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History, Fudge, and Horse-Drawn Carriages: An All-American Weekend on Mackinac Island



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Mackinac Island Harbor

Photo: Alamy



Travelers are so quick to leave the country in search of remoteness and a sense of place, that it's easy to forget the United States is home to a wealth of summer playgrounds that have these things in spades. Consider Mackinac Island (the second *c* is silent). Nestled near the confluence of Lakes Huron and Michigan, this tiny, less-than-four-square-mile island has embodied the American experience since the 17th century, at successive times serving as sacred Native American land, an important military fort during the Revolutionary and 1812 wars, a fur trading post where the likes of John Jacob Astor built a fortune, and, eventually, a resort town for affluent families from Detroit and Chicago. Some people might remember it as the backdrop to the 1980 film *Somewhere in Time*, starring Jane Seymour and Christopher Reeve, but most remember it as an idyllic all-American summer destination.

Stepping onto Mackinac is like stepping back in time. With only about 400 year-round residents and a summer population that swells into the thousands, the island is strikingly well-preserved, mostly because more than 80 percent of the land is a state park. There are no cars on Mackinac, because the island folk are so aggressively intent on protecting its unique character—when the first “horseless carriage” arrived in 1898, it spooked all of the horses so badly that the town immediately passed an ordinance banning automobiles. While there is an ambulance, fire truck, and police cars, in case of emergency, you shouldn't be surprised when you call for a “taxi” and a carriage pulled by two Clydesdales pulls up. But getting around on foot, by bike, or by horse here is all part of the fun. Mackinac boasts an adorable downtown filled with Victorian houses and plenty of shops to explore. And elsewhere on the island, there are enough secluded spots for you to take in all that the Great Lakes have to offer in perfect tranquility.

So the next time you seek some waterfront R&R, you don't have to set your sights so far—there's an island getaway within our very borders. Its waters rival the Caribbean in terms of clarity (seriously, but maybe not in terms of warmth). And what Mackinac lacks in tropical weather, it makes up for in charm, beauty, and nostalgic all-American hospitality. You won't even miss the cars.

How to Get There

The nearest regional airport is in Pellston, Michigan, an effortless hour-and-15-minute flight north of Detroit. From there, you can take a shuttle to Mackinaw City, then a 15-minute ferry to Mackinac Island. Taking a small propeller plane directly from Pellston to the island is much faster—plus, you'll approach Mackinac from the sky and really see the scale and majesty of the Great Lakes. Delta flies to Pellston, and Great Lakes Air operates easy, affordable charters from there to the island.

Where to Stay

There are a sprinkling of quaint B&Bs and small, owner-operated hotels on Mackinac (like Hotel Iroquois and the Chippewa Hotel Waterfront), but the best way to get a feel for the island is to stay at one of its big summer resorts, the full-service kind that hark back to the glory days of American leisure. Think: white clapboards, picket fences, and sprawling fields dotted with Adirondack chairs. Two of the biggest resorts are perched on opposite ends of downtown—the Grand Hotel on West Bluff and Mission Point by East Bluff—and each offers a polar-opposite way to experience the island. Mission Point, under new ownership since 2014, is a refined yet relaxed approach to lakeside vacationing. With waterfront property, it sprawls over 18 fantastic acres overlooking Lake Huron.

There's live piano music in the restaurant most nights, a cozy wine bar overlooking the water, and a friendly staff dedicated to organizing activities and outings for all guests.

The Grand, on the other hand, has been owned by the same family for decades, and while certainly iconic, it offers guests a more old-world experience. There is a formal dress code in the evening, and nonguests have to pay a \$10 cover charge just to sit on the porch for drinks. It's a traditional approach to resorting that might appeal to some, but those who seek an unwinding experience will feel more at home (and at ease) at Mission Point.

What to Do

Outdoor activities is the name of the game on the island, and starting with a bike ride will help you get the lay of the land. Rent a bike either from your hotel or from Mackinac Wheels in town, then spend an hour riding the eight-mile perimeter of the island. After that, you can take your time with a more leisurely hike through the middle of the island, stopping at historic sites along the way. Start from town, head up to the East Bluff, then look for the Tranquil Bluff Trail. It will bring you over to Arch Rock, where you can stop for a photo op before strolling to St. Ann's Cemetery to try to find the oldest gravestone. From there, walk by Skull Cave and eventually make your way down to Fort Mackinac, one of the oldest, still-standing Revolutionary War-era forts in existence. If all of this sounds a bit aggressive, consider resigning yourself to one of the many horse-drawn carriage tours. Mackinac Island Carriage Tours is the oldest, continuously operating horse-and-buggy livery in the world and has been owned by the same family for generations—so they'll definitely know how to show you around the island.

Even after all that hiking, be sure to not leave Mackinac without spending an afternoon ambling through town. There's the usual resort smattering of T-shirt and tchotchke shops, but there's also a new wave of stores offering locally made artisanal trinkets and gifts, such as Canvas & Paddle, Poppins, and Little Luxuries. And whatever you do, stop into one of the many fudge shops on Main Street (we hear JoAnn's is the best). Whether you choose to indulge or not, at the very least you can spend a few minutes watching the candy-makers pour out huge slabs of molten fudge. The smell alone is worth it.

A series of annual events keeps the island full pretty consistently between Memorial Day and Labor Day. The Lilac Festival, held the second Friday of June until the third Sunday, is a highlight, as is the mouthwatering Fudge Festival in August. You might also consider visiting in July and cheer from the finish line at the Chicago Yacht Club's yearly Race to Mackinac (the oldest annual freshwater distance race in the world), where some of the finest sailboats around race one another all the way from Chicago. Wherever you are on the island and whatever you're doing, just know that all paths converge at one bar almost every single evening during the season: the Pink Pony on Main Street, which serves up live music and strong drinks.

All in all, a visit to Mackinac is pretty foolproof. If the island's ability to keep cars away for more than a century is any indication, you shouldn't worry if you don't manage to see something on your first trip—chances are, it will be waiting right there for you the next time you visit this endearing slice of Americana.