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Column: Freewheeling

MICHIGAN'S LITTLE TRAVERSE BAY BECKONS THE UNHURRIED VISITOR

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Article Text:

LITTLE TRAVERSE BAY, Mich. -- Up the

scenery-studded coast of Lake Michigan from Grand Traverse Bay, a small sibling awaits the more leisurely, the more offbeat traveler. The kind who settles in for a quiet summer and/or finds pleasure searching the back roads.

Little Traverse Bay, the "baby" grand so to speak, plays in a different key from that of its more touristy counterpart.

About 65 miles separate thriving Traverse City, hub of the Grand Traverse region, from Petoskey, principal trading center of Little Traverse Bay. As resort centers they have much in common: a wide assortment of appealing accommodations in which to lay one's head, all easily accessible to downhill and cross-country skiing, championship golf, fine fishing, boating and conference facilities. Because the periods at which they are open vary widely, it is wise to check them out before making plans.

To get from Traverse City (the subject of Freewheeling Dec. 1) to Petoskey, just follow U.S. 31, a dotted line on AAA and Rand-McNally maps to denote scenic route, up the East Arm of Grand Traverse Bay, past the bay itself and finally along the wide expanse of Lake Michigan.

At the winsome town of Charlevoix, strung out between Lake Michigan and Lake Charlevoix, the highway turns east to follow the south shore of Little Traverse Bay.

During the summer months 50,000 multicolored petunia plants line both sides of the main thoroughfare for 4 miles through Charlevoix, a community project carried out by volunteers. (If you have a youngster along, he/she might like the Lincoln Logs Motel, built just like the familiar toy.)

Petoskey with upwards of 6,000 residents may be the largest settlement on Little Traverse Bay, but Harbor Springs, a trim little town of 1,500 residents and reminiscent of a New England fishing village, strikes the strongest chord for motoring vacationists. A tourist is not likely to visit one without the other -- or shouldn't, anyhow.

While U.S. 31 continues north and inland from Petoskey to join up with I-75 before reaching the Mackinac Bridge, one can stay on the scenic route by cutting off on M-199 just east of Petoskey and following it around the bay to Harbor Springs. For the prettiest drive of all, continue on M-199 around the Lake Michigan shore up to Cross Village, named for a large cross placed on the bluff by a French Jesuit missionary.

"If a beauty contest of the state's favorite roads were held, this tunnel through the trees with picture-window openings to the blue, blue lake would bring in an avalanche of votes," writes Doris Scharfenberg in her vacation guide to Michigan's shorelines, *The Long Blue Edge of Summer*. Sometimes the green cathedral through which the road winds gets dark enough for automatic headlights to come on.

While pleasant houses are set back from the road opposite the water most of the way up to Cross Village, the beaches and dunes are apt to be deserted. If you seek mansions, they are more apt to be found in Harbor Springs itself, especially in the exclusive area of Harbor Point, longtime summer headquarters of many distinguished families. No cars are allowed in Harbor Point; rather,

transportation is by horse and carriage.

Harbor Springs, nestled between a bay-within-a-bay and green bluffs, retains a turn-of-the-century atmosphere, but behind its facades are smart shops, art galleries and restaurants (the New York Restaurant, a glorified deli, packs in the patrons). The marina is filled with very fine yachts

during the summer season, perhaps the most of any place in the state.

A number of Dallas families have summer "cottages," to use the understated local vernacular, in Harbor Springs, but they would prefer that their secret hideaway not be publicized. They like it as it is.

Nineteen buildings are listed in Michigan's historic preservation inventory and two in the Federal registry. The Shay complex at the corner of Main and Judd streets is one of the oldies: the buildings where Ephriam Shay lived, designed and ran his logging locomotive. Another historic Main Street structure is the Erwin Building, the first brick commercial edifice. An eye-catcher is the Holy Childhood of Jesus Church.

The Chief Blackbird Ottawa Indian Museum (circa 1860) reflects the work of a versatile man who acted as postmaster and blacksmith while compiling books on the Indian language and legends.

Harbour Inn on the Bay, spanking white with red trim, offers the most nostalgic accommodations. Its wide veranda overlooks the pine-studded bay and its 65 turn-of-the-century rooms are gradually being refurbished to do justice to their heritage. A casino out back used to attract high-rollers until its demise in the 1940s.

Other overnight possibilities include condominiums, the Harbor Springs Motor Inn, the Colonial Inn and, west of town, the Birchwood Inn with golf privileges at a new country club development called Birchwood Farms.

About 4 miles northeast of Harbor Springs up in the wooded hills off M-119 is Boyne Highlands, an impressive resort that would be at home in the English countryside. The inn is a sprawling ivy-covered building containing 167 guest rooms, cocktail lounge and gourmet dining room.

