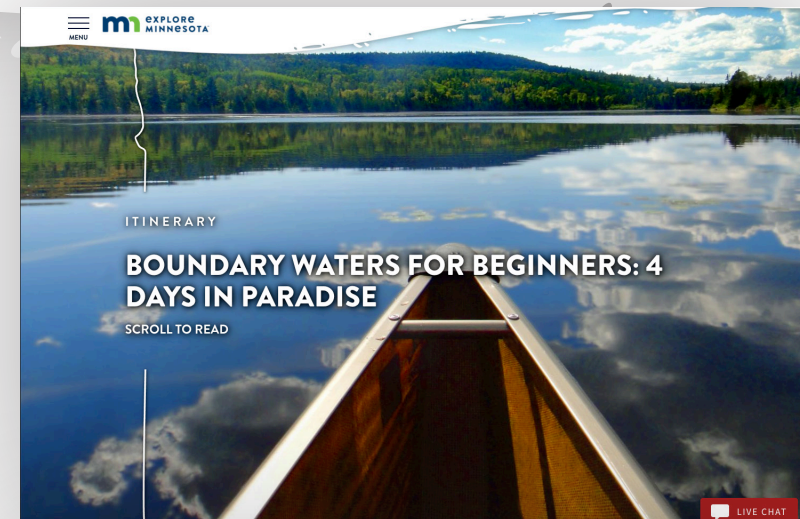
We **tagged every piece of content** on the site with related business IDs, its topic and its location. This allowed us to present places mentioned in articles on maps and to make **programmatic suggestions** of more reading about a specific topic or place, ensuring content suggestions stay fresh for repeat visitors to the site, and streamlining workflows for editors.

INSPIRATION & ORIENTATION

Rich visuals, including immersive photos, compelling videos and interactive maps, convey the wide range of Minnesota travel experiences, orient visitors to destinations within the state and clue them into the fact that every season offers opportunities for unique trip experiences and self-discovery.

SCROLL-BASED ANIMATIONS CREATE A FEELING OF DISCOVERY >

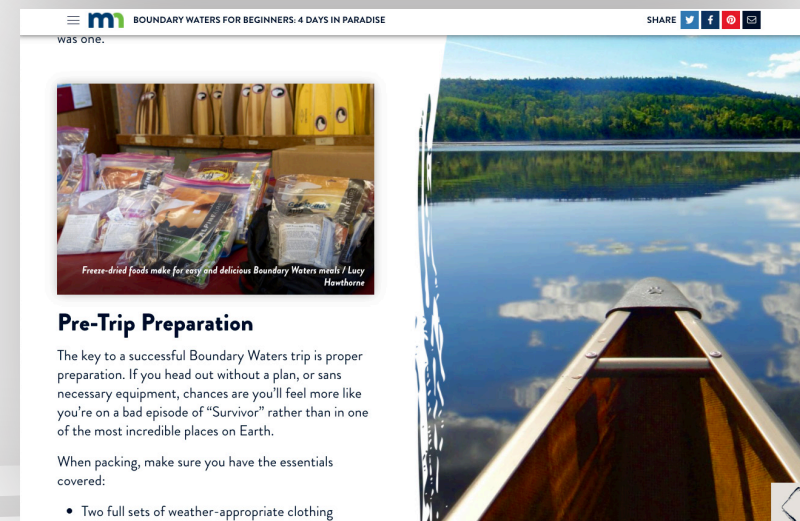
SEE ARTICLE >



User arrives at article



Article reveals as the user scrolls



Article scrolls on left, while image stays static

TACTICS

DIVERSITY & INCLUSIVITY

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Minnesota has a vast amount of cultural diversity, in its urban centers and beyond. It has a history of welcoming members of refugee populations, who have thrived and become part of the fabric of the state's culture. The website embraces that tradition by providing a warm welcome to non-English-speaking travelers in seven languages, orienting them to vacation planning tools in their own language. Spanish-speaking visitors are the most numerous non-English speaking user group on the site, so an additional 51 pages of human-translated Spanish-language content were developed specifically to service this segment of visitors. The state's Native American heritage is honored with rich content celebrating the vibrant culture and artistry of its indigenous people. Design details (explored on the next page) also reflect this heritage.

