



smart travel



PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY | SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Lake Huron's quiet beauty beckons visitors to Michigan's Eastern Upper Peninsula. Homes dot the lakeshore in Les Cheneaux Islands.

MICHIGAN | Eastern Upper Peninsula is one of the world's 'last best places'

INTO THE WOODS

It's easy to savor summer and childhood memories in the North Woods.

By ANNE Z. COOKE
Special to The Star

HESSEL, Mich. | The cottage looked just as I remembered it, although I hadn't been there for years.

A turn-of-the-century log cabin, darkened by age, it stood at the end of the lane beneath a stand of tall pines, a forest so quiet and cool it seemed lost in time. Lake Huron gleamed through

the undergrowth, silvery streaks winking among the branches.

For a moment we were alone with our thoughts, remembering. Then the back door opened, and Margy, our host for this impromptu high school reunion on Michigan's Eastern Upper Peninsula, hurried out to meet us. Smiling, she hugged me, and the years dropped away.

If you were born and bred in the shade of the North Woods, you know what "HOMES" stands for. The true test for any son or daughter of the Upper Midwest, it was my dad's favorite

riddle, a tradition he trotted out at the end of every long car trip.

"Where's home with an s?" he'd ask, grinning into the rearview mirror, while we three kids, crowded into the backseat, squealed in unison, "Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie and Superior!"

If you lived in Chicago, as we did, most of those lakes were just names. But not Lake Michigan, a few blocks away. Its sandy shores and gentle waves were our personal inland ocean. We spent many hot summer

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WOODS: Residents help preserve wilderness areas

FROM G1

days at the beach, pretending to ignore our male classmates.

Even better were the August weeks we spent with my grandmother at Loon Lake, near Cecil, Wis. Her green-roofed cottage, shaded by birch trees, had a screened porch, a cold-water pump that wheezed when you cranked it, a narrow pier that ran out into the lake and a drafty two-seater out-house.

Eventually I discovered that thousands of lakes spangle the great North Woods, like city lights on a dark night. And then Margy joined our circle of friends. Each summer, when school was out, she and her family headed for their cottage in Hessel, on Lake Huron.

There, deep in the woods and with few neighbors, the Raymonds shed their city skins. They lived in their bathing suits. They picked blueberries. They cruised the bay on their speed boat. They water-skied, launching themselves straight off the dock, a stunt I secretly envied.

Mr. Raymond, an enthusiastic fisherman, kept the frying pan busy. And the Raymonds were generous to a fault. Each summer after the school year ended, they invited a bunch of us up to the lake for a week.

What better place, then, for old friends to laugh over the past, update the present and, for me especially, see whether time and tourism had spoiled Hessel's quiet simplicity.

Thirty years ago summer meant downtime. You dunked in the lake, sunned on the sand, picked flowers in the meadows and read novels on the front porch. Adults watched the sun go down. Kids swam in the lake and prowled the woods unsupervised.

But with tourism on the rise, Clark County's 2,000 residents have adapted. Hessel and neighboring Cedarville, now linked as Les Cheneaux Islands, cater to visitors with restaurants, snack shops, motels, cottages, B&B's, gift stores, boat docks and sports rentals.

"Green" before it was a sound bite, the community was quick to realize that the Eastern Upper Peninsula is, in the words of the Nature Conservancy, one of the world's "last best places." Although many old forests were already in national or state parks, additional tracts of private land were protected when their owners donated them to conservancy groups.

"You ought to walk through the Oliver and Edna Birge Nature Preserve," Margy said. "There's a nice nature trail there. The Birge family — they were my mother's friends — donated it to the community to save it from being subdivided and developed. After that, talk to Jessie Hadley. She's done her best to cultivate and enhance a love of nature, sans Jet Skis and snowmobiles."

Hadley, 37, the owner of Woods & Water Ecotours, is Hessel's go-to girl for outdoor recreation, as well as for information about local history, sightseeing, wilderness destinations and conservation efforts on the Eastern Upper



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Summer guests relax on Margy Long's front porch in Hessel, Mich.



Peninsula.

"The Nature Conservancy saw what was happening, so they bought private land and transferred it to local preservation agencies," she said. "If you're into wilderness, or natural history or geology, or kayaking and camping, or just sightseeing, you can find some amazing places around here."

In summer, Hadley's staff leads guided kayaking, canoeing, hiking and biking tours through Les Cheneaux Islands. Her regular themed trips include birding, botany, geology, cave tours and moonlight paddles, but she will also customize half-day, full-day or overnight trips for couples, families and small groups.

"If my clients are interested, I'll even book their lodging," she said. Her store, rental shop and boat house in Hessel (it's the big red house with the yellow trim) sells outdoor gear, clothes and camping equipment; she also rents kayaks, canoes, paddleboats, wet suits, mountain bikes and related sports gear.

After Margy's parents died, she and her brother inherited the cottage. During one very busy summer, when Hadley could not find enough lodging for a prospective tour group, Margy volunteered to house them. Since then she has run an informal B&B, hosting guests some summer weeks.

If you're staying at her place you can swim and sun in front of her house off a small beach, half sand and half rocks, alongside the pier.