On the premises are two 18-hole championship golf courses, the more famous of which is the Heather course designed by Robert Trent Jones and opened in 1965. Other facilities include a nine-hole executive course, putting greens, pitch-and-chip practice areas, driving range, heated outdoor pools, saunas, paddle boats, tennis courts and stocked trout pond.

Nearby, the ski area boasts long, challenging slopes and a triple chairlift. The 70-room Bartley House here offers guests the facilities of Boyne Highlands.

Boyne Mountain, south of Petoskey and about an hour's drive away via U.S. 131, is a sister operation of Boyne Highlands. Together they form Boyne USA Resorts. Boyne Mountain was founded by Everett Kircher in 1947 as a modest ski facility; Boyne Highlands opened its ski runs in 1964.

Amenities at Boyne Mountain include 400 rooms in Boyne Mountain Lodge, Mountain Villas and Deer Lake Beach Villas, dining at Deer Lake Beach House, and most of the other facilities found at Boyne Highlands. The Highlands has a 4,000-foot landing strip while Boyne Mountain has a 4,200-foot paved and lighted jetstrip.

At the other extreme, Petoskey State Park with numerous campsites hugs Little Traverse Bay between Harbor Springs and Petoskey.

It provides nice surroundings for those who like to look for Petoskey stones, Michigan's state stone. Actually the stones are petrified fossils, the remains of coral reefs that thrived when the Devonian seas covered the area 350 million years ago. They are soft enough to be cut with a hacksaw and shaped with a file; final polishing brings out their beauty and preserves it. The best time to look for them in northern Michigan is after a storm on the Great Lakes.

Now let's go to Petoskey -- named roughly for Indian chief Pet-O-Sega or Pe-to-se-ga, depending on your source -- which has become the summer shopping center (gift and apparel stores move to Arizona and Florida during the winter) for the whole northern section of the state.

Diverse industries, however, keep it on a year-round footing.

An area not to be missed is the Gaslight District with its boutiques and restaurants. Nearby the landmark Perry Davis Hotel, built in 1895, occupies a hilltop site with a grand view of the harbor. A nice dining room and cocktail lounge, personal touches such as candy and flowers, and lots of fresh paint added up to a pleasant overnight for us.

Out in the harbor itself, 60 feet below the surface, is the only underwater shrine in America for skin divers, a life-size crucifix.

Two old railroad stations survive. The C&O depot on Water Street (where Ernest Hemingway began his first honeymoon trip; see story, Page 3G) is now the Little Traverse History Museum.

And be sure to visit Bay View, a separate community of grand Victorian cottages built around what was originally a Methodist Bible Camp. A sign at the entrance put up by the present Bay View Association points out that it is "A Historic Place . . . on the National Register."

Residents fly their flags, swing on their screened porches and keep their gingerbread immaculately and artistically painted. New owners are putting the lace-curtained 35-room Terrace Inn back into 1910 order.

Stafford's Bay View Inn right on U.S. 31 at the foot of the hilly, tree-shaded historic area, is the most elegant place around to dine and/or overnight. Built in 1887, it has been fully restored with antiques and is lovingly operated. Its restaurant has been so highly regarded that the owners, Stafford and Janice Smith, have expanded their operations with The Pier in Harbor Springs and the newer Stafford's One Water Street in Boyne City.

Among numerous other places to stay are the Best Western Inn, Coach House, Hayner's, Holiday Inn and Inn on the Hill.

In June, during the annual Little Traverse Bay Historic Festival, a 3-mile rope is strung across the bay for the World's Longest Tug of War. Perhaps it helps solve the vacationer's dilemma of which side of the harbor to choose.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Boyne Highlands Inn: Harbor Springs, Mich. 49740; (616) 526-2171.

Boyne Mountain Lodge: Boyne Falls, Mich. 49713; (616) 549-2441..

Perry Davis Hotel: Bay and Lewis streets, Petoskey, Mich. 49770; (616) 347-2516.

Stafford's Bay View Inn: U.S. 31 North, Petoskey, Mich. 49770; (616) 347-2771.

Petoskey Regional Chamber of Commerce: P.O.Box 306-A, Petoskey, Mich. 49770; 401 Mitchell St.; (616) 347-4150. Publishes summer recreation guide.

West Michigan Tourist Association: 136 Fulton St. East, Grand Rapids, Mich. 49503; (616) 456-8557. Publishes Carefree Days travel guide four ! times a year, covering seasonal visitor attractions, facilities.

Michigan Department of Commerce: Travel Bureau, P.O. Box 30226, Lansing, Mich. 48909; (517) 373-0670.

The Long Blue Edge of Summer: Bookstores can order Doris Scharfenberg's vacation guide to Michigan's shorelines from William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 255 Jefferson Ave., S.E., Grand Rapids, Mich. 49503; less than \$10.

Caption:

Photo: Boyne Highlands, which would be at home in

English countryside, boasts nearby ski area. (Credit: DMN - Tom

Simmons) Map: Michigan (Credit: DMN); LOCATION: Photo - Michigan.

Map - NR.

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