

THREE TIMES the Charm



LITTLE TRAVERSE BAY,
including the communities of HARBOR SPRINGS,
PETOSKEY AND BAY HARBOR, is quaint
perfection along northwest Michigan's lower peninsula.
BY HEATHER STEINBERGER

The first time I saw Michigan's Little Traverse Bay, Mother Nature did her level best to sully my initial impression. A churning fall sky hung low over steely water, with a frothy army of whitecaps marching in the teeth of a stiff west wind. Even the splashes of fall color looked muted and brittle as I drove along the bay's north shore.

Heading to Walstrom Marine in Harbor Springs for a boat test, I prepared to do battle with the elements. Instead, I found myself mesmerized by a genteel, 19th century resort community. Stately Victorian- and Edwardian-era homes joined more modest New England-style cottages around the snug harbor and along quiet, tree-lined lanes. The intimate downtown bustled even in the darkling weather, warmth pouring out through cafe doors and cheerful shop windows. I was utterly enchanted.

Harbor Springs is one of three distinctive communities on Little Traverse Bay, Michigan's fourth largest at 45 square miles. Extending eastward into the northwest corner of Michigan's lower peninsula, Little Traverse is a boater's gateway to some of the Great Lakes' most beloved cruising destinations, providing access to Harbor Springs, Petoskey and Bay Harbor. Charlevoix, another vacation mecca, is just outside the bay's southern lip, and Mackinac Island is a stone's throw to the north.

This area is home to a thriving resort culture that has endured for nearly 150 years. It continues today with countless summer visitors seeking clear blue waters, sandy beaches and outdoor recreation that takes every possible form—from sailing, kayaking and fishing, to tennis, cycling and even championship golf. Like their Gilded Age forebears, visitors flee the summer heat of Midwestern cities by land and by sea, flocking to Little Traverse Bay to take advantage of the pristine North Woods environment and cool, refreshing climate.

The climate was perhaps a bit too refreshing on this autumn morning, but as soon as our Chris-Craft Corsair 36 motored out of the harbor's confines, I understood the appeal without question. All three destinations are within easy reach, and they prove to be a successful blend of the historic and the contemporary.

Petoskey, another 19th century vacation community, lies approximately three miles across the water on the bay's south shore. The booming, four-star Bay Harbor development, founded in the mid-1990s, is just minutes west of it.



Harbor Springs became known as a prominent resort community, home to the Midwest's elite during the warm-weather months (top). A pedestrian tunnel connects the Petoskey waterfront to its famous Gaslight District (bottom).

This is where the Jesuits joined the native Odawa peoples, christening the settlement L'Arbre Croche (The Crooked Tree). For more than a century, the settlers subsisted alongside the natives through a combination of fishing, trapping and farming. In 1853, the first trading post and general store opened in the village, and in 1880 it was incorporated as Harbor Springs. This coincided with a lumber boom that would last until 1920.

By the late 19th century, Harbor Springs also had developed a reputation as a prominent resort community. Well-known Midwestern families like the Fords, the Upjohns, the Gambles and the Wrigley Company's Offields built elaborate cottages, many of which had private launches to meet family members as they disembarked from Great Lakes passenger ships and private yachts.

For today's visiting yachts, three marinas in town offer transient dockage. The challenge is that only one takes reservations, and getting dock space can be a long shot. Most boaters head for the twin-pier Harbor Springs Municipal Marina, which also uses seasonal slip-holders' spaces when available. Since the marina doesn't take reservations, call ahead to get on the waiting list.

Walstrom Marine has two waterfront facilities, one next door to the municipal marina and the other at the east end of downtown. While it does take some reservations, transient dockage is limited and depends on slip-holders' float plans. Here, too, there often is a waiting list.

The Irish Boat Shop is between the city's launch ramp and the Little Traverse Yacht Club. Its transient dockage accommodates boats 30 feet and up. Like the municipal marina, dock space is handled on a first-come, first-served basis without reservations. In such a popular cruising destination, this can mean having to find Plan B in a hurry.

