

market development leisure group & international market mid-year update

Jan. 29, 2026



market development team

- Jen Schak, Market Development Manager
- Brenda Maas, Market Development Representative
- Beth Helle, Deputy Director

agenda

- leisure group marketing
- international marketing



leisure group marketing

Brenda Maas, Market Development Representative

marketing & communications





★ goals & strategy

- Maintain visibility and awareness of Minnesota as a leisure group travel destination
- Increase engagement with professional group planners

Inspire professional leisure group planners to include Minnesota in their products by increasing awareness through group memberships, proactive communications, and paid marketing tactics focused on Minnesota's unique natural assets, events, unique group experiences and group-friendly attractions.



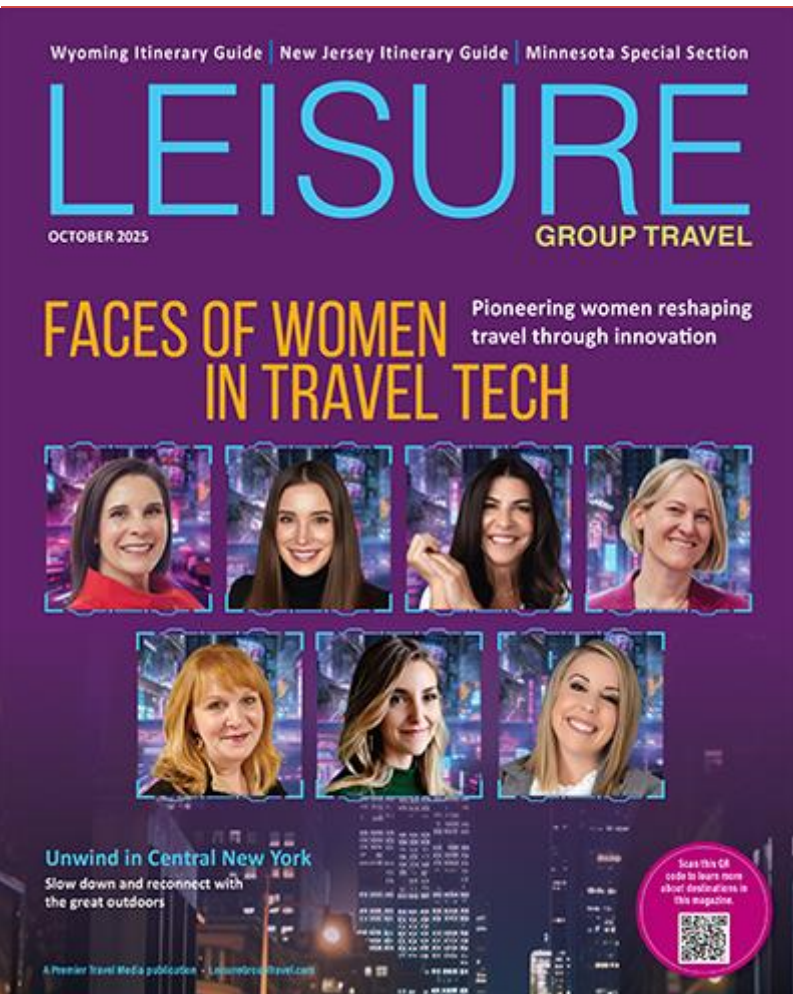
★ objectives & audience

Objectives:

1. Engage professional planners and influence them to consider Minnesota.
2. Make it easy for them to plan their group travel.
3. Support Minnesota destinations and attractions to attract more group business.
4. Provide group leads to the industry.

Audience:

- USA
- Professional planners (B2B)
- Recreational planners (B2C)
- + Domestic marketing team



tactics; look back

- Paid memberships
 - + National Tour Association (NTA)
 - + American Bus Association (ABA)
 - + U.S. Travel Association
 - > Group Travel Network Member
- Advertising
 - + Leisure Group Travel Magazine
 - > October 2025 issue; Minnesota special section
 - > [Article](#) focused on the Minnesota Music Experience
 - > Co-op opportunity

Milestones in the North

Minnesota celebrates history and heritage

Minnesota is proud to be among the many states that are celebrating milestone anniversaries in 2025.

