FALL ISSUE

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Winding along the sunrise side

A rich lumbering history, legacy of spirit and miles of Lake Huron's unspoiled coastal beauty await those traveling U.S. Heritage Route 23.

BY CINDY CRAIN NEWMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF GARLAND

Lake Huron is so accessible. There are good public beaches in Au Gres, Tawas, and Oscoda and all the way up to the bridge — wonderful pull-outs where people can go and just enjoy," observed Mike Hayes, president/CEO of the Midland Center for the Arts in Midland, who owns a second home south of Oscoda on Lake Huron.

The former state representative and current member of the State Transportation Commission added that while there's also no shortage of quaint hamlets to explore, the unspoiled, pristine lands along U.S. 23 are what attract him most.

"My wife and I don't want to be around a whole bunch of cities and resorts when we're relaxing," he shared. "We'd rather be in a less-developed, peaceful area where we can swim and bird and enjoy the beauty of every different season."

Not to mention the most spectacular sunrises.
"I'm attracted to color, and I found it at Mai Tiki Resort in Oscoda (north of East Tawas). The cabins were pink, salmon and orange with totem-like poles out front, and they reminded me of Hawaii. Later that night, there was a spectacular sunset that I captured from the beach in East Tawas."

— Photographer Jeff Garland

A sandy hook known as Tawas Point is a two-mile spit of land separating Tawas Bay from Lake Huron. At the end of this peninsula is Tawas Point State Park, a renowned Audubon-cited migratory bird flight haven that attracts more than 200 kinds of shorebirds every spring and fall. Further up Lake Huron's coastline, while journeying to Neogwgon State Park north of Harrisville, photographer Jeff Garland passed over a creek enlivened by running salmon. "I spent 30 minutes standing in the cold water, snapping pictures," he noted. Neogwgon State Park — a rustic, 3,730 undeveloped area open for hunting and hiking — features a beautiful, unpolluted sandy beach and diverse terrain, including a mature pine forest, open meadows, hardwoods, aspens and small ridges.
Alpena’s motto is “a warm and friendly port,” though the waters here haven’t always been so amicable to travelers of times past. The Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary preserves nearly 200 shipwrecks in and around the bay. To better share this maritime history, the area offers glass-bottom shipwreck tours and views of sunken vessels by guided kayak, snorkeling, and scuba diving as well. Alpena is also known for its 16.5-mile bike and pedestrian path which links more than a dozen parks and beach areas, as well as Lufage Fossil Park at the Besser Museum. Here, busloads of state-wide visitors arrive annually to dig hands-on with educator Joseph J. Kchodi “Paleo Joe” to uncover marine invertebrates that are around 350 million years old in a simulated limestone quarry (fishers, keepers).

In Michigan, there may also be no better place to get a crash course in Great Lakes maritime history than on the Sunrise Coast, where lake freighters are often seen on the far horizon. Every long-term Rogers City resident knows a family affected by the sinking of the Bradley in 1958 and the Cedarville in 1965 when 43 local men went down with their ships.

The lumbering history in these port towns — including such tragedies — have helped develop the character of these hard-working residents, too. Though Alpena was almost destroyed by fire four times, its steadfast residents repeatedly rebuilt their homes and mills and kept shipping lumber out of their harbor. Two other lumber communities — An Sable and Oscoda — witnessed lives lost and watched their buildings burn in 1910 when a fire swept in upon the twin towns as well. But they, too, rebuilt.
Driving from Standish to Mackinaw City up U.S. Heritage Route 23, you need to slow down to really appreciate this series of little towns. There are lumber barons' stone mansions and a variety of museums manned by knowledgeable staff; many of these arts and cultural area attractions can be discovered through ARTown Michigan. But along this eastern coastline — including the counties of Arenac, Iosco, Alcona, Alpena, Presque Isle, and Cheboygan — are also 200 miles of forests and wetlands.

Much of this natural beauty has been preserved in nine state parks, including undeveloped ones like Thompson's Harbor and Negwegon, which feature miles of spectacular Lake Huron shoreline but rarely a nearby hiker within shouting distance. And while Mackinac Island in the Straits is the state's most visited, the Sunrise Coast has islands of its own to explore. Visitors can venture out ten miles by boat to Charity Island in Saginaw Bay to explore the 222-acre island that is part of the Michigan Islands National Wildlife Refuge.

Last fall, Metro Detroit area photographer Jeff Garland embarked on U.S. 23. Along his peaceful journey he encountered residents fishing and biking. He met a couple who spent half an hour sharing friendly insights such as where to find salmon (in the river running through Harrisville) and the best treats to eat (cider donuts at Knaebe's in Rogers City).

And he discovered that while northeastern Michigan's shoreline may be the least travelled, taking the slow road up to the Straits on U.S. 23 is not only the way to embrace the state's maritime legacy, but better appreciate the natural beauty today.

To learn more visit us2heritageroute.org, thunderbay.nationalgeo vaginal.org, or www.michigan.org, lighthousefestival.org and palajoe.com. Freelance writer Cindy Crain Newman lives in Midland.

Sight: In Alpena, early timber tycoons' stately homes line the waterfront, reminding visitors of Michigan's role in the 1800s supplying lumber to cities including Detroit, Cleveland, Buffalo, Toronto, Milwaukee, and Chicago. Chicago's Great Fire of 1871 accelerated this demand.
On a map, Presque Isle looks like an island, but it's really more like a peninsula. To reach the Presque Isle Old Lighthouse — one of the oldest surviving lighthouses on the Great Lakes — you must drive around Grand Lake and out to the end of the road to the remote park complex of two lighthouses and a restored keeper's house. There visitors can climb the hand-hewn stone steps of the 30-foot lighthouse (circa. 1840) and "hear" stories from lighthouse keeper Elmer Byrnes, who lived with his family on this lonely shoreline in 1905. When the foghorn blows and you're told to picture a dark and stormy night, his tales of a lighthouse ghost don't seem so unbelievable.
“Everybody I encountered was glad to offer local advice like, ‘Buy your sausages at Plath’s Meats,’ or ‘Get your donuts at Knaebe’s Cider Mill.’ At Knaebe’s, I saw a man checking out the WW II plane hanging from the ceiling while his wife shopped for pies. Many of the storefronts on the main street in Rogers City showcased school spirit with orange and black slogans — I definitely knew I was in ‘Huron Country.’”

— Photographer Jeff Garland