

## Michigan without sleds: In summer, visitors prefer golf carts.

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HARBOR SPRINGS, Mich. \_ Trees and heather look great. Trouble is, they eat Titleists like so much popcorn. Lakes and creeks add to the beauty. But golfers know they make Top-Flites go splash.

So what's the attraction?

Michigan has been blessed with lots of wonderful scenery. Hills roll, brooks gurgle, reeds waft and pines sigh. It's the place to go for swell vistas of woods and waters into which people can hit a little ball and watch it disappear.

Boosters claim the state ranks as the nation's summer golf capital. Golf Digest magazine says it's the eighth best golf destination in the country, right up there with golf resorts in Florida, California, Nevada and the Carolinas.

Michigan lands stripped bare by lumber barons or given up by despairing farmers now sport emerald fairways. Michigan had more than 1,000 courses by last count, and many offer enticing golf packages \_ including lodging and meals \_ to lure the fanatics.

My son, Gabe, and I fit that category. For years, during his childhood, I would take him up to summer camp at a lake in the northwestern corner of the Lower Peninsula and, after eight weeks, pick him up again. We would leave a day or two before camp opened, stay in a motel, and \_ as he grew older \_ play some golf.

Now Gabe is 30 and a fishing guide in northern Arkansas, but we still talk about those annual Michigan jaunts.

Recently, both of our schedules jibed enough that we were able to sign on for a deal offered by Boyne Highlands Resort in Harbor Springs. For \$99 a day, per person \_ including a room, breakfast (valued by the resort at \$22 a day) and greens fees \_ we could play an unlimited amount of golf with golf cart at eight Boyne-owned courses. Taxes added another \$10.81. One very special Boyne property, Bay Harbor Golf Club, levies a surcharge of \$49 per person, which many patrons feel compelled to pay because the course is so beautiful and famous.

Only a golfer could appreciate how much of a bargain Boyne's "Truly Unlimited Golf Package" truly is. Single-round greens fees at those eight Boyne courses (cart included) range from \$49 to \$199 (the latter at Bay Harbor for non-guests). The "Truly Unlimited" deal would let us play golf as long as we wanted with no extra charge for putting all those extra yards on the golf cart. And the offer is good all season.

Unfortunately, the season isn't very long. As a Michigan native, I knew that a trip in late May/early June might require a hand warmer, rain suit, long underwear, mittens and a stocking cap, so I packed accordingly. Later on into late June, the temperatures tend to rise, and that's when you also should throw in some Deet to ward off mosquitoes and blackflies.

By October, the weather gets iffy, but the leaves on all those trees turn orange and red, rendering golf courses all the more gorgeous.

As it turned out, we didn't need the long underwear or mittens, and only our first day of play had to be called on account of rain.

The lodge at Boyne Highlands is a sort of English-estate fantasy with ivy-covered walls, medieval turrets, a decorative water wheel, wooden balconies and bits of stained glass. Its huge dining room features a cathedral

ceiling hung with immense iron chandeliers. It seemed more like the setting for a feudal lord's wedding banquet than a place where guys in golf caps and women in visors eat their Wheaties and swap tall tales.

During our first-day breakfast, the expansive dining room windows revealed dark clouds hovering above the tops of steep, wooded hills striped with ski runs. At ground level, we saw ski lifts and snow-making gear. Most golf clubhouses and resort hotels try for some kind of classic Mediterranean, Greek Renaissance, Georgian, Federalist or Colonial appearance. Boyne Highlands Lodge leans more toward Baronial and probably looks better after a heavy snowfall.

Our room, one of 237 units on the property, contained standard cookie-cutter generic hotel/motel amenities. But that's OK, because a golf vacation means pursuing your sport all day, dining well and then falling asleep.

After breakfast, we carried our clubs over to the nearby Heather course and watched the weather worsen. "I think it's clearing up," said Gabe, ever the optimist. I pulled on my rain pants over my regular pants, zipped up the rain jacket and gazed across the empty golf course at fairways sculpted by the redoubtable Robert Trent Jones. Those fairways were empty. Most guests had taken one look at the sky, felt the chilly drizzle and had given up.

"Let's do it," Gabe urged. A young woman in a yellow slicker put bags on the golf cart, and we took off, hoping to play a few holes before the next big squall. We barely managed to get through nine \_ half a round marked by high winds, frequent downpours and an encounter with clouds of mosquitoes in a swamp that architect Jones had fashioned into a nasty hazard.

So we quit too. With a golf package like ours, this was the best kind of quit. If the sun suddenly came out, we could turn around and play some more. Ordinarily, we'd have to just kick ourselves for losing patience so soon, or pay another greens fee to get back on. But we had unlimited golf!

The rain never did let up. We drove into downtown Harbor Springs, a bastion of Midwestern summer wealth. Out on The Point, a nearby finger of land poking into Lake Michigan's Little Traverse Bay, the mansions and grounds are so well-coddled that cars can't go there (and neither can uninvited visitors). Residents park their vehicles in a prosaic lot outside the main gate and arrive home by water taxi or horse-drawn carriage.