Voyageurs National Park—the state's crown jewel of outdoor adventure—turns 50 in 2025. As one of the few water-based national parks in the U.S. and an official International Dark Sky Park, Voyageurs offers groups an immersive connection to nature, history, and the stars. For groups planning a summer trip, a visit to the brand-new Crane Lake Visitor Center is a great way to celebrate the anniversary. Officially opened in June, the center offers a new gathering point to learn about the Ojibwe culture, the importance of natural darkness, and our personal connection to water and nature. The largest lake in Voyageurs, Rainy Lake also provides an exceptional opportunity to explore the Northwoods in full summer bloom and witness the wonders of the night sky. Enjoy scenic views, boat access, and community festivities.

Minnesota commemorates a major cultural milestone in 2025: 200 years since Norwegian immigrants began settling in the region. Known as 200 Crossings and Connections, this anniversary will highlight the enduring impact of Norwegian heritage across the Midwest. With special events, music, cuisine, and storytelling taking place in Minnesota and surrounding states, this celebration is ideal for heritage and cultural tour groups. Whether it's exploring folk art, sampling lefse, or tracing ancestral roots, visitors will feel connected to the journeys that helped shape this part of the country. For a calendar of events, visit crossings.norwegianamerican.com.

These anniversaries offer a fresh and authentic way to explore Minnesota—where history is honored, culture is celebrated, and the scenery is unforgettable.

For more Minnesota inspiration, read "Minnesota Welcomes Groups" and "How to Experience Nordic Culture in Minnesota" on the Explore Minnesota website. For group travel planning assistance, contact Brenda Maas, market development representative at Explore Minnesota, at (651) 757-1886 or brenda.maas@state.mn.us.

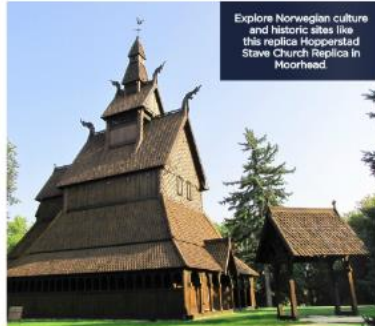
■ Explore Minnesota  | exploreminnesota.com, (651) 556-8465



Voyageurs National Park celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2025.



Park Rangers point out natural wonders to groups visiting Rainy Lake.



Explore Norwegian culture and historic sites like this replica Hopperstad Stave Church replica in Moorhead.

tactics; look back

- Public relations
 - + Article in July/August ABA Destinations Magazine highlighting milestone anniversaries in 2025. ([article](#))
 - + Answered inquiries
- Explore the MN website
 - + Group travel added under "trip planning" ([recreational](#))
 - + Group travel added under "contact us" ([professional](#))
- Industry support
 - + Leisure group market meeting, Nov. 12
 - + Presentation slides and a recording of the meeting are available on the [tourism industry website](#).



leisure group meeting takeaways

- Develop a new group email distribution list – sign up!
 - + Help answer questions from planners
 - + Receive additional leads
 - + What's new
- Continue co-op advertising for partners
- Don't create a committee
- Continue participating in trade memberships
 - + American Bus Association, Circle Wisconsin and National Tourism Association
 - + Drive market
- Develop more group-centric assets
- Don't do a fam but do support partner fams



tactics

- Memberships continue...
- Trade shows
 - + American Bus Association Marketplace
 - > January 10-13; Reno, Nevada
 - > Leads available shortly
 - > Strong interest in 'What's New,' including: Expo2031, MN Hockey Hall of Fame
 - + Circle Wisconsin Midwest Marketplace
 - > April 19-21; La Crosse, WI
 - > Are you attending?
- Advertising
 - + Destination Reunions Magazine
 - + Group Tour Magazine
 - > Are you interested in a co-op?