INCLUSIVITY & ACCESSIBILITY

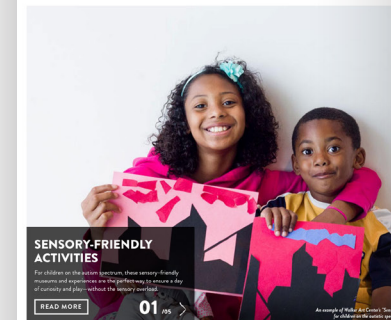
The whole site was built with inclusivity in mind, including dedicated pages for researching specialty travel styles from family fun to LGBTQ+ Travel to providing a wealth of information about accessible travel options around the state. WCAG AA conformance standards were followed throughout the project, and the team is working to close any remaining accessibility gaps as part of a proactive accessibility optimization program.



MINNESOTA VACATIONS FOR EVERYONE

From wheelchair-accessible trails to sensory-friendly theatrical productions, and ASL museum interpreters, Minnesota destinations embrace accessibility for all. Go fishing in one of our 10,000 lakes, explore the prairie at a state park or enjoy competitive culture and fun attractions in the Twin Cities. However you like to travel, you'll find an accessible way to do so in Minnesota.

- TAKE A VIRTUAL VACATION
LOCAL BUSINESSES STEP UP



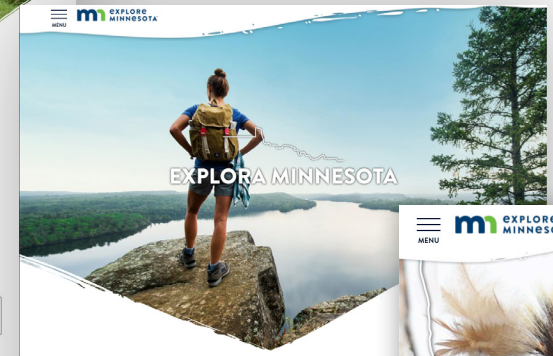
SENSORY-FRIENDLY ACTIVITIES

For children on the autism spectrum, these sensory-friendly experiences and activities are the perfect way to ensure a day of comfort and fun without the sensory overload.

- HIT THE LINKS TODAY
PLAY AND STAY

ACCESSIBLE ATTRACTIONS & PLACES TO STAY

Grid of travel options including Happy Hooker Charters, Grand Superior Lodge on Lake Superior, Arrowwood Resort & Conference Center, Grand View Lodge Spa & Golf Resort, East Bay Suites, Bear Paw Resort, Eagle Nest Lodge, Redwood Pointe Resort, Kohl's Resort, Kivanuoch's Steam Lake Resort, and Hall of America.



EXPLORA MINNESOTA

BIENVENIDO A MINNESOTA

Minnesota, un estado increíblemente diverso ubicado en la de los Grandes Lagos en Estados Unidos, es conocido como 'Tierra de los 10 000 lagos'. Minnesota ofrece actividades de todo tipo dentro y fuera del agua, desde animados centros urbanos hasta naturalezas intactas, bosques de pinos encantados, monumentos históricos y atracciones modernas.

Esta página te ayudará a conocer lo más destacado de Minnesota y te brinda información necesaria para comenzar a planificar tu viaje. En la parte superior de esta página, encontrarás una selección de artículos de viaje y enlaces a recursos de viajes a Minnesota disponibles en español. Te invitamos a utilizar el complemento de traducción para el navegador como Google Translate o Microsoft Edge para visitar el resto de este sitio en español.



Una mujer pinta una obra de arte callejera en un callejón de Minneapolis.

NATURALEZA CIUDADES D

Descubre experiencias en el estado de Minnesota desde los bosques del norte y Superior hasta los hermosos lagos de Minnesota y el camino que trae al centro urbano más grande del estado, hacia el sur.