One option is to find dock space in Petoskey or Bay Harbor and day-trip into Harbor Springs. The city-operated shoppers' dock has a two-hour limit, so there's usually room.

Or, if you don't mind a night on the hook, head for the small anchorage in the crook between Harbor Point and town. It offers excellent protection in 30 to 40 feet of water. You'll only be exposed in an east wind, a rarity in summer.

Harbor Springs' greatest attraction is its historic downtown, four charming square blocks of upscale shops, art galleries, restaurants and cafes. Shoppers will find antiques, hand-crafted furniture, architectural and garden accessories, interior design services, bou-

tiques, specialty clothing shops, fine art, jewelry and books. Everything is within walking distance of the harbor. One can't-miss stop is By the Bay on Main Street. The gallery is a Harbor Springs staple and carries nautical fine art and gifts for your favorite boater.

Wander along the shoreline drive, M-119, which is the ancient Mackinac Trail. And take the time to visit the Harbor Springs History Museum. Operated by the Harbor Springs Area Historical Society and housed in the century-old former City Hall, the museum features an interactive history gallery, a family-friendly Discover Gallery and a research library.

As you explore, you'll quickly discover history is very much alive in Harbor Springs—the private Harbor Point, Wequetonsing and Roaring Brook resort associations are still active, and many summer homes are still owned by the original families.

To experience the waterfront from another perspective, stop at The Outfitter on Main Street, located in the old Lyric theater, and rent a kayak. You may also join the Petoskey Waterfront Tour, the Wilderness State Park Shoreline Tour or one of the company's weekly guided adventures, which include backyard tours, gourmet excursions and youth adventures. In addition, the Outfitter offers lessons, women's paddling events, a youth kayak club and "Workout on the Water."

When you're ready for some sustenance, grab a coffee at Woolly Buggers or the Island Bean Coffee Company. Visit the old-fashioned soda fountain at Mary Ellen's Place. Sample the pizza at Turkey's, or have a deli sandwich in the courtyard at Cornichons European Market & Deli. If you're looking for a full dining experience, visit Stafford's Pier Restaurant, built on original harbor pilings, or the New York Restaurant, also on the Harbor Springs waterfront. Dudley's Deck at the Pier is reputed to be the most famous spot for dining al fresco in northern Michigan—and the place to be on the Fourth of July.

While you're in town, check the local schedule. Harbor Springs

Little Traverse is a gateway to the Great Lakes' most beloved cruising destinations.

hosts summer arts-and-crafts fairs, live outdoor music events and performing-arts activities. Popular festivals include the Waterfront Wine Festival, the Blissfest Music Festival, Shay Days, Taste of Harbor Springs and the Harbor Harvest Festival. The biggest draws tend to be the Fourth of July festivities and the annual Little Traverse Yacht Club Regatta & One-Design Series.

If you are staying in Harbor Springs, take advantage of those day trips. Visit the 305-acre Petoskey State Park at the eastern head of the bay for sunbathing, swimming, picnicking and hiking. Just make sure to go on a calm day. As I discovered, since Little Traverse Bay is both shallow and exposed to the west, it can get rough for smaller vessels in a stiff west wind.

While at the park, you also can search for the Michigan state stone. Petoskey stones are actually 350-million-year-old fossilized coral, remnants of reef coral that lived here when it was a shallow equatorial sea. Ice-age glaciers pulled the fossils from the bedrock and smoothed them into pebbles.

Petoskey visitors enjoy a full calendar of summertime events, including festivals, sidewalk sales, craft fairs and live music.



The city of Petoskey is ground zero for concentrations of the stones, which can be found in road beds and along the shoreline. Searching crowds often gather at hotspots such as the city's Magnus and Bayfront parks, particularly after wind storms or during a mist or light rain, when the coralline patterns show more clearly.

The first missionary arrived on the bay's south shore in 1855, and the settlement came to be known as Bear River. Later renamed Petoskey for the Odawa chief Petosega, the community garnered widespread recognition when a Grand Rapids reporter waxed poetic about its "million-dollar sunsets" in 1873. By 1874, the railroads were making regular runs into Petoskey, and both tourism and industry flourished.