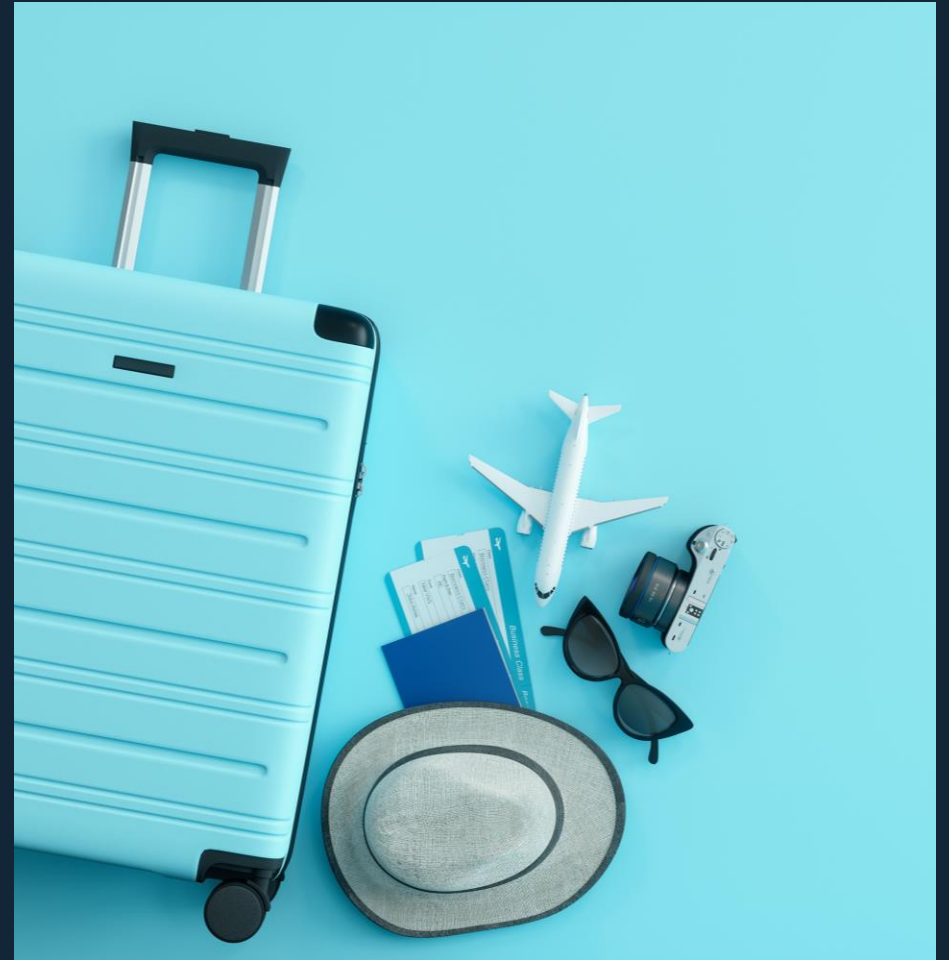
tactics

- Public relations
 - + Group Tour Magazine, Hidden Gems article, Feb.
 - + ABA
- Explore MN website
 - + [Group Travel](#) – Add additional resources and planning tools
- Content creation
 - + Video & photos
 - > Volunteer your group for a photo and video session!
 - > Out-of-state groups are ideal
- Industry support
 - + Explore Minnesota Tourism Conference session
 - > Kevin Hinton, Managing Director, Group Travel, U.S. Travel Ass.
 - > The State of Group & International Travel
 - > Join us! Thur. Feb. 12, 10:10 AM – 10:55 AM

international marketing

Jen Schak, Market Development Manager

marketing & communications



USA actions with global tourism implications

Marketing during significant headwinds, including:

- Trade tariffs
- Comments by political leaders
- International travelers detained in the USA
- Stricter travel restrictions for select countries; bans on select countries
- Increased fees for some national parks for non-residents
- Proposal for visa waiver country travelers to submit social media history
- The USD exchange rate (not favorable to most foreign currencies)
- Long visa wait times for non-visa waiver countries