Gabe and I watched the rain through picture windows in the Pier Restaurant Chart Room. A few sailboats and a medium-size motor yacht see-sawed at anchor in the marina. Some ducks waddled arrogantly across the grass, as if to flaunt the fact that this was excellent weather for them.

A well-groomed older man in what appeared to be a white cashmere sweatshirt sat down at the next table. "If you're not closing, I'll just stay here awhile," he told the hostess. "This day is shot." He ordered a Manhattan and a bottle of red wine.

It was that kind of afternoon.

Father and son toured the area some more, while rain came down in sheets. Don't worry. This isn't one of those tales about dad and boy cementing their relationship and trading inter-generational insights until readers weep, either out of manipulated reverie or sheer boredom. We'll leave that to the best-selling memoirists. This is about a 30-year-old fishing guide and his journalist father taking part in full golf immersion. It's eat, drink, tell jokes, play golf, snore, get up, watch the Weather Channel and start all over again. The Midwest is getting good at providing unexpected vacation treats \_ a week or so having fun in somewhat familiar territory without spending a fortune.

Even in the northern Lower Peninsula, a region filled with golf courses and golf resorts, the game never intrudes on the consciousness the way it does in Orlando or Myrtle Beach. People come up here just as much for the tennis, fishing, boating, swimming and fudge shops. With a few exceptions, the golf resorts tend to be located well off the major highways.

Still, they make their presence felt through a lot of tourist publications, advertisements, Web sites and cool, evocative names: Black Forest, Wilderness Valley, Crystal Mountain, The Chief, Hawk's Eye, The Bear, Spruce

Run, Wolverine. ... They cluster in their unobtrusive way around Traverse City, Harbor Springs, Petoskey, Gaylord, Grayling, Cadillac, Detroit and Grand Rapids, just to name a few golf-heavy regions.

In years past, Gabe and I have played at Crystal Mountain in Benzie and Grand Traverse Resort and Spa in Acme \_ just outside of Traverse City. We didn't always find terrific bargains, but we never had a bad experience.

Toward evening, the clouds went away and we drove in brilliant sunshine to the Rowe Inn, a dining institution in the town of Ellsworth. From Harbor Springs, the drive takes nearly an hour, following U.S. Highway 31 south and west along the shore of Little Traverse Bay, through Petoskey and Charlevoix, then taking a left at Michigan Highway 66 toward Ellsworth \_ a scenic appetizer almost all the way.

On the night of our arrival we had been too road-weary to explore the dining possibilities in the vicinity of Little Traverse Bay. We ate at Teddy Griffin's Roadhouse, an informal, sports-bar kind of place around the corner from our resort. A motto posted over the roadhouse front door says, "Better food than most hospitals," but I suspect the owner is just fishing for compliments. Our steaks were delicious.

Still, Rowe Inn is something else, a roadhouse with a sophisticated and deep wine cellar. Its bill of fare indicates that rural Michigan culinary achievements have long since passed the fried whitefish and Jell-O salad stage. "Julie will be here to explain the menu," said our host. "We have lots of good things."

The Rowe Inn walls may be knotty pine and the windows may look out on new-growth forest, but Julie spoke of fine dining at the level of a restaurant in Provence. Grilled quail with grapes and port. Cream of morel soup with sherry. Morel and leek pierogi. Pork osso bucco gremolata. Duck Magret with cassis ...

Gabe ordered veal tenderloin with pistachio and truffle cream. I had pork tenderloin with apple-pear sauce. We shared a bottle of 1999 Gigondas Mas des Collines.

I know that guys on golf trips are supposed to demand meat and potatoes and pound down beers, but Michigan with its ambitious collection of vineyards and well-trained chefs might put in a bid for recognition as the nation's summer gourmand capital \_ small town division, at least.

The next few days were the kind golfers dream about. The weather cleared up and we could set upon our appointed rounds without rain suits, umbrellas or long waits on the first tee.

At the Golf Center, a short drive away from the Highlands lodge, three respectable courses fan out over tree-lined, hilly countryside. Attendants \_ mostly young college students in green shirts and khakis \_ took our bags from the car trunk, strapped them on carts and acted pleasantly surprised when tipped a few bucks.

We started off on Boyne's Donald Ross course, which duplicates some of the famous architect's most notable holes. Your eyes needn't glaze over. This won't be a stroke-by-stroke account. Suffice it to say we enjoyed our morning round and had plenty of daylight left. Michigan insists that it stands on the western edge of the Eastern time zone, rather than the eastern edge of the Central. So at the height of summer, golfers can tee off at 8 p.m. and count on a couple more hours of visibility.

After our round at Ross, Gabe and I returned to the Heather course. We played the back nine that we had missed on the first go-around. "I could play another nine," Gabe said on the 18th green. I told him 27 holes a day was plenty for me, but go ahead. I walked over to the hotel and took a nap. Gabe returned to the room a couple of hours later. "Did you get in another nine?" I asked him. "Another 18," he said. "That's 45 for the day."

