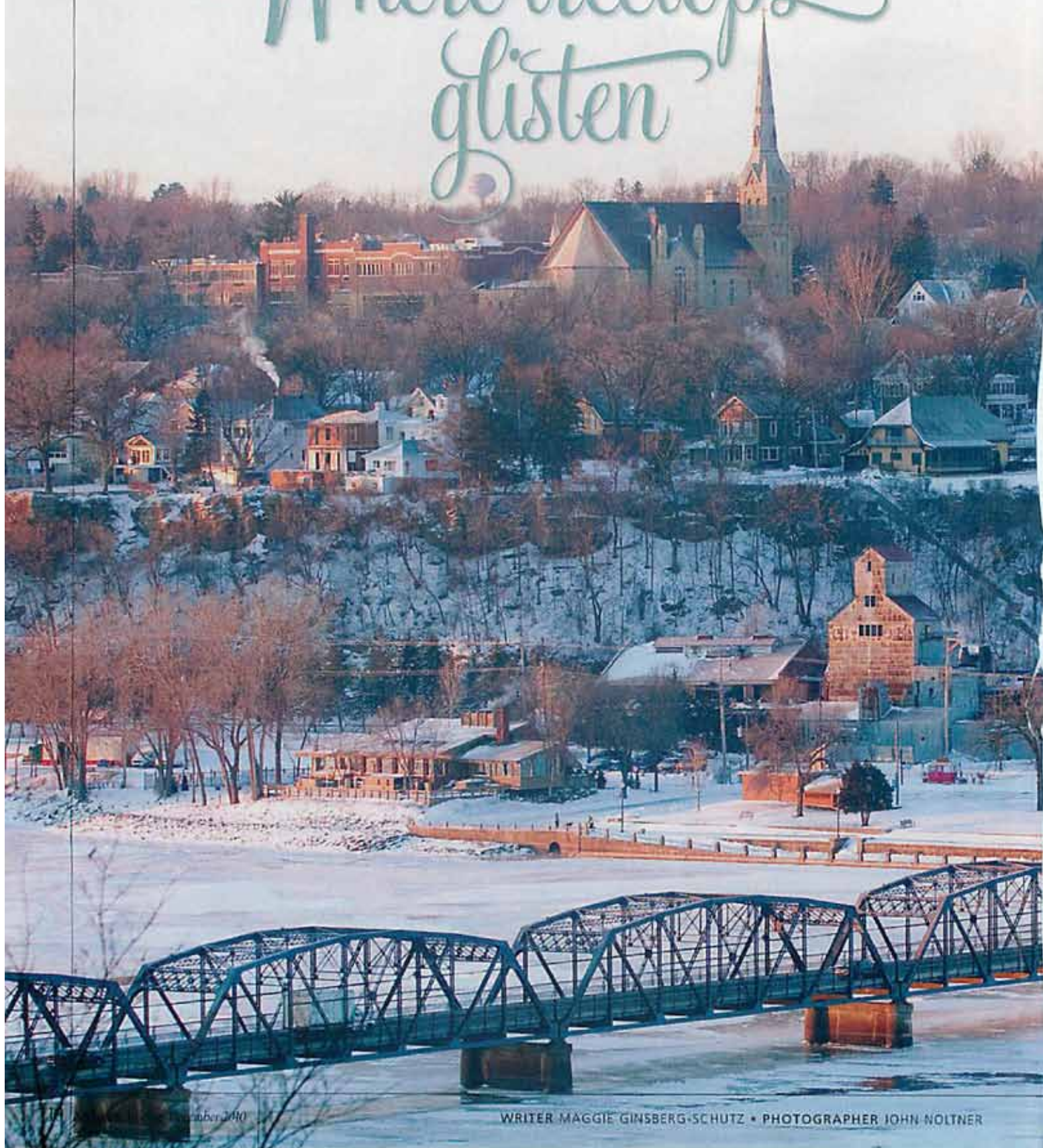
