

By Lisa Schmelz

# Native American Traditions

## Exploring Wisconsin's heritage

©RJ & LINDA MILLER

Ask someone who doesn't live here what they know about Wisconsin, and you'll likely get answers involving Packers, cheese and frigid winters. What you probably won't hear from this outsider is that Wisconsin is home to 11 federally recognized Native American Tribes – more than any other state east of the Mississippi River. Even many lifelong residents are ignorant of this impressive statistical fact.

"We're just two percent of the overall population, so it's not very often that people see us. We are also the most ethnically diverse race in the country," says Sivohan Marks, herself of Ojibwe and Irish descent, and the spokeswoman for the Indian Summer Festival, held annually on Milwaukee's lakefront since 1985.

While gaming opportunities at tribal casinos are typically well-known and help support tribes, tucked out of sight on the state's nearly half million acres of tribal land are experiences that work to preserve Native American culture and tradition. Open to us all, is an invitation to explore Native American ways — past and present — and below are some excellent places to start.

### Indian Summer

**September 7–9, Henry Maier Festival Park on Milwaukee's Lakefront**

In its 27th year, Indian Summer is one of the state's premier events celebrating Native American culture and traditions. This year, some 50,000 people are expected to attend. Here, you'll find five different full-scale tribal villages. Huts, wigwams, long-houses and tee-pees are just a part



©VISIT MILWAUKEE

of the experience. Inside these period dwellings you can learn how Oneida, Ojibwe, and northern woodland tribes of the Menominee and Stockbridge-Munsee prepared food and administered medicine and healing. Native American storytellers share history of long ago and explain how the First Americans of this region adapted to the unique state lands specific to their tribe. A contest pow wow runs all weekend. Friday and Saturday's fireworks show are more than explosions of light in the sky. The shows begin with members of the state's tribes rowing in canoes toward shore. The shows are set to live music and narrated, telling the Native American story as spectators look over the waters of Lake Michigan. [indiansummer.org](http://indiansummer.org)

### Native Games Exhibit at the Milwaukee Public Museum

For many Native Americans, games were a form of entertainment. But they also served important social, ceremonial and political purposes. Games taught skills and values necessary for adult life, such as patience, sportsmanship, dexterity, hand-eye coordination, endurance and critical thinking. Games also strengthened political and social relationships.

Most of the two dozen games displayed here can be found, with some variation, among tribes in the U. S. and Canada. All tribes played games of skill and chance, racing and relay, throwing and catching, and games that imitated hunting and war. The exhibit explores four specific game types: lacrosse and other stick games; games of skill; games of chance; and traditional European games adapted by Native Americans.

The exhibit will be on display through the end of the year. [mpm.edu](http://mpm.edu)

### Aztalan State Park

Considered Wisconsin's most important archaeological site, Aztalan State Park enjoys status as a National Historic Landmark. The park showcases an ancient middle-Mississippian village and ceremonial complex that thrived between 1000-1300 A.D. The people who settled Aztalan built large, flat-topped pyramidal mounds and a stockade around their village. Portions of the stockade and two mounds have been reconstructed in the park.

Archaeologists theorize that the occupants may have had cultural traditions in common with Cahokia, a large Middle-Mississippian settlement near East St. Louis, Ill. The park is mostly open prairie with 38 of its 172 acres in oak woods. Northern pike, catfish and walleye are caught in the Crawfish River, which is also used for boating and canoeing. Open year-round, 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., the park also features a museum. The museum is open Fridays through Sundays from May 19 through September 30.

The park celebrates its birthday and National Archeology Day on Oct. 20. Archeologists will provide guided tours from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and Native American artifacts can also be brought for identification. [dnr.wi.gov/topic/parks/name/aztalan/](http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/parks/name/aztalan/)

### Woodland Indian Art Center, Lac du Flambeau

This northern Wisconsin landscape is a premiere place for those seeking an exciting cultural and hands-on historical experience. The Ojibwe culture is alive and well-respected in this community as evidenced by the Woodland Indian Art Center.

Traditional and contemporary artwork, including beaded work, carvings, birch bark baskets, jewelry, paintings, and more are displayed — and for sale —



Woodland Indian Art Center

year-round. Providing technical support to Native American writers, musicians, dancers and other artists, the center is a link to some of the nation's most respected Native American artists.

The center also offers year-round art classes, in a variety of media, to the general public. Check their website or call for more information. [woodlandindian-artcenter.org](http://woodlandindian-artcenter.org) ew



Lisa M. Schmelz is a freelance writer based in Delavan.