Implications:

- Resulting international relations
- Decline in consumer sentiment
- Safety concerns

Minnesota – presence of federal agents and resulting local crises



★ fy2026 strategy adjustments

- Split year planning
 - + July – December & January – June
 - + Paused new marketing Jan. 7 – end of Feb.
 - + Pushed back Jan/Feb live dates
- Communications strategy
 - + Proactive approach to media outreach
 - + New, monthly international media & trade newsletter
- Continue global memberships & partnerships
 - + Brand USA, Significant Decrease in Funding
 - + Less investment, conservative approach
- Adjusted market mix
 - + Heavy focus on paid media
- Focused on target markets with adjustments
 - + Prioritized countries least impacted by external factors



why?

- Positive economic impact
 - + New dollars into Minnesota
 - + Average spend per party is almost 2.5 times more than a domestic party
 - + In 2024, international visitors spent approximately \$457 million in MN
- Maintain global competitiveness and positioning
- Support MSP Airport – key international gateway



★ goal & strategy

- Increase consumer and trade awareness of Minnesota as a must-visit travel destination.
- Increase visitation to Minnesota from target markets.

Inspire consumers in targeted international markets to visit Minnesota by leveraging global memberships and cooperative marketing partnerships, as well as proactive, innovative marketing and storytelling that focuses on Minnesota's unique natural assets, art, and culture.

- Regional positioning
- Agency of Record, RMI
- Audience: mature couples; repeat visitors to the USA



primary markets

High yield, high arrivals, mature markets. Historical interest in traveling to Minnesota and a developed tourism industry supporting it: flight routes, tour operators and travel agents, and bookable products.

- United Kingdom
- Italy
- France
- Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg)
- Nordics (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland)
- Germany

Direct Flights:

- Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Frankfurt, Germany
- London, United Kingdom
- Dublin, Ireland
- Paris, France
- Reykjavik, Iceland
- Copenhagen, Denmark
- Rome, Italy



secondary markets

Important arrivals markets into Minnesota. Closely monitoring developments and growth:

- Japan
- India
- Australia
- China
- South Korea

Direct Flights:

- Tokyo, Japan
- Seoul, South Korea



★ look back, tactics

Germany

- Two marketing programs, RMI
 - + Trpster digital travel magazine, partnership included an article, email marketing, and SEO.
 - > [MN, The Ultimate Road Trip](#)
 - + Reiserporter digital travel magazine, partnership
 - > [Road Trip Through Nature](#)
- Great Lakes USA – American Journal, published articles: Earned media from Oct. 2024 fam trip where we hosted Alik and Sascha.
 - + Great Lakes, [Wisconsin and Minnesota for explorers](#).
 - + [Minnesota, Exquisite in the land of 10,000 lakes](#).
- Brand USA travel agent familiarization tour
 - + This was a multistate itinerary for MN, WI, and IL. It focused on the Twin Cities and the Mississippi River, Sept.
 - > Thank you!



★ look back, tactics

United Kingdom

- Two marketing programs, RMI
 - + Active Traveller digital magazine partnership included [several articles](#), email marketing, and digital advertising, October – November.
 - + Wanderlust Magazine partnership included several articles, [podcast](#) and digital advertising, October – November.
 - > [How to plan the perfect trip](#)
 - > [Places to connect with our musical heritage](#)
 - > [Travel tips from famous locals](#)

In the footsteps of MINNESOTA'S MUSIC LEGENDS

Discover the heritage of iconic artists by visiting key locations from the careers of Prince, Bob Dylan and more...

Music is everywhere in Minnesota, with sounds to suit all kinds of travellers. It's indicative of the many different genres and artists – from Bobby Vee to Bob Dylan and Janet Jackson – that have links with the midwestern state. And thanks to daily flights with Delta Air Lines from London Heathrow to Minneapolis/St. Paul airport, it has never been easier to experience it live.

