



Harbor Country

Come for the beach, stay for the adventure sports

Photo by Mike Killian

Terry Richardson rides a wave near New Buffalo, Mich., rated by Outside magazine as one of the best places in the country to learn to surf.

By Suzanne Hurt
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Harbor Country often is thought of as back-in-the-day beach towns whose names whisper timeless Americana and the comfort of a good B&B. But the southwestern corner of Michigan is morphing into an adventure-sports mecca just 90 minutes from Chicago.

"It's like Chicago's backyard playground," said surfer Ryan Gerard, the 30-year-old owner of Third Coast Surf Shop in New Buffalo. "We've got quite a few activities a lot of people don't even know are possible in this area."

Harbor Country consists of inland Three Oaks and seven lake-side communities stretching from the Indiana/Michigan state line north to Warren Dunes: Michiana, Grand Beach, New Buffalo, Union Pier, Lakeside, Harbert and Sawyer.

This place is earning its adventure credentials: Outside magazine rates New Buffalo as one of the country's best places to learn to surf. Hang gliding started nearly simultaneously in two places: Germany and Warren Dunes. Three Oaks' Apple Cider Century, set for Sept. 28, has become the Midwest's biggest 100-mile, single-day cycling event. And on Sept. 13, nearby Michigan City, Ind., holds its first Eco-Fit Challenge providing a chance to kayak, run and play beach volleyball.

Want more? The area's also prime territory for kite surfing, sandboarding, skimboarding, paddleboarding and bodyboarding.

For decades, Chicagoans have fled the sweltering city in summer for the endless beaches with sugar-soft sand, closer-to-nature lifestyle and a slower pace. The summer of 1974, my family traded our Park Ridge house for a cabin a few sandy steps from Lake Michigan. One day my sister and I found two boys surfing a dune on wood boards. The air crackled with romance when they shared their sandboards so we could ride.

Chicagoans who grew up on Michigan and Indiana summers rediscovered the place in the 1980s. Now escapist who live by the "work hard, play hard" mantra are recognizing the adventure-sports potential. They're bringing weekend-warrior toys and disposable income to the other

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Tribune file photo

Extreme sports aren't the only activities; there's always just plain sitting.



SOURCES: ESRI, TeleAtlas

TRIBUNE GRAPHIC

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—surf shop owner Ryan Gerard

Topless Vegas pool isn't exactly for cooling off

By Jay Jones
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Going topless at some of the biggest resorts in Las Vegas is nothing new, but the growing popularity means an increasing number of properties are welcoming women who want an almost-all-over tan.

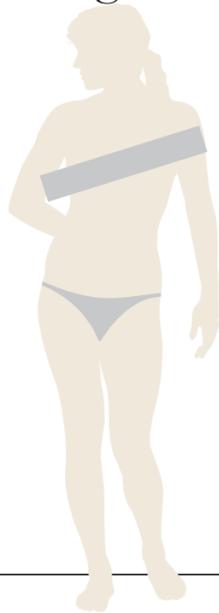
The resorts prefer to call them "European" instead of "topless" pools. Caesars Palace opened the first such venue more than 20 years ago, and its Venus pool still ranks among the more popular places to shed a bikini top.

A total of 10 Vegas hotels now offer topless pools. The newest, at the Rio, opened earlier this summer. Music and live DJs are nothing new at such pools, but the Rio's Sapphire provides additional

entertainment—the hotel describes it as "eye candy"—in the form of strippers from a nearby gentlemen's club who gyrate pool-side.

Ladies also can dare to be bare at the Flamingo, Golden Nugget, Hard Rock, Mandalay Bay, Mirage, Stratosphere and Wynn resorts. The Venetian is considering whether to continue to allow topless sunbathing at its Tao Beach pool. Don't worry if this isn't your scene; all of these hotels also offer family-friendly sunning and swimming.

Some topless pools are restricted to use by people staying on-property. Others allow guests, but expect to pay a cover charge. Be sure to bring plenty of sunscreen; seldom-bared body parts are no match for the desert sun. (Ouch!)