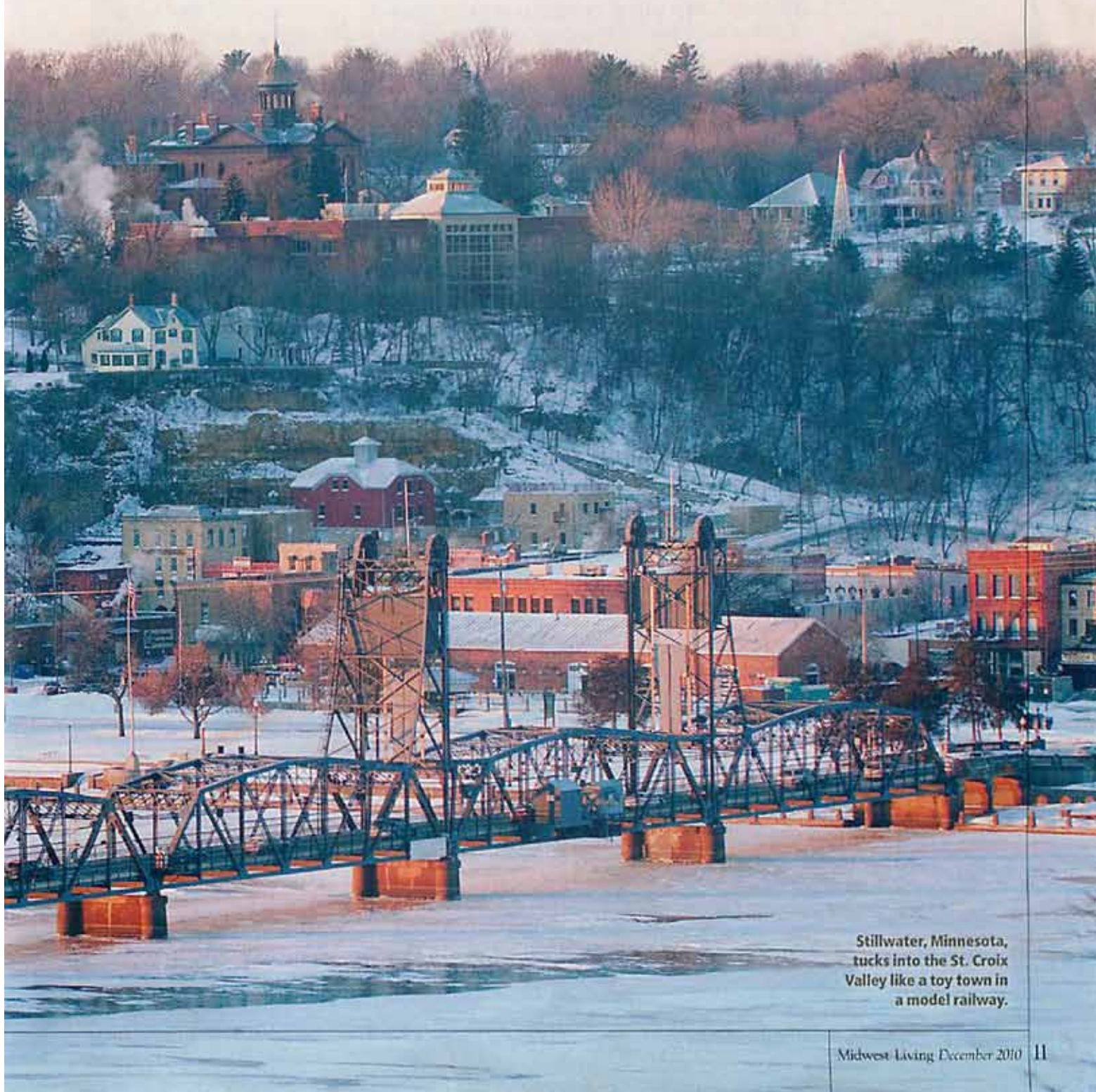


