

Travel:

MICHIGAN'S NORTHERN LOWER PENINSULA... THREE VERY UNIQUE PLACES TO STAY

by Don Woodland

Sunset at Pere Marquette Park. In silhouette is Muskegon South Pier Lighthouse.

Michigan may not be the first place some Easterners think of as a vacation destination. But that's changing fast. The word is getting around -- especially to those who love outdoor activity -- that Michigan is one of the greatest vacation destinations, and values, in the US.

Imagine a place with some of the friendliest people in America, a place with hundreds of sparkling clean lakes, and thousands of streams and rivers—a place with the longest freshwater coastline in America. There's so much to do, you could hang any of these signs on your door when you head out there: Gone Fishin', Gone Swimming', Gone Kayakin', Gone Boatin', Gone

Snorkelin'. And that's just when it's warm.

Add to that, Michigan has some of the best dining and shopping you can find--at prices that are unpretentious.

And don't forget that Michigan has over 800 golf courses! Plus, you'll seldom find a course in Northern Michigan that charges more than \$40 for 18 holes, including cart. Golf Digest selected Michigan as the 12th best golf destination in the world.

In addition, there's still a lot of family-owned resorts and lodges in Michigan. That means you can get accommodation offerings that range from stylized, to decidedly unique. And because the question of "where to stay" is the main one that often

holds folks back from going to a new vacation destination, we'd like to point out three accommodations that really stand out, and some of the related activities, sights and restaurants nearby each one:

Crystal Mountain Resort

This is a premiere accommodation in Michigan. In fact, a major ski magazine called it the #1 resort in the Midwest. But make no mistake; although it started as a ski resort, Crystal Mountain is a complete year-round resort, which is now in its 50th year--still family-owned, and very stylish.

Located in Thompsonville, Michigan, the site of the resort was originally picked out by ski-enthusiast Ward Creech--a range of hills located near the village of Thompsonville - the Buck Hills Range. The original winter resort opened in 1956 with two rope tows and a small warming hut. Over the years, millions have been invested in improvements. In 1985 a master plan was created to make it one of the Midwest's finest destination resorts.

In 1994, Crystal Mountain opened a ten-acre golf practice center--the backdrop to The Crystal Mountain Golf School. In 1998, the Mountain Ridge golf course was completed, which, along with the original

Betsie Valley course, gave Crystal Mountain its total of 36 holes of championship golf.

The resort now has a water park and playground, 45 downhill slopes, 24 miles of cross-country ski trails, lodging for over 1,200 people, indoor and outdoor pools, a fitness center, a tennis court, mountain biking trails, and two year-round restaurants plus several seasonal dining options. Crystal Mountain is also home to the Michigan Legacy Art Park--a collection of sculptures representative of Michigan's history and culture, set along a woodland trail. All of this, yet the place is relaxing. Because it is spread out, it doesn't feel busy--even when it's booked full.

Dean Sandell is a Golf Starter and an Alpine Ski Instructor at the resort, and has been there for 7 years. He proudly told us that the resort "is a well-organized operation with an outstanding Golf School and the best Alpine Ski School in the Midwest." And yes, Crystal Mountain continues to be a family-run operation. (www.crystallmountain.com)

Those wishing to stay at Crystal Mountain will want to fly into Traverse City, Michigan and rent a car. The resort
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One of the open-air dune buggies at Mac Wood's Scenic Dune Rides, at Silver Lake.



Renting a vehicle and riding the dunes is great fun at Silver Lake Sand Dunes.

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makes a great hub for day adventures to other area sights and attractions:

For example, Frankfort is a great little lake-front town for a half-day's shopping and dining. Try either of the two restaurants at the **Betsie Bay Inn**--especially their wonderful all-you-can-eat \$13.95 Sunday Brunch. (www.betsiebayinn.com)

Also, folks rave about the **Coho Café**, and their "seafoodcentric" menu. Everything here is as fresh and locally grown as possible. And **Fusion Restaurant** was named "Best New Restaurant" and "Best Chinese Restaurant," according to Northern Express People's Choice.

Also while in Frankfort, you can drive out to the beach at **Point Betsie Light-house**, one of the most photographed light-houses in the US, and a favorite place to watch sunsets.