Some questions ARE stupid

We don't really need any more ugly Americans stories floating around overseas, but we're afraid it probably was a Yank visiting the more-than-1,300-year-old Whitby Abbey on the northeast coast of England who asked, "Why did they build so many ruined castles and abbeys in England?"

That's one of the more stellar examples of embarrassing questions asked by tourists, according to English Heritage, which is charged with maintaining hundreds of England's most historic sites.

We prefer to think it was a Brit, though, and fan of his countryman heavy-metal rocker Ozzy Osbourne, who visited Osborne House, Queen Victoria's summer palace, and asked, "Is this where

Sharon and Ozzy actually live?"

More dumb questions:

- "Can you tell me where I can see the Hobbits?"—at Kenwood House, Hampstead.
- "How long does life membership last?"—at Osborne House, Isle of Wight.
- "Are the tunnels underground?"—at Dover Castle and Secret Wartime Tunnels, Kent.
- "Is this Dracula's castle?"—at Whitby Abbey, North Yorkshire.
- "What time do you switch the mist off?"—at Dover Castle and Secret Wartime Tunnels.
- "Is that a man-made jetty?"—pointing at a 300-million-year-old rock formation at Dunstanburg Castle, Northumberland.

—Phil Marty

Geoquiz: Where in the Midwest will the Republican National Convention take place this week?

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West Coast.

In June, I jumped at the chance to stay with friends at their Michigan City beach house and sandboard at Warren Dunes State Park just north of Sawyer.

The sand was already toasty when we hiked up the biggest dune. We were catching our breath when a teen named Nick offered to show us the best dunes nearby. The dunes were empty, their sand pristine. Nick explained the basics. You can't learn to sandboard without taking a few falls. We yelled the same advice whenever someone tumbled: "Try to stay limp!"

We graduated to steeper, longer slopes. Waxing the boards only made us go faster. With each ride down, summers flew backward until I felt so much like that kid in 1974 that I almost forgot we'd lost our Gumby-esque rubberness. Then my friend Adam rocketed out of control on his well-waxed board, cracking a rib.

I found most of the sports centered on the beach. Harbor Country has only two public beaches—3-mile Warren Dunes and 1,100-foot New Buffalo City Beach. Michigan City offers a 1.9-mile beach and one end of Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore.

Chicago-area residents such as hard-core surfer/kite surfer Scott Guhlstorff, 41, of River Forest come here because the city bans them from surfing or kite surfing at Chicago beaches (although Montrose is known as an unofficial kite-surfing beach). They can do both in Harbor Country.

"Here I am landlocked, and I'm lucky enough to have this crazy inland sea that has a world of possibilities just around the corner," Guhlstorff said.

Surfing

Surfing Lake Michigan won't pit you against the world's hugest waves, like northern California's Maverick's or Maui's Jaws. Still, when you can shoot the curl on 14-foot waves on a Great Lake, it ain't too shabby. Harbor Country delivers plenty of stoke with waves reaching 9 to 14 feet fall through spring. Guhlstorff even shredded on 15-footers last fall.

About 150 regulars surf the southern end of the lake. Harbor Country is so choice due to its location on the lake. Waves need space to build. Storm winds push waves south for 300 miles, building force and delivering the biggest at the bottom. Good days come after a storm, leaving well-formed waves to roll in for a day or so. Summer brings small waves perfect for learning. Die-hard surfers get out there even on stormy days and in winter.

"We surf when it's 10 degrees and there's icebergs out there," Guhlstorff said. "It's almost playing with death when it's that cold. If anything goes wrong, you may not come back. But the waves are just so good that time of year that you've got to go."

Best places: Rock jetties (leeward side) at Washington Park in Michigan City and New Buffalo City Beach.

Sandboarding

Chicagoans aren't the only ones coming here to sandboard monster dunes. Sandboard makers from Oregon, where the sport is huge, are roadtripping here. Gerard suspects facetime with their Michigan buyers is just a cover story.