Passenger steamers arrived, and trains ran routes every 15 minutes between Petoskey and Harbor Springs, with other routes taking vacationers to Charlevoix and Walloon Lake. By 1890, the Lake Street and Midway shopping districts had taken shape, and today they comprise the core of Petoskey's famed Gaslight District.

Petoskey remains the tribal headquarters of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians. Like Harbor Springs, it also remains a treasured home away from home for many founding families, and it continues to draw tourists from around the Midwest and beyond.

For boaters, Petoskey Municipal Marina at Bayfront Park has a



Boaters bound for Little Traverse Bay need to keep a watchful eye on their charts or GPS units as they cruise inbound, particularly off the bay's north shore. The shoreline here is constantly curving, and it's easy to lose your bearings while sightseeing and get tangled among the reefs.

Harbor Springs lies halfway down the bay's north shore, tucked behind Harbor Point with its 1884 Little Traverse lighthouse, also affectionately known as the Harbor Point Light. Rounding the point, you'll enter the deepest natural harbor on the Great Lakes—and what may be one of America's most lovely resort communities.



Petoskey is a timeless place that exemplifies all the charms of Little Traverse Bay.

Hotel, built in 1899 on a Little Traverse Bay bluff that marks the city's highest point. Located in the heart of the Gaslight District, the Perry Hotel was one of the area's 20-plus original luxury resort hotels and now is the only one still in operation. Visitors can enjoy three dining options: the H.O. Rose Dining Room, the casual Rose Garden Veranda and the lively Noggin Room Pub.

In fact, as you walk through Petoskey's kaleidoscope of shops and galleries, you'll have many opportunities to appease the taste buds. If the shopping seems diverse, the restaurant scene may be even more so—an impressive feat for what is still, at heart, a North Woods town. Stock up on provisions at the Grain Train Natural Foods Market, Symon's General Store or Toski Sands Market & Wine Shop. Pick up sandwiches at the Flatiron Deli. Try the homemade pie at Jesperson's Restaurant, a longtime downtown eatery, and pick up an extra sweet treat at Johan's Pastry Shop, Kilwins or Murdick's.

Then there's the Roast & Toast Cafe, Mitchell Street Pub & Cafe and Julienne Tomatoes, just to name a few. There are places for Thai food, for Italian cuisine and even Polish sausages. And don't miss Stafford's Bay View Inn, with its Sunday morning buffet, and the Terrace Inn, with its outdoor veranda, walking tours and homemade foods. Both are just a short taxi ride from town.

A cab can take you to the Odawa Casino Resort, which offers gaming, shopping, dining, the O Zone nightclub and impressive live entertainment. This year's headliners include Bill Cosby in May

and rocker Joan Jett in July. The casino is operated by the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians.

Cruising boaters visiting the city in the summer months will have a full calendar of events to keep them busy. On June 19, the 2010 Petoskey Historic Festival and Taste Of The North event will feature live music, a silent auction, vintage baseball exhibitions, craft demonstrations, candle and soap making, antique bicycle demonstrations, carriage rides, petting zoo, children's activities and an old-fashioned pie eating contest.

There is the Fourth of July celebration and then, on the third Saturday in July, the Petoskey Art in the Park event. Last year, more than 130 artists' booths filled Pennsylvania Park.

On the last weekend in July, more than 100 businesses join forces for downtown's Annual Sidewalk Sales. And on the third weekend in August, the 8th Annual Festival on the Bay will feature live music, a triathlon, bay cruises, an arts-and-crafts show and a nightly sunset celebration.

Petoskey has a downtown farmer's market every Friday morning from mid-June through September. Located between JC Penney's and Julienne Tomatoes, it features fruits, vegetables,

Located in the heart of Petoskey's Gaslight District, Stafford's Perry Hotel was one of the area's original luxury resorts (bottom).

organic meats, flowers and much more. And the Charlotte Ross Lee Concerts in the Park series, now in its 29th season, takes place every Tuesday at noon and each Friday at 7 p.m.

