

"MINNESOTA NICE"

Everyone has concerns about moving to a new place and dealing with an entirely new culture, so rest assured the term "Minnesota Nice" is not just an expression—people here really are nice. In contrast to some other parts of the country, Minnesotans feel the need not to offend and to "make the other person feel comfortable." Consequently, they invariably display a positive demeanor when encountering strangers. You can expect them to jump start your car in the grocery store parking lot, tow your boat when it runs out of gas, lend you their favorite chainsaw, let you go first at a four-way stop. What they won't do, however, is open up to you in any meaningful way. Try to get personal, and "Minnesota Nice" quickly turns into "Minnesota Ice," making it hard to tell what a Minnesotan is really thinking or feeling about you, and making it very, very hard to make friends when you first move here. In fact, that's the main complaint of nearly everyone who's ever moved here, so don't think it's you. It's merely a cultural (and possibly weather-augmented) lack of willingness to engage at any level beyond the superficial. On the other hand, if you have to hold up the checkout line while you dump the entire contents of your purse out on the counter to find your credit card, it's nice to know that the people behind you, no matter how angry, frustrated, irritated or bent out of shape they may be, will stoically fume in silence and steadfastly refuse to show any displeasure with you!

That said, how do you develop relationships with people who are so reserved? Do the same things you'd do anywhere. Get involved. Volunteer in your child's school or sports. Join a church, club, or civic organization. The League of Women Voters (www.lwvnmn.org) talks about important issues at every meeting—and it's a great way to learn about your new state; ditto the library book clubs. Organizations such as Twin Cities Transplants (www.imnot-fromhere.com) sponsor events for singles and couples that range from happy hours to museum tours and New Year's Eve parties. They also maintain message boards to help people with similar interests find each other and arrange to get together. The local Newcomers Clubs (www.newcomersclub.com/mn.html) provide a similar service, sponsoring golf and tennis leagues, bridge, and many social events, though their events are only open to women.

Finally, if you've moved here in winter, just hang on. In summer your neighbors will come out of their houses—and while they may not be willing to talk about much more than the weather, at least you'll be talking!

LOCAL LINGO

Sisu. *Fish house.* *Hotdish.* What are these people talking about? Here's your Minnesota-to-English Translation Guide. For an in-depth understanding of Minnesotan, rent the movie *Fargo* (yes, we do talk like that!) or read Howard Mohr's book, *How to Speak Minnesotan*.

Bars: Cookie squares, such as brownies or lemon bars.

Borrow: Lend, as in, "Will you borrow me your chainsaw?"

Brat (rhymes with trot): Something you eat; officially named bratwurst.

Croppie: How Minnesotans pronounce the name of the panfish the rest of the country calls a "crappie."

Din't: How Minnesotans pronounce the contraction, "didn't."

Duck, duck grey duck: The circle tag game the rest of the world calls "Duck, duck, goose."

Fish house, also ice house: A structure you haul out on the ice so you can be warm and cozy sitting inside a heated shelter while you fish through a hole in the floor. For a sneak peek at what it looks like inside one of these homes-away-from-home look online at the website of Distinct Builders, <http://ice-shack.com>.

Hotdish: Casserole. The standard formula is some kind of meat plus some kind of soup plus some kind of cooked vegetable. In other parts of the country, if you're invited to a potluck, you typically take enough for eight to ten servings. Minnesotans, however, take enough food for the whole crowd. Not only that, but if asked to bring an appetizer, they will, without fail, arrive with two—and probably some bars for dessert (see above), as well.

Ice dam: A ridge of ice that forms at the edge of a roof and prevents melting snow (water runoff) from draining off the roof. The water that backs up behind the dam eventually gets under the shingles and leaks into the home, causing damage to walls, ceilings, insulation, and other areas. The only permanent fix for ice dams is to properly insulate, seal, and ventilate the attic so that the home's roof remains cold.

Lutefisk: Fish soaked in lye. This Scandinavian delicacy is usually served at Christmas with melted butter and mashed potatoes. Don't worry—no one will expect you to actually eat this, but they may demonstrate their own superiority to you by going back for seconds. That said, Minnesotans are nothing if not practical, and this stuff stinks, which is why those who choose to indulge normally eat it at a restaurant, church supper, or down at St. Olaf College, where they serve it in the dining hall prior to the St. Olaf Choirs' annual Christmas concerts.

Norski: Norwegian

Not too bad: Very good.

Ole and Lena: Norwegian characters in Minnesotans' favorite Scandinavian jokes. They are often joined by their Swedish friend Sven, as they are in this joke that goes around year after year: Ole died, so Lena went to the local paper to put a notice in the obituaries. Sven, the editor, after offering his condolences, asked Lena what she would like to say about Ole. Lena replied, "You yust put 'Ole died.'" Sven, somewhat perplexed, said, "That's it? Just 'Ole died'?" Surely, there must be something more you'd like to say. You were married 55 years. If it's money you're concerned about, don't worry, the first five words are free." So Lena thought about it for a few minutes and finally said, "O.K. You put 'Ole died. Boat for sale.'"