The amazing fieldstone fireplace in Cobblestone Restaurant, at Nettie Bay Lodge

1935. It's one of those wonderful independent, family-run restaurants with loads of character—one that shouldn't be missed. If there's something that can be made from black cherries (something Michigan is pretty famous for), they offer it at the **Cherry Hut**. Our favorite was the cherry chicken salad croissant. Be sure to save room for dessert. Try the **Cherry DuBonnet** ice cream or the **Cherry Hut Cherry Pie**. (www.cherryhutproducts.com)

Also in Beulah, is the **Myers' Granary Antique Market**, an open-air antique market in an historic grain mill and warehouse with 10,000 sq. feet of antiques. There's other shopping in Beulah as well.

South of Beulah, in Benzonia, is another wonderful find--the **Roadhouse Mexican Bar and Grill**. The al fresco dining there is great fun. Everything on the menu is good, and the salsa is made fresh daily. (www.roadhousesalsa.com)

When in Benzonia, be sure to take in **Gwen Frostic Prints**. (www.gwenfrostick.com) The business' namesake is best re-

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The **Cherry Hut Restaurant** has been a local fixture in nearby Beulah since



Lodge and one of the lifts at the beautiful Crystal Mountain Resort, in Thompsonville



At Thunder Bay Resort's Elk herd ride, you're drawn by huge Percheron Draft horses.

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membered for her hand-carved wood-block prints of small nature scenes. The store overlooks its print shop, and you can look right in. The business is now managed by Gwen's nephew. (For more Benzonia information, go to www.visitbenzie.com.)

Manistee is a charming river- and lake-front town that offers another great half-day shopping and dining experience. In fact, historic Manistee was chosen as one of 200 most-charming towns in the

U.S. The entire historic business district is in the Nat. Reg. of Historic Places. (www.visitmanistee.com)

Further south is Ludington. Don't miss the sunset from **Pere Marquette Park** on Lake Michigan. Ludington Beach was designated Michigan's #1 beach. And AAA rated Ludington as the 3rd-most-popular drive-to destination in Michigan.

Biking is extremely popular in Michigan. And the area from Ludington to Silver Lake along Lake Michigan provides a great biking opportunity. This can be ar-



Finding no beach along the Little Manistee River, hungry kayakers lunch on a sand bar.

ranged through **Trailhead Bike & Kayak** in downtown Ludington. As owner Jeff Betz explains, "Because of the mixture of rolling country inland, and the flatter terrain along the lakefront, Michigan's biking opportunities are better than most places." (www.trailheadbikeshop.com)

Since Ludington is also Lake Michigan's #1 fishing port, visitors should take advantage of the more than 65 licensed charter boats available for hire.

Newcomers always find the enormous **sand dunes** in this area a big surprise. They were formed during periods when the Lake Michigan water level was lower; the wind would blow the exposed sandy lake bottom onto the western shore of the Lake. Today

ing. In addition, the Mac Wood's Dune Rides aren't in enclosed jeeps, but instead are open-air, 24-passenger homemade vehicles, which use airplane-style tires. The experience is a heavenly one and is over way too soon. (www.macwoodsdunerides.com)

For those who enjoy hiking, you can hike through woods and dunes at **Ludington State Park**, out to Big Point Sable Lighthouse and back. The park is adjacent to the **Nordhouse Dunes Wilderness Area** and the climb to the top of the lighthouse offers a panoramic view of the dunes and Lake Michigan. Nordhouse Dunes is the only federally designated wilderness area in Michigan's Lower Peninsula. some



Getting your rented Jeep muddy is the whole idea, when you jeep safari with Sandy Korner's Adventure Tours, in Mears.

the dunes are about 140 feet high.