Where treetops glisten



Everyone has secrets at Christmas, even the St. Croix River.
Spend a winter weekend along its snowy banks,
and you'll find a magical mix of holiday bustle and
time-honored traditions.



Stillwater, Minnesota,
tucks into the St. Croix
Valley like a toy town in
a model railway.

S

he Stillwater Lift Bridge crouches in wait across the St. Croix River, a steely sentry to the parade of cars racing between Minnesota and Wisconsin. I used to imagine this bridge as a living beast when I was a kid, holding my breath as we rode through its belly on the way to Grandma's house every Christmas. Though I've since driven it more times than I can count, today's crossing feels more like my childhood trips, full of excitement and anticipation. Fresh snow and the electric hum of early December are in the air, and I'm about to finally explore the St. Croix River.

I'm not the only one with this idea. Stillwater, Minnesota, and Hudson, Wisconsin, the busiest towns on the St. Croix, have a sugarplum magic to them in December. Visitors flock here from the Twin Cities (just a half-hour southwest) to peek in shop windows, curl up in cozy bookstores and linger over holiday feasts. People eager to slow down even more take a wintry drive along the silent St. Croix, a 165-mile-long waterway traveled by fur traders and Scandinavian settlers, Chippewa and Sioux. Birch, pine and oak trees stand in snowy fields sprinkled with few houses. Tiny river towns observe humble traditions. On this rare weekend to myself, the St. Croix's blend of festive energy and frozen serenity fits my mood like a warm winter glove.

I start in Hudson and Stillwater, where couples bundled in hats and scarves duck into shops stocked with creature comforts. A half-hour slips away easily in Seasons on St. Croix, a Hudson art gallery that showcases 160 artists, most of whom are regional. In Stillwater, I finger rich, creamy stationery at Mara-Mi and, at the Chef's Gallery, buy a bright red whisk perfect for whipping peppermint cream into a frenzy. In need of a warm-up, I wander into Valley Bookseller and collapse into an armchair in the sunny back section, where a Santa fumbles with his jacket before heading outside. Later, he waves at me and winks from a toy-filled window display down the street.

Snowflake lights twinkle on the lampposts when I retreat to Stillwater's Rivertown Inn,

Parts of the St. Croix are a designated National Scenic Riverway, known for forested bluffs.

A crisp pregnant moon hangs above the log church, where families hold candles and exhale cotton ball puffs with every hymn.

where I've heard that chef Ray Wyatt serves food and wines as opulent as the Victorian mansion in which they're served. But first I slip into a hot bath, close my eyes and listen to the hum of dinner guests congregating in the parlor below. My third-floor room is named for Jane Austen, and I imagine myself like Elizabeth Bennet, readying for a dance with Mr. Darcy.

I'm not sure Elizabeth ever ate so well, though. Every dish served at the elegant buffet dinner is rich, inventive and perfectly paired with distinctive wines. Chef Wyatt and his staff float in and out with dishes and stories. Sedated by foie gras, Christmas pudding and sweet sherry, I say my good-nights and head

back to my room. On the way, I secretly kick off my shoes and slide sock-footed through the inn, running my palms over the hand-painted wallpaper—pinching myself.

I wake ready for a drive along the St. Croix Scenic Byway, which follows the Minnesota side of the river. North of Stillwater, open fields and pine forests cradle tiny towns of buttoned-up houses. Driving past Marine on St. Croix's old-fashioned general store and white-steepled church gives me the dizzying sensation of falling into a dime-store puzzle.

Across the river in little St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin, two bald eagles cut a regal swath through the ice-blue sky. In Luhrs/Bjornson Artworks, a potter feeds his kiln and tells me how he and his painter wife live upstairs in this restored riverside granary, part home, part shop. Farther down Washington Street, a new

Many families make a trip to St. Croix Valley Trees a holiday tradition. The Somerset, Wisconsin, farm also sells wreaths and ornaments.





The Gammelgården Museum hosts its candlelit, predawn Lucia Dagen service (December 12 this year) in Minnesota's oldest Lutheran sanctuary, an 1856 log church.

restaurant, Grecco's, recently expanded, and the additions (including a wine bar) are all anyone is talking about. My meal packs as many treats as a Christmas stocking: Cotswold cheese and blackberries on a bed of mixed greens, maple-honey apples with pork tenderloin. I join locals for a Festival Theatre performance of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. When the show ends, I stand in ovation with the rest of the crowd, as if those were my kids up on stage.

On my final morning along the river, my alarm goes off at 5 a.m. for the Lucia Dagen service at Gammelgården Museum in Scandia, Minnesota. I am not Swedish, and I'm certainly not the kind of person who gets up before dawn on vacation for a sub-zero drive to

church, but something about the service captures my imagination. The name *Lucia* comes from *lux*, Latin for *light*. I think about how dark and frigid these mornings must have felt when starting the day meant lighting candles and stoking the fire. (The *lefse*, *lucia katta* buns, pickled herring and spritz cookies served afterward aren't far from my mind, either.)

