

Weekend Getaway Brian E. Clark

Mission Point Resort is a Mackinac Island charmer

Care-free destination 'slice of Americana'

Liz Ware first saw the Mission Point Resort on the southeastern tip of Mackinac Island more than a decade ago. Though the property's 18 acres fronting Lake Huron provided a lovely setting, the hotel looked "very tired and in need of some work," she said.

But the 3.8-square-mile island, which she describes as "magical," captured her imagination. So she returned again and again as part of the Chicago Yacht Club's storied Race to Mackinac, which annually draws sev-

eral hundred sailboats for the 333-mile competition. The island, which is care-free and something of a throwback to the turn of the 20th century, is a "real slice of Americana," she said. "When I step off the ferry, I feel like I'm disconnecting from the modern world, in part because of all the horse-drawn wagons and carriages and many, many bicycles. In fact, Mackinac Island has the only state

highway where cars are forbidden. "History truly comes alive here in the town and at Fort Mackinac, which dates to the 18th century. The air is crisp and clean and there are flowers everywhere. It's hard to beat. That's why generations of families keep coming back here. And I have to say that when I leave here, I feel sad," she said.

Ware, a former Chicago resident, had no idea during her first visits that she would one day move to the island and be in charge of renovating Mission Point Resort's 241-room hotel, which her family purchased in 2014. Since then, the

Ware's have spent several million dollars on upgrades, she said.

The hotel is the second largest property on the island after the Grand Hotel, which was built in 1887 and is a National Historic Landmark.

"My father is a native of Michigan and in a sense, restoring Mission Point is his legacy for the island and the state," said Ware, who grew up in Indianapolis.

Her dad, who now lives in Texas when he's not on the island, worked in the pharmaceutical and medical device industries.

Ware, who is also restoring boutique Silver Birches Inn on the northeast side of the island, said the Mission Point hotel was built in the 1950s by the Moral Re-Armament group. This pacifist organization, which was set up before World War II and later started Up With People, used the property for conferences and other gatherings.

In the late 1950s, the MRA built an extensive training center on the site that included a theater and soundstage. The soundstage was

used for the production of movies, including "The Crowning Experience," "Voice of the Hurricane" and "Decision at Midnight." From 1966 to 1970, the hotel was home to a nonsectarian college with programs in statesmanship and leadership, as well as more traditional curricula. After the school folded, the property was purchased by John Shufelt, who ran it as a hotel until he sold it to the



MISSION POINT RESORT

Mission Point Resort's 241-room hotel on Mackinac Island has undergone renovations in recent years.

Ware's.

"One of the things that is unique about this island is that all the hotels are family run," she said. "There are no chains here like Hyatts. Mr. Shufelt was very interested in finding people who would be custodians of Mission Point and maintain its feel."

The hotel opens in May and closes at the end of October, when many of the leaves have fallen and winter is drawing near. During the last two quiet seasons, when the island's population drops to less than 500, Ware has unleashed squads of workers on the hotel.

They've installed a new, million-dollar kitchen, repainted the hotel white (from a dark green), put local artwork on the walls and redone tiling in many of the bathrooms. They've also added shops on the lower level, built a new garden cafe and added a 5,000-square-foot spa that is now the largest on the island "all to help create a better guest experience," she said.

"We're in the middle of a multiyear renovation," she said. "We'll be improving our meeting space, adding suites and doing upgrades to more of our rooms. If the demand for the spa stays

strong, we'll expand that, too."

Ware said summer is the busiest time for the hotel and the island, when thousands of guests disembark daily on ferries from St. Ignace on the Upper Peninsula and Mackinac City on the south side of the Straits of Mackinac.

Come fall, when the leaves are turning and children are back in school, the pace on the island slows down and the clientele is older with more retired visitors and couples whose children have flown the coop.

When I visited for two days in late June with my two youngest children, ages 13 and 15, we stayed in a family suite and dined at the Bistro on the Green, where the youngest ate mac and cheese, while his older sister and I split a delicious seafood bouillabaisse.

One afternoon, we went sea kayaking with a guide from the Great Turtle outfitter on Main St. who took us to Arch Rock and gave us a primer on the island's geology. We also got a history lesson up at Fort Mackinac, where soldiers in period uniforms told us about life at the fort and then fired their rifles. Later they shot off a big canyon (with

blanks) out over the yacht harbor.

On our last day, we rented bikes at the hotel and did the eight-mile spin around the island, stopping on the far side for ice cream. And because no trip to Mackinac Island would be complete without a carriage ride, we made sure to get a horse-drawn tour of the town that took us past numerous fudge shops, historic buildings, the Grand Hotel, state mansions and the summer home of Michigan's governor, which is open to the public on Wednesdays for tours.

More information: Mission Point Resort is on the east end of the island's downtown shopping district, roughly a 12-minute walk from the ferries. If you are staying overnight, a shuttle will take your luggage to your hotel. You can also hire a horse-drawn carriage.

Depending on the day and the season, room rates range from about \$119 to \$329 a night. In August, rates start at \$239 a night. The resort runs specials and packages for families, golfers, pet owners, couples and more. See missionpoint.com or call (800) 833-7711. The resort is open through the end of October.

For more things to see and do on the island, see mackinacisland.org or call (906) 847-3783.

Getting there: From Milwaukee, St. Ignace is a 365-mile drive via I-43 and Highway 2. Once there, you'll have to leave your car behind and take a ferry to Mackinac Island.

For even more of a nautical experience, travelers can take the Lake Express High Speed Ferry from Milwaukee to Muskegon, Mich., then drive north. Or take the S.S. Badger from Manitowoc to Ludington, Mich.

Brian E. Clark is a Madison writer.



Cars are not allowed on the Michigan island, so visitors get around by bike or on foot.