"They come to Michigan to ride our dunes. That's how good they are," he said.

Warren Dunes officials ask sandboarders to help prevent erosion by sticking to bare dunes. Tower Hill, the park's highest dune, which sits next to the parking lot, is an exception.

Best places: Warren Dunes; Washington Park for beginners/small kids; Grand Mere State Park, Stevensville.

Kite surfing/kiteboarding

Kite surfing. Kiteboarding. Flysurfing. Whatever you call it, it's storming Harbor Country. Guhlstorff estimated that about 400 hip Chicagoans are traveling here this summer just to kite surf, up from about 250 last year and 100 in 2005.

The lake's southeastern corner is a sweet kite-surfing spot due to storm-backed sideshore winds in spring and fall and beach thermals in July and August. Thermals bring breezes almost daily as tremendous heat rises from the sand and cold air rushes off the lake to replace it. The surfers use a kite to propel themselves across the water.

Conditions have been as good as almost any place in the world this summer as alternating cold and warm fronts bring steady wind, Guhlstorff said.

Lessons are essential. Kite surfers play in extreme conditions, so they must become expert enough to navigate micro-weather systems and to ride large surf and strong winds.

Best places: Washington Park Beach; South Haven (north of Harbor Country).

Paddleboarding

Paddleboarding is revving up as another "new" watersport with ancient ties. And some see huge potential here.

Stand-up paddleboarders, or paddle surfers, stand on long boards and use 6-foot paddles. Any body of water works—oceans, lakes, ponds and rivers.

The practice survives from early water-oriented cultures such as that of Hawaii. But today, most people paddleboard as a fun way to build balance and core strength.

"When you actually try it and see how much fun it is to stand up above the water, it's an incredible experience," Gerard said.

Best places: Lake Michigan (dynamic and huge) and Galien River (mellow and slow, with views of plants and wildlife).

Hang gliding/paragliding

Warren Dunes packs a mystique among hang gliders because it is connected to the equipment's origins. In the 1890s, engineer Octave Chanute chose the dunes for some of his biplane hang glider's first flights because the dunes are big—Tower Hill's about 120 feet high, or 284 feet above the lake—and there's good space below for landings.

The dunes are bigger and better than those in popular Monterey, Calif., and Nags Head, N.C. Here, hang gliders go higher and farther because the coast is lined with dunes and bluffs, which provide lift to stay airborne, said Skokie hang glider Angelo Mantas, 53.

"I think the dunes are an undiscovered gem," he said.



Tribune file photo

The more traditional pursuits still go on in Harbor Country, but bathers should also be aware that lake currents can be dangerous.



Photo by Michael Hoffman

Paddlers up a creek in Michigan City, Ind.



Photo by Angelo Mantas

Angelo Mantas of Chicago rides the wind at the bottom of Lake Michigan.



Photo By Jason Lukas

Skimboarding supposedly started in Laguna Beach, Calif.

Lake wind is less predictable than ocean. That, and new local restrictions, have pushed the most experienced hang gliders to start paying ultralight pilots to tow gliders into the air near Kankakee, Ind., and elsewhere.

Best place: Tower Hill, Warren Dunes. Permit \$33/year or \$11/day.

Kayaking

Kayaking, whether white-water or flat-water, is just catching on here. Only last year, paddlers opened up wild Trail Creek near Michigan City by clearing log jams. More and more people are kayaking on the lake.

On Saturday, Sept. 13, kayakers (and canoeists) can kick it up a notch in the first Michigan City Eco-Fit Challenge, where people can compete in a single sport (such as Ride the Wave Regatta, a 16K paddle on Lake Michigan) or 10K on Class I Trail Creek), a biathlon (kayak and 8K run/5K walk) or the Eco-Fit Crazy Tri (kayak, run and beach volleyball).

For an easy trip, Outpost Sports will shuttle people and their rented kayaks up the Galien River for a two-hour paddle/float

down a Class 1 section, through a beautiful marsh and into New Buffalo harbor. Cost: \$50.