Out East: East Coast

Parking Ramp: A multi-story building where you can park your car (as opposed to a surface lot), called a parking garage or parking structure in some other areas of the country.

Pop: Soda or cola

Rambler: One-level house

Sisu: Finnish word for an almost magical combination of stamina, toughness, and perseverance in the face of adversity. While the term is more commonly seen on bumper stickers than heard in everyday speech, every now and then you can expect to hear somebody say that someone has “sisu.” It’s most often a reference to a patient fighting a life-threatening illness, or someone who has just suffered a devastating loss—often it’s as much as you’ll ever hear about someone else’s troubles.

Sack: Bag

So . . . then: The basic construction of a Minnesota sentence, as in: “So, are you through with the chainsaw then?”

SPAM: That iconic canned pork-shoulder-and-ham product with an indefinite shelf life that was invented and is still produced in Austin, Minnesota (www.ci.austin.mn.us) by Hormel Food Corporation (www.spam.com).

Spendy: Pricey; expensive

That’s different: Expression of extreme disapproval. In ancient Viking days, those who were different were killed. Consequently, a Scandinavian’s foremost wish is to fit in, and anything that is “different” is very bad, indeed.

The Range: Iron Range (www.rangecities.com); Northern Minnesota, around Virginia, Chisholm, Ely, Eveleth, Biwabik, Hibbing, etc., where iron ore and taconite have been mined since the late 1800s. This part of the state was made famous by the 2005 movie *North Country*.

Uff-da: Norwegian expletive that passes for an extreme emotional outburst in Minnesota. It signifies strong disgruntlement on the order of something a carpenter might say when he hammers his finger instead of the nail.

Up North: Northern Minnesota, above Grand Rapids.

Warming house: Temporary, seasonal shelters beside outdoor ice rinks where you put on your skates and go to warm up after skating.

Whatever: This is the ultimate expression of Minnesota’s institutional passive-aggressiveness. Do not make the mistake of thinking that the person who has responded to your query by answering “Whatever” has no opinion or preference and is leaving the decision up to you. They are merely keeping you guessing.

Wild rice: Minnesota’s State Grain is not actually rice, but a very high protein annual water-grass seed, “*zizania aquatica*.” Naturally abundant in the cold rivers and lakes of Minnesota and Canada, wild rice is still harvested in the traditional Indian way, from a canoe using beater sticks to knock the seeds into the bottom of the boat. Wild rice soup, in particular, is a favorite of people who live here.

Ya: Phrase of agreement, as in “Ya sure, you betcha.” You’ll hear this phrase ten times a day if you go Up North, but around the metro, you’re more likely to hear people say, “You bet.” The Howard Mohr book, *How to Speak Minnesotan*, says that this phrase is popular because “it is pleasantly agreeable, but doesn’t obligate the speaker to a strong position.”

Yet: still. You will hear Minnesotans say things like, “Is it raining yet?” (meaning, “Is it still raining?”) and it will grate on your nerves, but there is nothing you can do about it.

ADDRESS LOCATOR

There are places where Twin Cities’ streets follow a perfect grid, and places where streets are laid out at crazy angles with no sense to east, west, north, or south. The convolutions are due primarily to the Mississippi River winding through both downtowns, oblivious to the needs of city planners. City boundaries, where streets occasionally change names, add additional confusion. Suburban communities often follow Twin Cities’ street patterns, but not always. For the full picture, you’ll need to accompany this guide with a map. Even better is a hefty street atlas, which offers page-by-page micro-views of every metropolitan block accompanied by an index of all streets, such as Hudson’s Street Atlas of the Greater Twin Cities (www.hudsonmap.com). With one in hand, keep the following things in mind:

MINNEAPOLIS

- Street addresses are uniformly divided in hundreds, block by block. Numbers increase moving outward from the Mississippi River on the north side and from Nicollet Avenue on the south side.
- Downtown streets are laid out diagonally to the compass (the pesky Mississippi!) so try not to let compass directions throw you off. Because of their orientation to the river, numbered streets and those running parallel to them are labeled north or south, dividing at Hennepin Avenue.
- South Minneapolis (south of Grant Street) is straightforward and easy to understand. Numbered streets run east-west, with ascending numbers going southward. Avenues for the most part run north-south, and have numbers east of Nicollet Avenue and proper names west of Nicollet, which means, in South Minneapolis, the higher the numbered street, the farther south it is; the higher the numbered avenue, the farther east it is.
- In the University of Minnesota neighborhood, numbered streets generally run east-west, while numbered avenues run north-south. Streets and avenues here are labeled Southeast.
- In Northeast Minneapolis numbered avenues run east-west, with numbers ascending northward. North-south streets are numbered heading east from the river until 6th Street. East of 6th the streets are named chronologically after U.S. presidents, from Washington to Coolidge.
- In North Minneapolis numbered avenues run east-west, with numbers ascending northward. North-south streets have ascending numbers as you go west from the Mississippi, until 7th Street. West of 7th, streets have proper names.