Taking in musicals, museums and murals, here's a five-day itinerary for Minnesota music pilgrims...

Day 1: All hail the Purple One

Beginning in the Twin Cities region, where Minneapolis and St. Paul converge, there is no better place to start than the genius who defied genre, gender and even alphabets for a time.

To best understand Prince – born Prince Rogers Nelson in Minneapolis in 1958 – start at Paisley Park, his 6,040 sqm home-cum-studio in the leafy

suburb of Chanhassen. Tours take in rehearsal rooms, outfits, instruments, motorbikes and more. Next, return to downtown Minneapolis to visit the legendary First Avenue music theatre, an ex-bus depot in which much of Prince's 'Purple Rain' music video and the subsequent film was shot. Lizzo, Hippo Campus and The Replacements are among the breakout Twin Cities acts to make its 500-star wall of fame.

If you're visiting between 16 October and 16 November 2025, try getting tickets for the new *Purple Rain* musical at Minneapolis's ornate State Theatre before it transfers to New York.

Day 2: Devote a day to Dorothy

Drive north of the Twin Cities – ideally in a little red Corvette – for three hours, passing alongside the Mille Lacs Lake, and you'll reach Grand Rapids. This city on the Mississippi is known for its arts scene and craft beers. It is also where Frances Ethel Gumm was raised in the 1920s, before becoming Judy Garland.

Scenery to hum to (this page, clockwise from left) The Prince Atrium at Paisley Park offers insight into the artist's life beyond the stage; The Judy Garland Museum is worth a visit; pause for a moment at the Prince memorial at First Avenue music theatre in Minneapolis

Though best known as an actor, Garland was also a prolific singer, as proven by her rendition of *Over the Rainbow* while portraying Dorothy in 1939's *The Wizard of Oz* film. On Grand Rapids's southern fringes, her childhood home is open daily, as is the newer, neighbouring museum.

Day 3: Search for the Girl from the North Country

Few 20th-century singer-songwriters have had the impact of Bob Dylan, who moved 55km east of Grand Rapids in his mother's hometown of Hibbing when he was six, back when he was still known as Robert Zimmerman. It was here that he discovered music, formed bands and met Echo Helstrom, aka the 'Girl from the North Country'.

Acolytes might pause by Dylan's former home at 2425 7th Ave East (tours are sporadically available; in the past, a sign on the lawn has announced them). Inspect the Hibbing Public Library's modest collection of Dylan ephemera or follow its walking tour to key sites. Finish with one of the Boomtown Brewery's Tangled Up in Blueberry wheat beers or continue on to Duluth and drive some of Dylan's beloved, oh-so-scenic Highway 61 along Lake Superior's flanks.

Day 4: Dive into a day in Duluth

Dylan was born in Duluth, which is, today, a charming, youthful lakefront city. While you can explore Dylan's heritage along the 3km-long Bob Dylan Way, be sure to soak up the modern music scene here, too.

Time your visit with one of the music festivals held on Bayfront Park (including the Duluth Dylan Festival) which offers enviable Lake Superior views as the backdrop. Don't miss the Duluth Homegrown Music Festival



which features some 200 local artists across 30 venues. Or for something more low-key, explore authentic neighbourhoods such as Lincoln Park to listen to live music inside coffee shops and breweries.

Day 5: Murals and bars

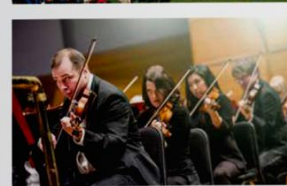
Follow more of Highway 61, now Interstate 35, back to Minneapolis. In Downtown, you can admire *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, a colourful, three-part Dylan mural. Dylan fans could also frequent the divey Palmer's Bar, where he once jammed, while Prince pilgrims might watch a film at

Purple patch (this page, clockwise from top) The *Times They Are A-Changin'* mural in Downtown Minneapolis hails one of the state's most famous songs; Disco Death Records is an icon on Minneapolis's vinyl scene; Duluth's Bayfront Blues Festival takes place in August; the Minnesota Orchestra is Grammy Award-winning; a Minneapolis mural of the Purple One

the Capri theatre, which hosted one of the artist's first-ever solo concerts.