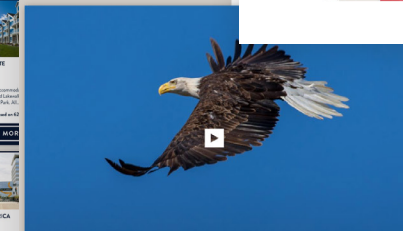
DANCE, DRUMS & ARTISTRY COMBINE AT MINNESOTA'S NATIVE AMERICAN POWWOWS

SCROLL TO READ



HAGA UN RESERVA

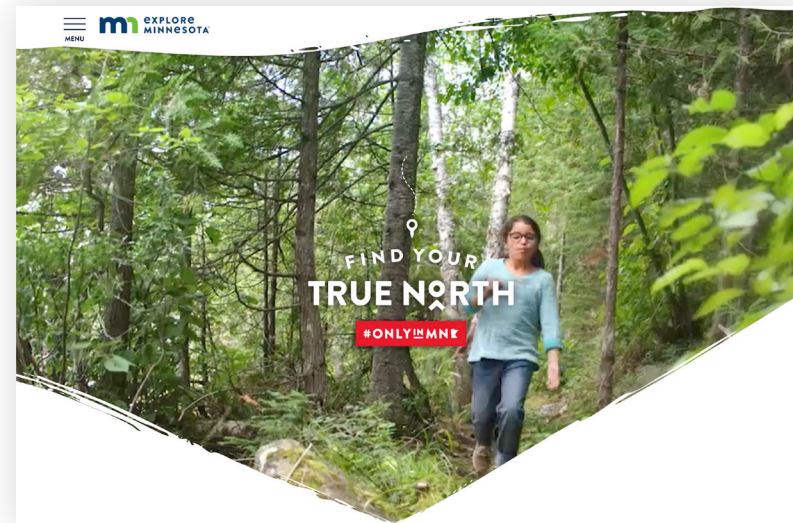
TRAVEL YOUR WAY grid with categories: ACCESSIBLE TRAVEL, FAMILY FUN, ROMANCE, LGBTQ+ TRAVEL, PET-FRIENDLY TRAVEL, ROAD TRIPS & SCENIC BYWAYS.



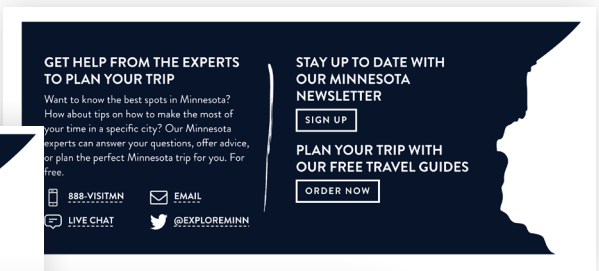
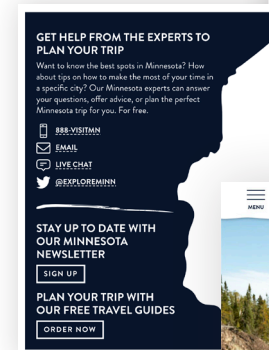
Un paisaje de hermosa región de los Grandes Lagos en Minnesota. Comienza por Bloomington, Minnesota, hogar del famoso Mall of America, y luego explora el museo y la escena artística de Winona. Mayo Clinic, un centro médico de renombre internacional ubicado en Rochester, aporta vida nocturna y gastronomía de primer nivel a esta área histórica.

TACTICS

DETAILS WITH PURPOSE



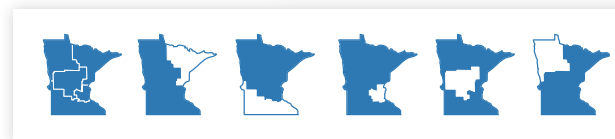
Textures and unique crops used in otherwise clean and simple executions echo the contrast between nature and urban pursuits within the state.



Deconstructed state border shapes create unique textures and accents throughout the site.



A custom-created Ojibwe bead pattern used in accents and fallback images highlights cultural aspects of the state in unique ways.



State map thumbnails provide users a sense of place.

The state's 2-color palette was expanded for WCAG AA conformance and to enhance the contrast among design elements.



