



KEWEENAW

PLAN YOUR TRIP TO ROCKLAND & VICTORIA

Author: Nathan (aka Nathan Invincible) on June 27, 2023

The Copper Country mining district stretched from the Porcupine Mountains to the tip of the Keweenaw. Hundreds of mines and dozens of communities sprang up along the mineral-rich hills, most long since lost to time. Not all of them completely faded away though, and right on the Keweenaw's doorstep lay the community of Rockland and its ghost town neighbor, Victoria.

Located about 45-60 minutes from the heart of the Keweenaw, this area is ripe for both natural and historical discovery. We've collected some of our favorite locations so you can plan your next day trip adventure. From waterfalls to ruins and everything in between, there's something for everyone. Read on!

HOW TO GET THERE

Travel in the Copper Country often follows historic corridors once used by railroads long ago. In fact, most of our ORV and snowmobile trails were built along these right-of-ways after the tracks were removed! Whether you take the highway or ORV trail, the destinations are the same.

By road, reaching Rockland is easy. Head west on M-26 from the Keweenaw, passing through Houghton as you continue southwest through Toivola and Twin Lakes. Follow M-26 until you reach its terminus before hopping on US-45 following signs for Rockland. Soon you'll reach your destination: a sleepy town that is your homebase for the day.

If you're taking the ORV trail, the Bill Nicolls trail will get you from Houghton to Mass City. From there, follow the signs the rest of the way. Find a downloadable ORV Trail Map [here](#).

ROCKLAND HISTORICAL SITES

Although it's not a very big community any more, Rockland has its fair share of beautiful old homes and some well kept structures downtown. The Rockland General Store is a must-visit spot to stock up on an impressive selection of snacks and treats (ice cream included!). Be sure to check out the converted bank vault which now hosts a stash of the most fragrant spices imaginable.

Just south of town you'll find the Irish Hollow Cemetery, one of the Keweenaw's finest. Gravestones dot the forest everywhere you look, many with intricate carvings and other details that set them apart from modern headstones by a mile. The area has been saved from being totally consumed by nature and today is exceptionally scenic.

If you catch it when it's open, the Rockland Township Museum offers a wealth of area information. Although not a huge museum, the history here focuses on a part of the Copper Country not highlighted by bigger museums found elsewhere. The volunteers here can point you in the right direction if you're looking for additional spots to explore. The museum is located in the old school just as you roll into town.

Finally, maybe you spotted the sign for the Minesota Mine as you came into town on US-45. Yes, the misspelling is accurate (sorry MN friends!). All of the bluffs and hills south of Rockland were full of copper and were once home to some of the most profitable mines in the region. The Minesota Mine is particularly famous for a 527-ton mass of copper that took miners more than 15 MONTHS to chisel free and bring to the surface in bite-sized chunks. For scale, the giant float copper found at the A.E. Seaman Mineral Museum in Houghton is only 19 tons. Today, a variety of old ruins and an impoundment from the Minesota and other ventures can be found along US-45.

OLD VICTORIA HISTORY

Take Elm Street/Victoria Road west out of Rockland and soon you'll find yourself on a windy journey that leads you straight to the 8. Although a few people still keep up homes and camps here, an entire community has faded into history over the past 150+ years. There's a lot of cool stuff down here to check out!

At the top of the hill you'll find the Old Victoria townsite, a wonderfully maintained collection of dwellings in their original location. One of the Keweenaw National Historical Park's Heritage Sites, Old Victoria is a must-see for any history buff. The cabins are well-maintained and chock full of stories and period items. On visitation days you can tour the interiors to see how past generations lived during the mining era. Visitors traveling counter-clockwise around the circle will enter the Keweenaw via M-26. Consider stopping at Twin Lakes State Park or Wyandotte Falls on your way! Regardless of which way you come, both highways will funnel into the charming small town of Houghton, Michigan.

Surrounding Old Victoria are dozens of ruins both big and small. Many are located on private property so it's best to stick with established routes to see what you can find. Lucky for you, the North Country National Scenic Trail passes not only next to, but right through some of these ruins! The NCT likes to joke that along its 4,800 mile length, this is the only place where the trail passes through a building... albeit one with no roof. The trail can be rugged in spots so wear proper footwear if you plan to head out.

No visit to Victoria would be complete without a trip down the hill to Victoria Dam. Still in use for hydropower, the dam was originally built to provide compressed air for the mines in this area. You got that right: rather than burning coal like most other mines in that era, the underground caverns of the Taylor Air Compressor provided all the power the mine needed for its operations! The current dam is a newer addition but is still an impressive sight to behold. When the river is running high after spring snowmelt or heavy rains, the auxiliary spillway turns into a massive waterfall as it thunders into the gorge below. No other waterfall in the Copper Country compares!

NATURAL SITES

Although best known for its history of copper mining, the Rockland and Victoria area is home to a wide variety of natural treasures to explore. Because this area isn't as heavily traveled as other parts of the Keweenaw, you'll feel like you have the place to yourself. That's why it's my go-to adventure area! Remember to Leave No Trace when you visit these places to keep them pristine for others.

The North Country Trail in this area is prime for exploration. The stretch of trail from Old Victoria to Norwich Road about 13 miles to the west is among the best hiking not only in the U.P., but all of Michigan. You can find bluffs with epic views seemingly every ten minutes, several waterfalls, and some of the most beautiful woods around.

If you're looking for something shorter, an easy out-and-back starts along the road heading to Victoria Dam (park here right after the trail crosses the road). Head up the hill for half a mile and soon you'll find a huge viewpoint overlooking the Victoria Reservoir and beyond. Keep following the NCT's blue blazes for another mile and you'll find a short white-blazed spur to Cushman Falls, a little waterfall that is perfect for those seeking a quiet place off most people's radar.

For the slightly less adventurous, the Military Hills Roadside Park on US-45 is a neat spot that's easy to fly by. Located at the bottom of the steep valley as the road passes over the Ontonagon River, this park is a great area to stop for lunch or to watch the river flow by. You likely won't find any cell service down here which is a plus if you're trying to avoid your work emails.

Last but not least, a float down the Ontonagon River from the Military Hills crossing is a leisurely stretch of river that is highly scenic. It's about a 24-mile paddle back to the Ontonagon marina on mostly easy water. Two sets of rapids, Irish Rapids and Grand Rapids, barely nudge into Class II territory and are easy to navigate for those with a little experience. You'll obviously need a way to get back to your vehicle and the right paddle craft for the job, but if you're keen on a longer day on the water with almost no man made intrusions along your journey, this is an excellent option!

Author

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Nathan (aka Nathan Invincible) is an adventuring conservationist that photographs everything. He's spent the last 17+ years exploring the Western U.P., crisscrossing the region "working" for the likes of the Copper Harbor Trails Club, Keweenaw Land Trust, and other organizations to improve recreational opportunities for everyone. Whether by bike, kayak, snowshoe, or hike, he's always on an adventure to somewhere new.

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