A crisp pregnant moon hangs above the winding path to the log church that houses the service. Inside, families hold candles and huddle on wood pews, exhaling cotton ball puffs with every hymn. The entire service is in Swedish. I don't understand a word of it save one: *tack*, or *thank-you*. And it is enough. ■

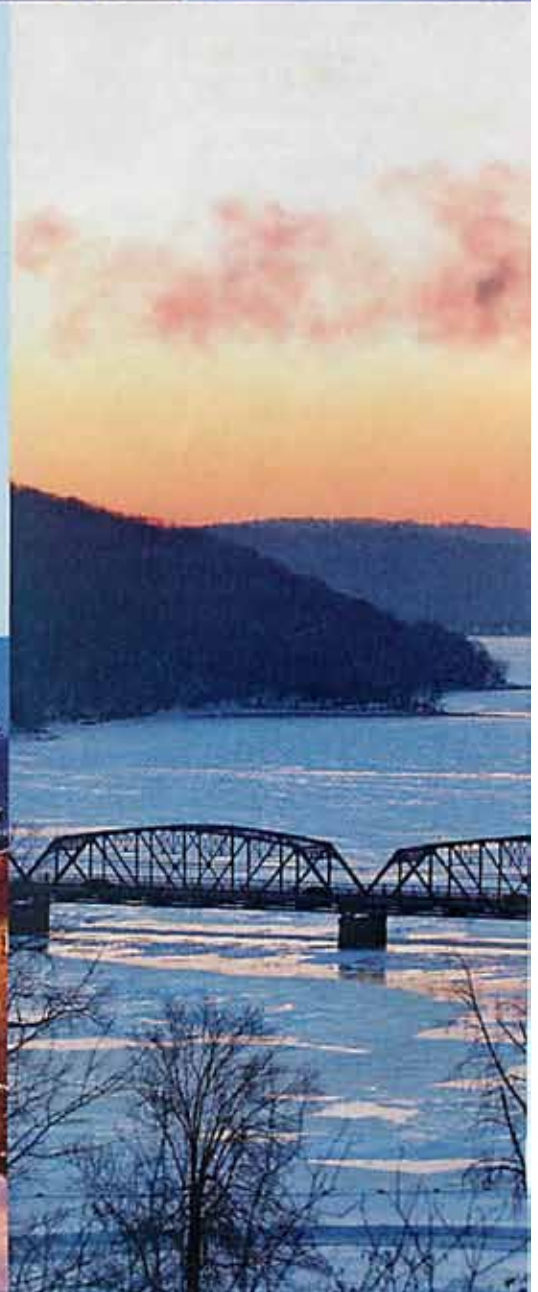
To plan your trip, turn to page 116.

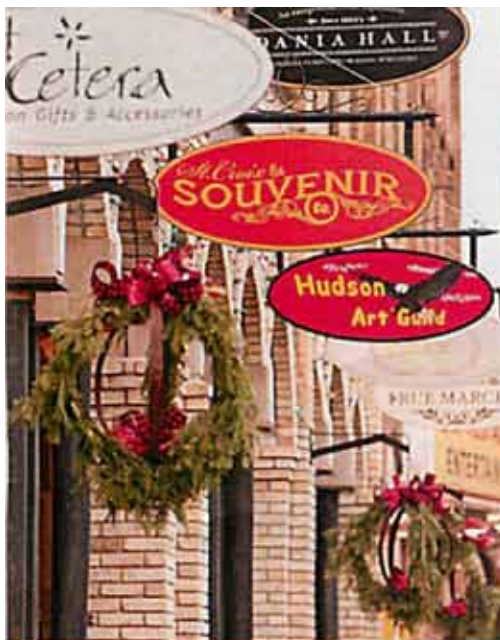




WHERE TREETOPS GLISTEN

(Above) The elegant Rivertown Inn in Stillwater has nine rooms, all named for authors. *(Left)* Grecco's in tiny St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin, changes its menu regularly, offering creative dishes such as coconut-crusted scallop with tomato pico and butternut squash. *(Right)* Thawed spots on the St. Croix River capture the sky's rosy glow. *(Below)* Stillwater, the St. Croix's busiest town (population: 18,000), looks magical even at night.





WHERE TREETOPS GLISTEN

(Top, from left) Hudson, Wisconsin (population: 12,000), has more than a dozen shops. A Swedish-garbed Santa sometimes greets visitors at the Gammelgården Museum in Scandia, Minnesota. La Rue Marché is a stylish Hudson boutique.

(Middle, from left) Glass trees twinkle at Seasons on St. Croix Gallery in Hudson. Finches live in Valley Bookseller in Stillwater, Minnesota.

(Bottom, from left) Chef Ray Wyatt and his staff plate soup for a Rivertown Inn wine dinner. The Christ Lutheran Church in Marine on St. Croix, Minnesota, looks as if it inspired a postcard. Stillwater's Käthe Wohlfahrt shop sells German Christmas decorations.

