



NATIONAL TREASURES:

America's Great Lakes

By Carrie McWhorter

Arch Rock in Mackinac Island State Park provides a picturesque view of Lake Huron. Visitors can take a guided carriage ride through the park or enjoy an only slightly slower pace on foot.

Photo by Carrie McWhorter

Carved into the landscape of North America by thousands of years of glacial melting, the Great Lakes hold a place of honor among our country's geographical treasures.

WHILE MOST THINK OF THE LAKES SEPARATELY (REMEMBER the acronym HOMES from elementary school?), the five lakes actually are connected through a series of waterways, forming one system that leads like aquatic steps from the headwaters of Lake Superior to the Atlantic Ocean.

Along the thousands of miles of shoreline, small communities and major cities alike have thrived both commercially and culturally on the banks of these great inland seas. Whether your interests lean toward scenic drives or must-see attractions, the Great Lakes have something for travelers of all interests and ages.

Lake Michigan: Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore

Along the southern shores of Lake Michigan lies Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. The sand dunes along the lakeshore are the world's largest freshwater dunes, constantly shaped by the wind and waters of Lake Michigan.

Decades of efforts to protect the dunes and the delicate habitats around the lake resulted first in Indiana Dunes State Park in 1926 and the national park designation in 1966. The park now includes more than 15,000 acres of lakeshore and habitats, and dozens of trails invite visitors to experience the unique flora and fauna of the lakeshore.

While many Dunes visitors come for the scenery, most come for the water. Several sand beaches line the 15-mile stretch of lakeshore. The most popular, West Beach, offers three miles of open beach and amenities like a picnic shelter, grills, lifeguards, showers and restrooms. Children will love building sand castles and playing in the gentle waves, and grownups will enjoy the relaxed setting. Ample parking for large vehicles is also available, which makes West Beach a good choice for visitors in RVs. For campers at Indiana Dunes State Park, the State Park Beach offers similar amenities, and the beach is a short walk or bike ride from the campground.

Lake Huron: Mackinac Island

Just east of the Straits of Mackinac where Lake Michigan meets Lake Huron sits Mackinac Island. In the late 1800s, Mackinac Island became a summer destination for wealthy industrialists from the east. To encourage travelers to take the train west, railroad companies built the magnificent Grand Hotel on the island in 1887. Though renovations have modernized the interior, the hotel retains its Victorian charm, including the 660-foot porch, where even non-hotel guests can enjoy a stroll (for a small fee).

Today, the bustling village offers lodging, shopping and dining, and few visitors can pass by the delicious smells of the many fudge shops that line Main Street without taking some home. The island's fudge is so popular that locals have nicknamed visitors to the island "fudgies."

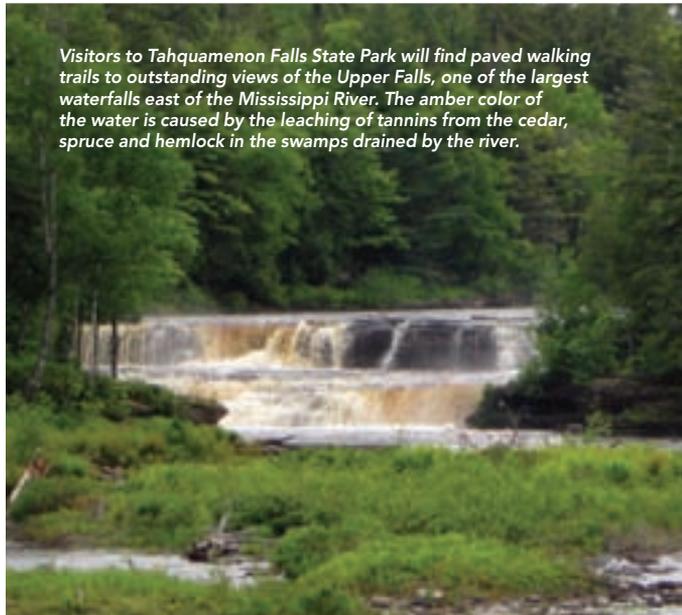
Mackinac Island has preserved another Victorian tradition as well. No personal motorized vehicles are allowed on the island, so most visitors from the mainland board a horse-drawn carriage on Main Street to tour the island. Knowledgeable guides regale passengers with history and humor on the way to the Surrey Hills Museum, which features carriages from the past, including a horse-drawn hearse. From the museum, visitors can continue their carriage ride through Mackinac Island State Park.