Best places: Galien River; Trail Creek; Washington Park Beach kayak rentals.

Skimboarding

Skimboarding is an emerging beach sport in which a running skimboarder hops on the board to skim across sand and shallow water and then sometimes bank off incoming waves and ride them back in. Some people skim just on wet sand and an inch or so of water.

Third Coast Surf Shop offers skimboarding lessons that teach warm-up exercises, equipment handling, water awareness and the basics of holding, running, throwing and riding skimboards.

Best places: All beaches, including New Buffalo at the mouth of the Galien River.

Cycling

Cycling's not an adventure sport. But when waves and wind aren't ripping, it's still a great way to get outside. Especially when you're hammering out 50 to 100 miles in a day. Harbor Country is crisscrossed by miles

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

Amtrak stops in Michigan City, Ind., and New Buffalo, Mich.; one-way tickets start at \$12 and \$16.

SPORT SUPPLIERS

Dewey Cannon Trading Co./Three Oaks Spokes Bicycle Club, 3 E. Central Ave. (soon to be Dewey Cannon Avenue), Three Oaks; 269-756-3361 or 888-877-2068; www.applecidercentury.com/dctc.htm. Bike rentals (\$15 a day or \$35 a week), tourist and cycling information and maps, refreshments.

Outpost Sports, 105 W. Buffalo St., New Buffalo; 269-469-4210; www.outpostsports.com. Rents/sells kayaks, skimboards, bodyboards, bikes (bikes are \$30 a day or \$100 a week) and beach toys. Trips: Galien River kayaking, \$50.

Third Coast Surf Shop, 22 S. Smith St., New Buffalo; 269-932-4575; www.thirdcoastsurfshop.com. Rents/sells surfboards, kayaks, stand-up paddleboards, skimboards, sandboards, bodyboards, wetsuits. Lessons: Surfing, sandboarding, paddleboarding, skimboarding. Events: Group stand-up paddling sessions, 11 a.m. every other Saturday, New Buffalo Waterfront Park and Beach. Free, including gear.

MACKite, 106 Washington Ave., Grand Haven (north of Harbor Country), 616-846-7501 or 800-622-4655; www.mackkiteboarding.com. Kiteboarding lessons and camps, \$299-\$625.

STAYING THERE

Best towns to stay in: Union Pier or New Buffalo, Mich., and Michigan City, Ind. For more information: www.harborcountry.org

Warren Dunes State Park campground, \$16-\$27, 800-447-2757.

Gordon Beach Inn (state historical site), \$85-\$175, 269-469-0800, www.gordonbeachinn.com.

Lakeside Inn, \$90-\$210, 269-469-0600, www.lakesideinns.com; both in Union Pier.

New Buffalo Inn, \$125-\$375, 269-469-1000, www.newbuffaloinn.com; the **Harbor Grand**, \$299-\$349, 888-605-6800, www.harborgrand.com;

Marina Grand Resort, \$289-339, 877-945-8600, www.marinagrandresort.com; all in New Buffalo.

Blue Chip Casino Hotel, Michigan City, 219-879-7711 or 888-879-7711, www.bluechipcasino.com.

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EVENTS

Michigan City Eco-Fit Challenge, Sept. 13, Washington Park, Michigan City, www.toweronline.org/eco-fit/index.html. Cost: \$10-\$35 per person.

Apple Cider Century, Sept. 28, 25- to 100-mile bicycle ride, 269-756-3361 or 888-877-2068; www.applecidercentury.com. Cost: \$20.

of bicycle routes and hassle-free country roads taking cyclists past fragrant orchards, woods and vineyards.

"The hills are rolling, and you'd feel like you're in Tuscany or Napa if you didn't know better," said cyclist J.V. Peacock, 59, whose New Buffalo shop, Outpost Sports, rents and sells bicycles.

The Apple Cider Century, one of the country's first big rides, has introduced thousands of cyclists to the area's riding potential since 1974. Former Three Oaks Mayor Bryan Volstorff created the ride and established 14 marked bike routes from 5 to 60 miles.