The Silver Lake Sand Dunes area is the only place where a section of dunes has been set aside for ORV riders who can rent a vehicle to ride the dunes from **Silver Lake Buggy Rentals**. (www.silverlakesanddunes.com)

If you don't want to drive yourself, the 7-mile, 40-minute dune ride at **Mac Wood's Dune Rides** is quite different from what you may have experienced in our own Provincetown dunes. The Michigan dunes are hillier and the dune trails are very smooth. They are graded every morn-

3450 acres and 7300 feet of Lake shoreline. The dunes parallel the shore. (www.ludington.org)

Further south, in Mears, Michigan, is **Sandy Korner's Adventure Tours**, where if there's been some rain just before your vacation, you'll want to try a little automotive mud-wrestling on some back roads. But you won't get lost, or in trouble. These are *guided* jeep safaris, and you'll be talked through anything difficult over the CB in your Jeep Rubicon, which will look brand-new when you start out. Of course, after

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Photographers take part in a wildlife photography seminar at the incredibly serene Nettie Bay Lodge.

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you've spent a couple of hours negotiating seasonal roads filled with the appropriate occasional mud obstacles, the car will be significantly dirtier. And you'll have had the time of your life. (www.sandykorners.com)

Thunder Bay Resort

This is a bustling golf resort, but also a ride into a Currier and Ives experience. During their stay, guests can enjoy a dinner sleigh ride (on wheels when there's no snow) through the woods to see the resident elk herd, and then on to the Elk Antler

Cabin, where guests receive a five-course dinner, complete with wine and entertainment--then a ride back to the resort. The Elk herd at the Resort numbers between 800-1000 elk, which live on 1700 acres. The horse-drawn sleigh uses serious horses—weighing in at about 2,200 pounds each.

The golf course at the resort rivals most courses in America. And golf prices at the resort are a tremendous value. During peak season, you can golf 18 holes for \$39 with a cart. There are also mid-week discounts. Plus, you can get a package including cart, suite lodging and breakfast from \$64 - \$74

-- with unlimited golf.

Quilting and Scrapbook Retreats are a popular item with the gals at the Resort. The upcoming Quilting Retreat schedule for this year is October 18-21, October 25-28, November 12-15, and November 29-December 2. The Scrapbooking Retreat Dates are: October 12-14 and November 9-11.

The affordable four-day, three-night Quilting Retreats are jam-packed with opportunities to socialize, sew, shop and pamper yourself. And the immaculate Quilt Barn offers a charming location for uninterrupted group sewing. The retreat also includes the Resort's signature event--the Horse-Drawn Carriage/Sleigh Ride to view elk, enjoy the memorable gourmet dinner, and wine tasting.

Thunder Bay offers deluxe suites, whirlpool suites, villas and chalets--from one to three bedrooms. There is also a new state-of-the-art RV Park.

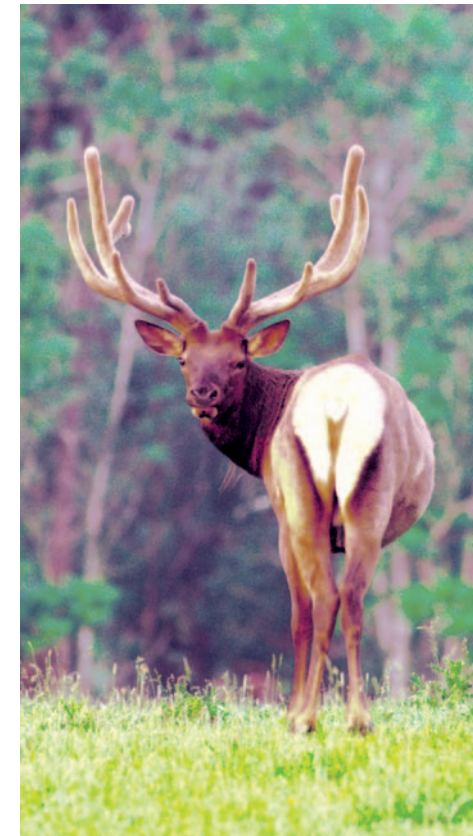
The Resort is most easily accessed via Alpena airport and then by rental car. (www.thunderbaygolf.com)

Nettie Bay Lodge

In the same general area of Michigan

as the Thunder Bay Resort, is the Nettie Bay Lodge. It is just southwest of the northern tip of Lake Huron in Hawks, Michigan. What makes this place so unique, is that unlike a lot of resorts that focus on excitement and "wow factor," Nettie Bay Lodge excels at picture-pretty solitude--what you'd expect if you were looking for a place nestled in the "northern woods" on a quiet, crystal-clear lake. It even comes complete with an occasional haunting call from a loon. The Lodge enjoys the most popularity during whitetail hunting season, and summer vacation season.