When we sat down to an unremarkable seafood dinner in Petoskey, the sun was just beginning to descend below the bay, turning scattered clouds a brilliant scarlet. How does that saying go? "Red sky at night, golfer's delight ..."

The next day, we played Boyne's Arthur Hills course. Hills, another respected golf course architect, has a way with rolling terrain, as it happens. His course rose and plunged through forest and meadow, offering occasional broad vistas of thick hardwood growth and brilliant blue sky. I returned to the hotel and rested until the vertigo wore off. Gabe played another nine at the Donald Ross.

Somehow, both of our regimens resulted in raging appetites.

We drove back to Ellsworth and into the parking lot of Tapawingo. Like Rowe Inn, it's another backwoods anomaly \_ gourmet level dining with all the trimmings. At Tapawingo, the setting is an old but thoroughly renovated house that has become all dining room and kitchen. The walls are a pleasing lemon-cream color and adorned with excellent art work. The wait staff wears matching white and black outfits, and a sommelier in an Armani suit makes the rounds.

Also making the rounds was owner/chef Harlan "Pete" Peterson. He told us his clientele didn't include a large chunk of the golf links crowd. "I don't know why not," he said. "You probably could walk from here to Traverse City on nothing but golf courses."

After our seared foie gras over grilled pineapple, Gabe had sea scallops with truffled celery root and potato mousseline, caramelized onions, wilted spinach and sweet pepper truffle relish. I ordered persillade-cruste Colorado lamb rack with gnocchi, glazed baby root vegetables, asparagus, wild leeks and morel mushrooms with leek and lamb jus.

"This is the best restaurant I've ever been in," Gabe declared. Understandable. This sort of fine-dining trend hasn't yet taken hold in rural Arkansas.

The next day, we coughed up the \$49-per-person surcharge and played Bay Harbor, a Boyne outpost on the lakefront west of Petoskey. It often gets accolades on the order of "Pebble Beach of the Midwest," etc., and it truly is a magnificent spread with some holes along the lake, others in and around the crater of a former stone quarry, and still others winding through a nature preserve.

All around are rambling, wood-sided mansions, townhouses and a lot of other buildings that reinforce Bay Harbor's claim as a full-fledged community, albeit the gated kind and less than a decade old.

Bay Harbor pushes the edge of the golf resort envelope. Its glossy brochure says, "Our objective is to provide 'Legacy Lifestyle Experiences,' which are experiences so extraordinary that they become the basis of family traditions. Where else can you experience calf roping, dog sled races, fishing tournaments, art fairs and in-water boat shows and concerts?"

We looked around for awhile at the marina, the little Bay Harbor "downtown" with stores, restaurants, a hotel and an architectural mix that might be described as Victorian Painted Lady Meets Great Lakes Lighthouse. Condos and houses were for sale at prices ranging from \$400,000 up close to \$5 million.

Gabe and I would have to content ourselves with our own legacy lifetime experiences: a week of golf, dinners, sight-seeing and a memory of our own private Michigan \_ one that even the most ambitious new real estate development can't reproduce.

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IF YOU GO:

**LODGING:** Michigan offers a wealth of golf resorts. This article goes into detail about Boyne Highlands, but the Boyne group also owns a nearby two-course complex called Boyne Mountain. Boyne's Bay Harbor community not only has 27 holes of golf but a hotel, as well, and another 18 holes at Crooked Stick, across U.S. 31. Statewide variety and competition could bring some bargains even in high season. Your shopping might start on the Web at [www.golfmichigan.com](http://www.golfmichigan.com) or [www.resortsandlodges.com](http://www.resortsandlodges.com)

Another possibility: Focus on one of Michigan's golf-rich areas, book a centrally located room (lodging chains abound) and play a different course each day. Just around the Grand Traverse Bay area, for example, Antrim County has 11 courses; Grand Traverse County boasts eight (including three at the huge Grand Traverse Resort) and Otsego County counts 15, most clustered near golf-happy Gaylord.

DINING: A lot of excellent restaurants are sprinkled around Michigan golf country, including the two Ellsworth exemplars described in the main story. Those would be:

Rowe Inn, East Jordan Road; 866-432-5873.

Tapawingo, 9502 Lake St.; 866-588-7881.

Reservations are recommended for both.

Other dining possibilities:

City Park Grill, 432 E. Lake St., Petoskey, 231-347-0101, evokes the atmosphere of an old saloon and tenders a wide-ranging menu from chicken breasts to steaks to fried zucchini.

Stafford's Pier at the waterfront in downtown Harbor Springs, 231-526-6201, stays on top of the trends (i.e. wraps and exotic soups) while serving up old-fashioned lake views.

Teddy Griffin's Roadhouse, 50 Highland Pike Rd., Harbor Springs, 231-526-7805, is a lively place featuring solid American fare.

And between nines, try a Ross Burger at one of the Boyne Highlands or Boyne Mountain snack stands. The name honors golf course architect Donald Ross, who evidently was a fine judge of ground beef.

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