Finally, no visit to Little Traverse Bay would be complete without a stop at Bay Harbor. While Harbor Springs' and Petoskey's roots lie firmly in the 19th century, Bay Harbor's story begins less than 20 years ago with the crumbling remains of a massive cement plant that occupied roughly 1,200 acres and five-plus miles of shoreline for more than 100 years.

In 1994, developer David V. Johnson embarked on one of North America's largest land-reclamation projects. Workers took 2.5 million cubic yards of kiln dust, formed a hilly landscape, covered it with rock and soil and created the Bay Harbor Golf Club. They demolished the smokestacks and removed the barrier between Bay Harbor and Little Traverse Bay, allowing 2.5 billion gallons of water to rush in and form Bay Harbor Lake. And they transformed the bases of several old silos into an observation platform, public fishing pier and tie-up area for large ships.

Johnson also contributed a mile of shoreline and 70 acres of land to create public parks at both ends of Bay Harbor, which are connected by five miles of nonmotorized nature trails. In between are 32 storybook neighborhoods, each with a distinct architecture. The residents' lifestyle embraces Bay Harbor's world-class assets: The golf club, with its stone clubhouse and three, nine-hole courses designed by Arthur Hills; a yacht club; an equestrian club; a swim and fitness center; and a gracious, compact downtown overflowing with an array of boutiques and restaurants. Crain's Detroit Business has proclaimed Bay Harbor a "contemporary Camelot."

Bay Harbor Lake Marina can accommodate more than 120 boats ranging from 20 to 200 feet, and the tie-up area in the 70-foot-deep harbor can handle megayachts to 280 feet and even Great Lakes cruise ships. Forty slips are set aside for transient boaters, and amenities include pumpout services, power, telephone, broadband Internet, dry-cleaning pick-up, showers, laundry facilities, and a ship's store. While the marina does not have a fuel dock, gas and diesel are available in Petoskey, just four miles east.

The Bay Harbor Yacht Club will try to accommodate transients if the public docks are full. And they often are, with up to 200 boats traveling to Bay Harbor on mid-summer weekends for sightseeing, shopping and dining.

Boaters may use the swim and fitness center. Families can also rent kayaks and paddleboats from the marina and soak up the sun across Bay Harbor Lake. The equestrian club is open to the public and offers guided trail rides, lessons and clinics.



Great Lakes boaters seem to descend on Bay Harbor for two particular reasons. First, it is the 21st century version of counterparts like Lake Geneva, Mackinac Island and, yes, Harbor Springs and Petoskey. Second, its calendar includes two hot events.

The 8th Annual Bay Harbor In-Water Boat Show is scheduled for June 18-20. Boat dealers from around the Midwest showcase vessels from personal watercraft to megayachts, and the show includes both in-water and on-land displays.

Then there's the Vintage Car & Boat Festival, slated for June 24-27. The show features classic automobiles and wooden boats; attendees also may participate in a silent auction. All events are open to the public, and the festival launches with the Northern Michigan Dream Cruise, during which vintage cars cruise the streets amid Friday evening revelry of food, drink and live entertainment.

Summertime on Little Traverse Bay is glorious, to be sure, and Petoskey, Harbor Springs and Bay Harbor are gearing up for an action-packed 2010 season. Whichever city you visit, you'll find more than enough to keep you busy and, unless you are summering in the area with unlimited time on your hands, there will be plenty to keep you coming back for more.

Don't forget the shoulder seasons, however. Spring and fall have their own unique charm.

After what proved to be a rollicking morning of surfing the waves on the bay, I returned to Harbor Springs for a savory meal at Stafford's Pier, a stroll through the friendly downtown and a warm-up visit to Woolly Buggers for a steaming latte and free Internet. Rain began to splatter the windows, providing a soothing soundtrack for the chatter inside the coffeehouse, and I realized that this particular business trip had rejuvenated me after all. Like a mini vacation.

Only a very special destination can do that. ↴