Away from Minnesota's most famous pair, learn about other local legends such as Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, two of the most prolific music producers, responsible for Janet Jackson, Mariah Carey and Usher. The duo boasts more number one hits than any other team in music history.

Finally, don't miss the Music Wall. Lining a former HQ for the instrument-makers Schmidt, this 50-year-old, five-storey mural depicting sheet notes appears in the video for Lizzo's 2018 funk-pop anthem Boys.



Three ways to immerse yourself in the Minnesota music scene

1 Head to iconic music venues

As well as First Avenue, Minneapolis is home to the Grammy Award-winning Minnesota Orchestra's concert hall and the Dakota jazz den, while St. Paul's Turf Club has hosted rock shows for decades.

2 Dive into authentic record stores

Open since 1968, Electric Fetus vinyl shop has a cult following. It headlines a staunch Twin Cities vinyl scene that also includes the coffee-loving Disco Death, punk-obsessed Extreme Noise and Black-owned Urban Lights Music.

3 Time your visit with a music festival

Be it St. Paul's big-name Yacht Club Festival, Duluth's reggae-loving Bayfront or Boats and Bluegrass in Winona, music bashes arrive thick and fast in Minnesota in summer.

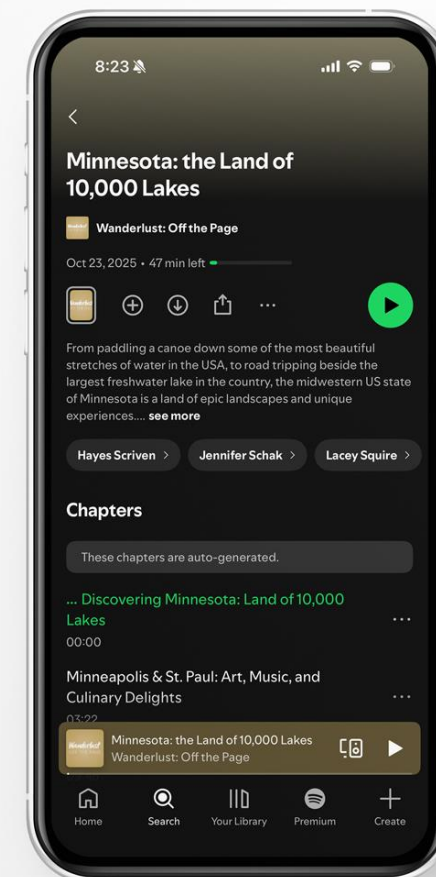
GETTING THERE:

Delta Air Lines flies daily from London Heathrow to Minneapolis/St. Paul airport. Various UK tour operators offer tailor-made trips to Minnesota, including America As You Like It, Bon Voyage and North America Travel Service. For more information on Minnesota go to: exploreminnesota.com/en-GB.

EXPLORE MINNESOTA

For more information, go to: exploreminnesota.com

Wanderlust Magazine advertorial & podcast



Thank you!



★ look back, tactics

Italy

- One marketing program, RMI
 - + The Touring Club Italiano (association/club) campaign included two published articles (digital), and website, social and email marketing.
 - > [Nature experiences](#)
 - > [Influential people](#)