More than 80 percent of Mackinac Island lies within the state park. One of the most notable sights in the park is Arch Rock, a towering limestone formation overlooking

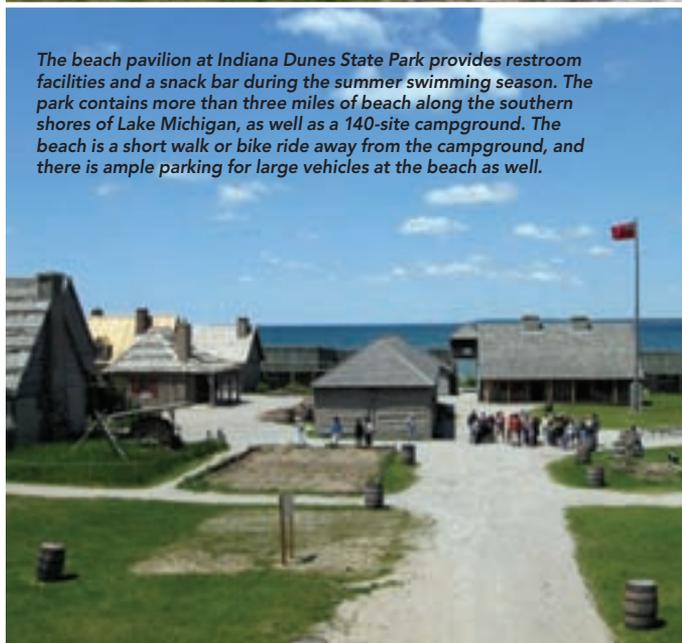
The dunes at Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore are the world's largest freshwater dunes. The dunes are constantly shaped by the wind and waters of Lake Michigan.



Visitors to Tahquamenon Falls State Park will find paved walking trails to outstanding views of the Upper Falls, one of the largest waterfalls east of the Mississippi River. The amber color of the water is caused by the leaching of tannins from the cedar, spruce and hemlock in the swamps drained by the river.



The beach pavilion at Indiana Dunes State Park provides restroom facilities and a snack bar during the summer swimming season. The park contains more than three miles of beach along the southern shores of Lake Michigan, as well as a 140-site campground. The beach is a short walk or bike ride away from the campground, and there is ample parking for large vehicles at the beach as well.



Photos by Carrie McWhorter



Photo by Darlene McWhorter

The South Shore Line train provides visitors with easy access to many Chicago attractions.

Lake Huron. Take time to visit Fort Mackinac, too, which gives visitors a glimpse into the military history of the Straits. During the summer, actors in period costumes perform rifle drills and fire cannons. Inside the fort's 14 original buildings, younger visitors can dress in period clothes and experience life as a British soldier.

Lake Superior: Whitefish Point

Spanning the Straits of Mackinac, the Mackinac Bridge connects Michigan's Lower and Upper Peninsulas. Small towns dot the coastal drive to Whitefish Point, but when the sign says "Welcome to Paradise!" you can't resist slowing down for a look.

West of Paradise is Tahquamenon Falls State Park. While both the Upper Falls and Lower Falls are beautiful, the unusual amber color of the water draws attention. Often mistaken for mud, the color actually results from the leaching of tannins from the cedar,

spruce and hemlock in the swamps drained by the river.

To enhance your UP experience, stop at a local eatery, like the Tahquamenon Falls Brewery & Pub located at the state park, and order a pasty (pronounced pass'-tee). Today's recipes vary, but the traditional pasty recipe calls for a filling of seasoned diced potatoes, rutabagas, carrots, onions and ground beef baked in a flaky, buttery crust—a hearty meal for hungry travelers.