But Nettie Bay Lodge is not only a great place for quiet, restful times. Where **(Continued on page 20)**



One of the hundreds of elk you might spot at Thunder Bay Resort



The Norman Rockwell downtown of Frankfort, Michigan



Beautiful and serene evening twilights are a Michigan specialty.

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it really excels is in its learning workshops. Seminars that are offered include: hunting, fishing, split bamboo fly rod making, bird identification workshops, twig furniture, fork shop, spring turkey hunt, fall grouse/woodcock, whitetail hunting archery, rifle and black powder, cross country trails, and ice fishing on Lake Nettie and stone masonry—where you can learn how to build a fieldstone fireplace. The latter may be the only seminar of its kind in the entire country.

There's also a recently added seminar on "Women in the Outdoors," which teaches winter survival skills, walking with snowshoes, etc.

(Note: these seminars are scheduled, not ongoing. You may contact the Lodge for more information, or go to nettiebay.com.)

There are ten cottages plus the main lodge. Most have working fireplaces. Each cottage has a compact, well-equipped kitchen. A boat is included with each cottage and motors are available for \$75 per week. Some canoes and life jackets are also available. The outdoor fire pit, shared by all guests, is just the right spot for evening songs and storytelling.

For hunters, there are over a thousand private acres for hunting at Nettie Bay Lodge. All hunting programs are reasonably priced, guided or unguided; designed specifically for you, or your group. Hunt packages include all meals, which are served family-style. For those hunters wishing to stay in the woods all day, they make a sack lunch for you. Cottages range from single bedroom, knotty pine duplexes to a spacious A-frame, that sleeps up to 12.

Once again, the Lodge is most accessible by flying into Alpena airport and renting a car. (www.nettiebay.com)

Since either of the latter two accommodations will require you fly into Alpena, you'll also want to enjoy shopping downtown while you are there. Have lunch with your favorite microbrew at the **Fletcher Street Brewing Company** in Alpena. There's also the new **Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center**. Among its many interesting exhibits, the center features a wonderful new facility they call "Science on a Sphere", where they can take huge amounts of data and depict its global impact visually by projecting it onto a sphere representing planet earth. The results are quite remarkable. Even the Smithsonian doesn't have

this yet. (www.thunderbay.noaa.gov).

You can also make the scenic drive to **40-Mile Lighthouse**, in Rogers City. The name derives from being 40 miles northwest of Thunder Bay. The property, over 22 acres in all at 40 Mile Point, is a two-story duplex with a tower incorporated into the center of the side-wall facing Lake Huron, with a footprint measuring 35 feet by 57 feet.

The Lighthouse operated with a lighthouse keeper until 1943. The Coast Guard maintained the light and the surrounding grounds using the reservation for training, housing, and as a retreat for hunting and fishing.

Over the years, the light station became a favorite spot for picnics, swimming and hiking. Unfortunately, the station, and particularly the lighthouse, began to deteriorate. Since 1998, the county and the 40 Mile Point Lighthouse Society have been working to restore and preserve the entire site. The park is open year-round to the public. (www.presqueislemi.com)

The northern lower peninsula of Michigan has vacation opportunities galore, including 100's of other great places to stay. Also, a Michigan vacation is a great buy right now. The Michigan economy is less than stellar right now, because the state put pretty much all its eggs in the automotive basket. As a result goods and services are chasing fewer dollars there, which means you get tremendous value when you visit Michigan.

There's also more to do there year-round. Winter outdoor activity is very popular for locals and tourists alike. (After all, you don't live in Michigan if you don't like snow.) And there are many skiing and ski-mobiling opportunities in the state.

The Fall in Michigan is spectacular, and a great opportunity for birdwatchers.

Spring brings trout fishermen galore to the area, and also thousands pursuing morel mushrooms.

Learning where good spots are to get morels is a bit like asking Cape Codders to tell where their favorite fishing spots are. But there are those who will tell. Check out web sites like www.michiganmorels.com/ for more information.

And Summer vacationing in Michigan means going salmon fishing. They run pretty big, too.

For more information about travel in Michigan, go to www.michigan.org.

And thanks for traveling!