★ look back, tactics

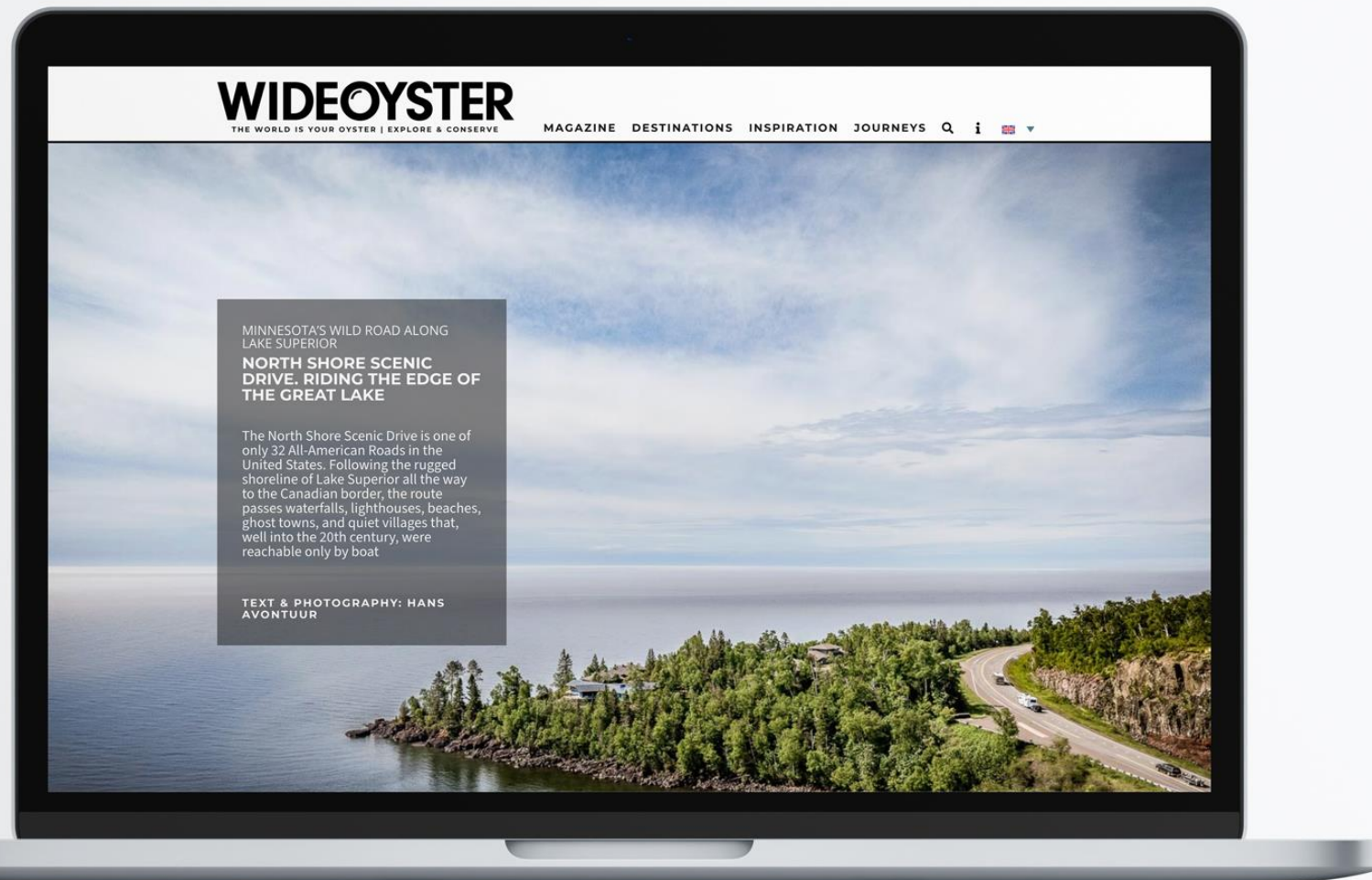
Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands, Luxemburg)

- Four marketing programs, RMI
 - + Financieel Dagblad (financial and business news publication), one-page feature in the business travel & leisure section; Dec.
 - + AmerikaNu (tour operator) campaign, six-page article and ad in GoAmerika Magazine and two new itineraries, Nov.
 - + RonReizen, (travel TV program) on the #1 TV channel in the Netherlands, filmed June, aired our segments (2), on Nov. 23 and 30. [Online article](#).