Chris Sutton, daughter Arla and a neighbor build sand castles beside Lake Huron, Mich.

The house, decorated with 1950s cottage-style furniture, has a spacious living room with an oversized fireplace, shelves stuffed with books, and a large dining room wing. A serving pantry, piled high with stacks of dishes and glassware, connects the dining room to a large kitchen, with a table big enough to seat eight.

Upstairs, seven small bedrooms paneled in fir have twin or double beds with down comforters, dressers and closets. Some bedrooms share a bathroom. One has a private bath. Historic photographs, watercolors, posters and photos of friends and favorite fishing boats of yore recall the Raymonds' early years in Hessel.

A covered front porch, running the length of the house, overlooks Lake Huron, with Marquette, Goat and Long islands on the horizon and Avery Point in the near distance. There and on some of the larger islands, families from Chicago, Cleveland and Detroit have owned cottages for a century. Some are now operated as seasonal B&B's; lists are available on local Web sites.

Wherever you stay, pack a picnic lunch and spend a day at Margy's favorite stretch of

shoreline, a gently curving arc of white sand known as Sandy Beach. This primo location, ideal for jogging and building sand castles, is about eight miles east, past Cedarville, on Lake Huron Scenic Drive (Michigan 134). The nearby sand dunes are popular with photographers.

Our week was gone in a moment but felt like forever. We hiked in the woods behind the house, compared book clubs, talked politics to death, discussed ex-husbands and pored over the graduation photographs in our high school yearbook. We shopped in Hessel and swam in the lake. We didn't water ski, but we walked on the beach and tossed endless tennis balls to Margy's chocolate Lab.

As for our reunion, it was a shot in the arm. So wonderful, in fact, that we're doing it again this year, this time in Colorado. We've gone our separate ways, but it hasn't mattered. Growing up in the same town, with the same neighbors and in the same schools, forged a lifelong bond. As did our long-ago summers in Hessel's North Woods.

Anne Z. Cooke is a freelance writer in Marina del Rey, Calif.

TRAVELER'S CHECK | LES CHENEUX ISLANDS

Getting there

Hessel and neighboring Cedarville make up Les Cheneaux Islands on the Eastern Upper Peninsula of Michigan, about 890 miles from Kansas City.

You can fly to the Chippewa County International Airport, serving Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., and drive to Hessel, but it is expensive. Round-trip, restricted airfare from Kansas City recently started about \$740. Sault Ste. Marie is about 25 miles north of Hessel.

Other options: Fly to Chicago (airfare from about \$145), rent a car and drive the 450 miles to Hessel, or fly to Detroit (airfare from about \$265), about 325 miles from Hessel.

Where to stay

■ Lakeview Motel & Cottages, 3078 W. Lake St., Hessel. Cottages for one to four, \$135. 906-484-2474.

■ Hessel Bay Sunset, 3347 W. Lake St., Hessel. Cabins for one to four, \$135 a night. 906-484-3913, www.hessel-sunsetcabins.com.

■ Hessel on the Lake, 210 Island View Road, Hessel. Two-bedroom cabins, \$1,425 a week. 800-243-1299, www.hesselonthelake.com.

■ Hills Point Resort, 484 S. Hill Island Road, Cedarville. Two-bedroom cabins for four from \$205. 800-378-2876, www.hillspointresort.com.

■ The Raymond Cottage B&B, 3503 S. Mill Pond, Hessel. Five rooms, some with shared bath. \$125. 906-484-3954.

Where to eat

■ The Hessel Bay Inn, Lake Street on the Harbor, Hessel. Fresh lake trout, perch and lobster, prime rib,

goulash, salad bar and homemade soups. \$11 and up. 906-484-2460.

■ Ang-Gio's, 232 W. Michigan 134, Cedarville. Restaurant and bar with a casual menu with pasta, pizza, steaks and salads. Daily specials run about \$9. 906-484-3301.

■ Pammi's Restaurant, 54 W. Michigan 134, Cedarville. Family restaurant open for lunch and dinner. Fresh lake trout and perch, sandwiches, chicken and soups. \$7 and up. 906-484-7844.

Recreation

■ Woods & Water Ecotours, 20 Pickford Ave., Hessel. 906-484-4157 or www.woodswaterecotours.com.

■ Ask about camping available in the vicinity, near Search Bay Beach and near St. Martin's Point.

■ For the Hiawatha National Forest, west of Hessel, see www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/hiawatha.

■ For books, visit the Village Idiom Bookshop, on Pickford south of Michigan 134.

■ For games, puzzles and gifts, visit the Pickle Point Store, at the Hessel Harbor.

On the Web

■ Les Cheneaux Islands Area Tourist Association: www.lescheneaux.org.

■ Les Cheneaux Islands Chamber of Commerce: www.lescheneaux.net/lodging.html.

■ Eastern Upper Peninsula Nature Tourism Alliance: www.greatwaters.net.

■ Online guide to *Hunts' Guide to Michigan's Upper Peninsula*, by Mary and Don Hunt: www.hunts-upguide.com/hessel.html.

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