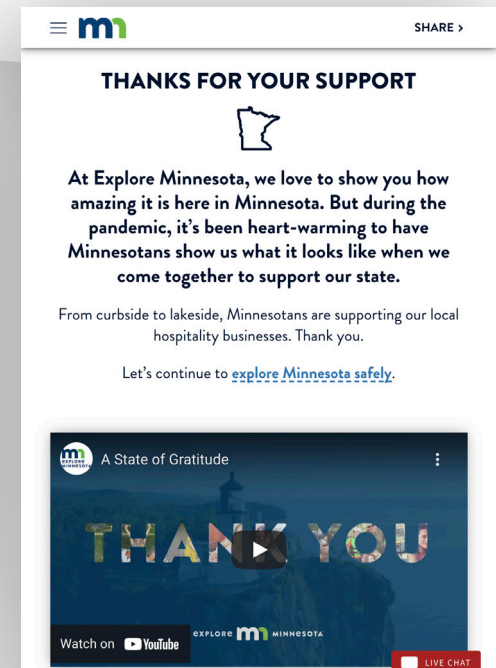
TACTICS

WEATHERING A PANDEMIC

During the travel downturn, the content strategy shifted dramatically. The team needed to respond quickly to changing conditions to keep travelers informed. From a performance standpoint, it was also important to maintain awareness of and affinity toward the destination and its **tourism and hospitality businesses** despite disruptions to consumer behavior — and to position the site well for a **rebound in organic traffic** when market conditions improved. Our three-pronged approach included:

- Providing essential information and inspiring dreaming while travel was effectively shut down.
- Dedicating resources to content development around responsible travel topics to guide travelers during the recovery and reopening periods.
- Using personalization to surface relevant content based on the geographic market. For example, targeting local audiences with information about how they can support their local tourism and hospitality businesses during the pandemic.

During the shutdown, the **COVID-19 information page** launched with key information on closures, changes, restrictions and guidance on mask wearing and other public safety measures. This page was updated regularly, and the page content expanded and evolved over time to highlight **virtual experiences**, from virtual tours of attractions to Minnesota-themed **digital jigsaw puzzles** to keep people engaged with Minnesota from home.



TACTICS

WEATHERING A PANDEMIC (CONTINUED)

As travel began to reopen, we developed and promoted fresh content reflecting **social distancing** and **responsible travel**, such as hiking, camping and other **outdoor experiences**. It was also important to **support tourism, hospitality and culinary businesses** that were feeling the revenue hit more than any other sector. We wanted to use this downtime in travel to build deeper understanding of what Minnesota has in store for both visitors and locals, from artists and makers to unique culinary offerings. We offered experiences they could either enjoy safely in person or from home, like recipes from up-and-coming culinary personalities on the **Culinary Campfire page**.

Personalization was used to serve up relevant content based on the visitor's geolocation. Various forms of personalization were deployed around the site, from announcement banners to fly-ins and customized embedded content. Here is how embedded homepage content was personalized during one point over the past year:

- **IN-STATE:** Audience served content about how to support local Minnesota businesses as part of the State of Gratitude campaign.
- **NEIGHBORING STATE:** Audience served content about road trips.
- **NON-TARGETED STATE:** Audience served content highlighting iconic outdoor experiences with "imagine the adventures that await" messaging.

PERSONALIZATION:
LOCAL MARKET >



To the rescue for gratitude. Credit: @laura25

KEEP SUPPORTING LOCAL
THIS WINTER SEASON

We're in a state of gratitude after seeing how fellow Minnesotans have come together to support each other. Our local businesses are feeling the love - let's keep it going. This winter, supporting local restaurants, shops, attractions and other businesses in a safe and responsible way will be more important than ever. See local love in action and check out ways to support Minnesota businesses in person or from home.

SHOW LOCAL LOVE



Northshore Grains in Ely serves up coffee, wine and craft beer



Winter brews and hotels @theWagoner



North Shore Scenic Drive is one of the prettiest routes in America

IMAGINE THE ADVENTURES
THAT AWAIT

New sights, new flavors and new adventures are calling. Head to a pristine Minnesota lake to float, fish or paddle. Follow our hiking or biking trails for great views, or beer trails for great brews. Or chart your own course with a road trip to unforgettable family attractions, museums and small-town gems. From cultural immersion to wilderness camping, explore the top adventures for summer and beyond.