+ Wideoyster

Online travel magazine for the Dutch market. Content was gathered in June and published in Nov. & Dec.

- [North Shore Scenic Drive](#)
- [Minneapolis – City of Free Spirits](#)
- [Exploring Minnesota's Untamed North](#)





★ look back, tactics

Nordics (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland)

- Four marketing programs, RMI
 - + Etraveli (OTA) partnership included email marketing with a landing page and flight options, Nov. – Dec.
 - + Joyvoy campaign (Swedish travel website) included two digital articles ([Nature](#) and [Twin Cities](#)) and are being promoted digitally on major Swedish lifestyle and news platforms, Oct. – Dec.
 - + Swanson's Travel (Swedish tour operator), social media and email marketing, Dec.
 - + FDM (Danish tour operator), social media and email marketing, Oct. – Dec.



★ look back, tactics

Other:

- Brand USA Travel Week Trade Show, London, Oct. 20 – 23.
 - + We met with 42 tour operators
 - + Leads available for you!
- New, International trade and media newsletter
 - + [September](#), [October](#), [November](#) and [December](#).
 - + Average open rate of 47%; click thru rate of 9%
 - + [Sign up!](#)



tactics

United Kingdom

- Great Lakes [USA brochure](#)
 - + Spring issue of Essentially America
- Two marketing programs, RMI
 - + The Telegraph partnership
 - > Two print articles (Feb. 4)
 - > Two digital articles and digital ads
 - + The Times partnership
 - > One print article
 - > One digital article, paid social and display ads



tactics

Italy

- Four marketing programs, RMI
 - + Si'Viaggia (online travel magazine) campaign
 - > Three articles, social, display ads and email marketing
 - + Dove Travel Magazine campaign
 - > Three-page printed feature, digital article, social media and email marketing
 - + Renewed, Great American West Partnership, Gateway
 - + Alidays travel agent training, Feb. 6



tactics

France

- Five marketing programs, RMI
 - + Terre d'Escales (tour operator) marketing campaign, included one article in Courants d'Air magazine (travel magazine), [a new itinerary](#), SEO and email marketing
 - + Evasions USA (tour operator) B2C marketing campaign
 - + Le Figaro (daily newspaper) article in travel section
 - + Le Parisien (daily newspaper) brand content campaign, includes digital article, social and display ads
 - + Milk Magazine (digital lifestyle magazine), includes a digital article and social media
- Brand USA optimized audience campaign, includes digital ads, landing page, and booking platforms: booking.com and kayak.com, April.



tactics

Germany

- One marketing programs, RMI
 - + USA-Reisen Experte (travel agency) B2C Campaign
 - > Paid social, email marketing, new MN itinerary
- Great Lakes USA
 - + Organized a multi-state media fam for Dirk Rohrbach, Jan. 16 – 19. Thank you!
 - + [Brochure](#)
 - > Spring issue of Mein Amerika
 - > Use for your German-speaking clients!

Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands, Luxemburg)

- One marketing program, RMI
 - + National Geographic Traveller (Dutch print magazine) campaign, includes printed article, digital article, social and email marketing.



tactics

Nordics (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland)

- Two marketing programs, RMI
 - + Icelandair campaign, includes flight options, website, email and social marketing
 - + Amerikaspesialisten (travel agency) training

Other:

- U.S. Travel's IPW, Fort Lauderdale, May 18 – 21. The largest international inbound travel trade show in the USA.
- EMN website update
 - + Adding an international media room
- International trade and media newsletter: **January**, February, March, April, May, & June
 - + Submit newsworthy updates
 - + Sign up on the [industry website](#)



tactics

Mississippi River Country [membership](#)

Japan

- Media and trade mission to Japan; Feb. 16 – 20
- Trade mission to L.A., California; March 24 – 26
 - + Interested in attending?

India

- Represented MN at the Brand USA India trade mission; Jan. 18 – 23
- Social media influencer fam, June
 - + Interested in hosting?



thank you!



questions?

