

Nebraska Geographic

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Late Summer Prime Time to Visit Harlan County Lake

I have never understood those folks who seem to think that Labor Day weekend marks the end of summer. They are likely the same people who don't venture outdoors until Memorial Day weekend in May.

Don't get me wrong. I like it when people put away their fishing tackle, their boats, their tents and campers and other outdoor gear and leave the lakes, campgrounds, and trails all to me. The truth is, that the few weeks of summer remaining after Labor Day are often the most pleasant and mildest of the season in terms of summer weather. Late summer is one of my favorite times of the year to be outdoors, and here is one of my absolute favorite late summer outdoor destinations.

In south central Nebraska, north of our border with Kansas, Harlan County Lake is a recreational gem covering more than 13,000 acres when at full pool. When I go to this lake, I typically work my way from east to west, beginning at Republican City.

Years ago I took a guided boat tour with friends on this lake during the pelican migration. That was fun, but the most interesting part to me was hearing how Republican City was moved when the lake was built in the 1940s and 1950s. Most of it anyway. When the water is low, remnants of the original Republican City sometimes are exposed. The white bass are very cooperative at Harlan County Lake and sometimes I pick up wipers and walleye, too, fishing from the rocks near the northeast corner of the dam. Fishing from a boat? Watch for the birds diving toward the water – that often means the wipers are having a feeding frenzy. You can often pick up a few if you can motor over there in time.

The Bait Box is a full-service bait and tackle store in Republican City that also features a bar and a hot food. Right on the lake, North Shore Marina offers boat slips, campsites, and a great restaurant. The flooding in 2019 hit this business hard, but it is up and running with a full menu. I suggest the Popper Pie pizza loaded with cream cheese, pepperoni, sausage, and jalapeno pepper slices.

If I am toward the west end of the lake at Alma, I stock up on gear at Fisherman's Corner on the north side of town, and then head downtown for something sweet. Dragonfly Desserts is a thriving bakery and coffee shop. I don't see quiche on many menus while traveling around Nebraska, so I was excited to see it on the

menu here the last time I was in Alma. Still, I ordered a cinnamon twist (they are famous in these parts) and a black coffee to go.

One of my all-time favorite Nebraska lodging destinations is located only a few miles to the north and west at the village of Orleans. The Orleans Hotel looks like it right out of 1930 because it is! The new owners are updating the place, but it maintains its elegant charm. Parts of the hotel feature shared bathrooms. When I stayed there this summer, I got one with my own private facilities. The town is pretty quiet until Applefest rolls around. The event that takes place every year in early October marks 40 years in 2024.

There is a lot to see and do down here, and this column will not touch on them all. I hope you will hit the road to explore this part of Nebraska for yourself.

Safe travels – and watch for deer!