GET INSPIRED



Kayakers on Lake Winona by Sugar Leaf Bluff / Visit Winona



Two women enjoy a romantic date together on the expansive patio at Birch's on the Lake / Paul Vincent

PERSONALIZATION:
DOMESTIC/U.S. >

EXECUTION

DELIVERING THE PRODUCT

INITIAL DEVELOPMENT COST
\$501,000

THIS BUDGET INCLUDED:

- Website content plan
- Website design and build
- Partner extranet build
- Migration of partner data to the new extranet
- Platform selection and setup of all third-party integrations
- Planning and setup of a totally revamped partner advertising program
- Third-party user testing

INITIAL DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE
12.5 MONTHS

INCLUDED IN LAUNCH:

- 467 pages of editorial content totally refreshed and migrated into the new content architecture
- 124 new topical, geographic or international landing pages, written and curated from scratch
- 7 languages serviced (in addition to English)
- 9 integrated third-party web services including a user-generated content feed, mapping, brochure inventory management and fulfillment, personalization and live chat
- 3 new partner advertising products promoting Minnesota's travel and hospitality businesses

RESULTS

SITE PERFORMANCE SHINES

The COVID-19 outbreak began impacting travel within a month of the site's launch. While site engagement showed significant improvement over the old site, because of the pandemic's impact on travel activity, we were never quite sure until more recently how impactful the new site's deep content efforts would be. Comparing the most recent five-month period against the same five months of 2019 gives the best possible window into how the new site is performing against the old site outside of a crisis period.

While overall visits were down 9% due to lingering effects from the pandemic and lower paid traffic investment, **organic visits rose 15%**. Notably, **all major engagement metrics were strong**, with time on site seeing the most growth with a gain of 26%.

JAN-MAY 2021 (COMPARED TO JAN-MAY 2019):

^ **15%**

**ORGANIC
VISITS**

^ **8%**

PAGEVIEWS

^ **18%**

**PAGES/
SESSION**

^ **26%**

**TIME
ON SITE**

✓ **18%**

**BOUNCE
RATE**

Note: While the January-May 2021 time frame represents the most recent "normal" data we have, it is important to acknowledge that COVID-19 restrictions weren't even fully lifted and travel demand wasn't solidly back on its feet until June. The first few months of 2021 still reflected significant COVID-related impacts.

RESULTS

TIMELY CONTENT DRIVES TRAFFIC & ENGAGEMENT

The content created or updated specifically to address the pandemic provided a major boost to site traffic, **driving more than half a million visits**. Many of these content pieces also generated strong engagement impacts as well, helping to increase total pageviews and average time on site.

NEWLY CREATED OR UPDATED COVID-RELATED CONTENT GENERATED AT LEAST **543,427 TOTAL PAGEVIEWS**.

KEY PAGES INCLUDED:

COVID-19
Information page:

325K
PAGEVIEWS

Road Trips & Scenic
Byways landing page:

141K
PAGEVIEWS

Explore Minnesota at a
Safe Distance article:

28K
PAGEVIEWS

Minnesota Digital
Puzzles landing page:

22K
PAGEVIEWS

Individual
puzzle pages (6):

16K
PAGEVIEWS

State of Gratitude
landing page:

12K
PAGEVIEWS

Explore Minnesota's team was able to rapidly respond and deploy content experiences to respond to the changes in visitor interests and needs in relation to the pandemic, and that's **exactly what we set out to make possible**.

RESULTS

POSITIVE REVIEWS

QUOTES FROM USER TESTING ▾

“ This really expanded my thoughts about Minnesota, it makes me want to visit it. I hadn't really considered Minnesota as a travel destination, but I will now.”

“ The video on the home page is inspiring. It is beautiful and makes me want to go do the things featured here.”

“ The pictures are the most eye-catching part of the website. They're inviting and beautiful. The images make you feel like you're there.”

“ Nicely designed, intuitive. Easy to read and interactive.”
Described as “well-organized” and providing a “comprehensive experience.”

EXPLOREMINNESOTA.COM [↗](#)

“OUR NEW WEBSITE IS
AS BEAUTIFUL AND RICH
WITH INSPIRATION AS
MINNESOTA ITSELF.”

-Explore Minnesota Tourism

EXPLORE **m** MINNESOTASM