North of Paradise on the banks of Lake Superior is the Whitefish Point Light Station and the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum. Standing on the sandy banks littered with driftwood, feeling the heavy mist in the air, it is easy to imagine the conditions that could turn the lake into a swirling fury of wind and water. Countless vessels have been lost in the waters of Lake Superior, the coldest and deepest of the Great Lakes, and the museum focuses on one of the most famous, the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald, as well as the history of the U.S. Lighthouse Service and the U.S. Life-Saving Service.

Lake Ontario: Niagara Falls

Niagara Falls draws more than 13 million visitors to the region each year, and few leave disappointed. Of the many attractions at Niagara Falls, the Cave of the Winds and the Maid of the Mist (both operated seasonally from May to October) will take your breath away. Don your yellow poncho for a trip to the Hurricane Deck, where you will be showered—literally—by the waters of the American Falls. A little less drenching but no less impressive, the Maid of the Mist ferries passengers to the base of the American Falls and then into the swirling mist at the base of the Canadian Falls. The boat ride is as close as you can get to total immersion in the millions of gallons of water that flow over the falls daily.

Many campgrounds are available throughout the Niagara Falls area, and campers in New York state parks will enjoy free parking at the Falls. Several bridges connect the United States and Canada at Niagara Falls, including the Rainbow Bridge. Remember that you must now have a U.S. passport, passport card or enhanced driver's license in order to return to the U.S.





Photos by Carrie McWhorter

General Tips & Information



From top right: the maid of the mist; Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame; NASA Glenn Visitor Center.

Lake Erie: Cleveland

Buffalo, New York, has its world-famous wings and Sandusky, Ohio, is the roller coaster capital of the world, but Cleveland ROCKS! Located on the banks of Lake Erie, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum takes visitors on a journey from the early days of rock and roll into the modern era, with an ever-changing array of films, posters, costumes, cars and other artifacts from the biggest stars of rock and roll.

Right next door, the Great Lakes Science Center offers a hands-on experience for younger visitors. At the NASA Glenn Visitor Center, children can take the helm at mission control or board a simulator to practice their shuttle landing skills. More than 450 interactive exhibits invite children to see science in action, and in the summer, this includes Port Polymer, an outside playground overlooking Lake Erie's North Coast Harbor.

If you visit Cleveland in your RV, plan ahead for parking. One of the best options is the Port Authority lot near the Cleveland Browns Stadium, but you will have to walk a couple of blocks to the museums.

From lighthouses to shipwrecks and waterfalls to old-growth forests, the Great Lakes region has something for everyone. Whether your visit takes you to the western shores of Lake Superior, the eastern beaches of Lake Ontario or anywhere in between, you will be inspired by the spectacular natural treasures the region has to offer. 📍



SXC Photo by Graeme Jansen

Each season provides a different view of the natural beauty of the Great Lakes Region. The best weather in the Great Lakes Region occurs from May until September. Highs in the summer are generally in the 70s and 80s, with lows in the 60s and 70s (Michigan's UP stays a little cooler generally).

You might beat some of the crowds by visiting in the late spring and early summer, but many attractions close down or operate on a limited schedule prior to the peak months of summer. Many campgrounds close during the winter as well, so check the Good Sam Club website for links to campgrounds and their operating season.

September and October are generally the best months for viewing fall foliage, but a lot of factors enter into the seasonal color changes, so check online fall foliage maps before planning your trip.

Winter months can be very cold in this region, with lake effect rain and snow often hindering travel. Highs in the winter are usually in the 30s with lows in the 20s or below.

Ultimately, keep in mind that the lakes always impact the weather along their coasts. Regardless of the season, bring appropriate clothing and plan to dress in layers. Even in late spring and early fall, a light jacket may come in handy early in the morning, late in the evening, or on cloudy days. Good walking shoes are a must as well.