

TRAVEL

Visit Harbor Country - The Sparkling Jewel of Lake Michigan

Hugging the shores of Lake Michigan are the eight towns of Harbor Country, stretching for 15 miles along the southwest Michigan coast. Here you'll discover family-friendly



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beaches, eclectic eateries, world-class wineries, bountiful farmers markets, even a casino. Whether you're planning a romantic getaway, fun-filled family vacation, or just some time to relax, you'll find it all just a 90-

minute drive from Chicago.

Having never been to the New Buffalo/ Union Pier area before, I could tell this was one great find. Everywhere I went, people were leisurely walking, riding bikes, watching the sailboats from the lakefront parks, or just naturally enjoying a summer's day. Perhaps that's why the area has been the summer home of former Mayor Daley's family for years. Ditto current Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

Harbor Grand, Grand Indeed

Our home for this getaway was the Harbor Grand, a luxurious waterfront inn in New Buffalo. The location is perfect, just a short walk to the quaint downtown and beach. Your stay includes breakfast in bed at your convenience - can't beat that! Choose from homemade granola, yogurt, fresh fruit, cereal, Michigan blueberry muffins, bagels, and beverages, delivered in a picnic basket right to your door. Got an urge for ice cream? They'll deliver Ben and Jerry's, 24 hours a day. With complimentary bicycle rentals, beach chairs, and beach towels, you get the idea you can just show up and relax!

Some of the boutique hotel's other amenities include spa showers, plush luxury bedding, a fireplace, and Jacuzzi. Sharing a glass of Riesling while watching the sun set at the Terrace Room was pure magic. At night, the Terrace's open fire pit beckons with a warm glow against the night sky and marina lights. You never want to leave.

Their sister property a few blocks down is the Marina Grand, offering boutique-style residential accommodations from one to three-bedroom suites. The Marina Grand also boasts "artisan comfort cuisine" at Bentwood Tavern as well as a coffee bar.

"The beauty of New Buffalo is that it's truly a beach town," said Robert Kemper, Managing Director of the Toast Hotel Group. "You can easily walk to the beach, shopping, restaurants, and ice cream. There's a real sense of community here."

For special packages and reservations, call 888-605-6800. Harborgrand.com.

Take the train

With Amtrak's nonstop service from Union Station to New Buffalo several times a day, you can be ready to kick back in an hour. The train stops right in the middle of the town, providing easy access to many B&Bs, cottages, and row houses.

Uncork the Michigan Wine Trail

Considered the Napa Valley of the Midwest, there are a dozen wineries in the area that offer tastings. Check out the Lake Michigan Shore Wine County Wine Trail Map and be on your way. Here are just a few I enjoyed. Lakemichiganshorewinetrail.com.

At Tabor Hill Winery and Restaurant in Buchanan, I learned why Michigan is such an ideal region. "The land and climate of Southwest Michigan replicate some of the finest grape growing regions in France," said Paul Landeck, General Manager of the winery. "Tabor Hill was the first in the Midwest to plant European vinifera grape varieties and determine which of these noble grapes were hardy enough to withstand Michigan's roller coaster climate." The

results were spectacular. Taborhill.com.

Free Run Cellars in Berrien Springs is a boutique winery that specializes in small batch, more experiential vineyard wines. "It's based on the desire to explore new ideas," said General Manager Nichole Moersch. "Our passion for the spirits of Northern France has enabled us to create our own version of these French-style wines." After sampling the Balaton Cherry, we fell in love and brought some home. Freeruncellars.com.

The Round Barn in Baroda, housed in Michigan's largest barn, is a unique distillery, microbrewery, and winery - also owned by the Moersch family. Between the wine, vodka, and beer, Round Barn is one spirited destination. Come celebrate the grape harvest Aug. 27-28 or spend a weekend picking grapes from their vineyard and handcrafting your own wine Oct. 1-2. Roundbarnwinery.com.

At most wineries, we saw stretch limos and inquired as to who the celebrities were. No, there were no celebrities. We found out they were the safest way to enjoy wine tastings. These limos took the group from place to place, ensuring a good time for all. Fruitfulvinetours.com.

This is Blueberry Country

Come pick your own at the Blueberry Patch in Sawyer. Or bring home blueberry blossom honey, pottery, soap, preserves, and more. Opens mid-July. Facebook.com/pages/the-blueberry-patch.

Climb the Dunes

Warren Dunes State Park is a wonderful place to bring the kids. Explore the dunes that rise 240 feet above the shoreline, beautiful beaches, hiking trails, and guided nature walks. On a clear day, you can see the Chicago skyline across from the top of the Tower Hill sand dune! Michigan.gov/warrendunes.

Acorn Theater

Just minutes from New Buffalo is the town of Three Oaks, where many artists take up residence. Housed in a turn-of-the-century former corset factory, the Acorn Theater produces more than 100 shows a year. Music, comedy, drama, and more draw visitors from around the area. Co-owner David Fink says that performers like this venue because it "affords them a very intimate space with the audience." Be sure to peruse the Wine Shop inside the theater. The Platters will perform Aug. 5-6. Check out the year-round calendar for more. Acorntheater.com.

Open Air European Farmer's Market

Located on Red Arrow Highway in front of Skip's Restaurant, this market features everything from home-grown fruits and vegetables to fresh baked goods, lush flowers, handmade jewelry, and more. Hours are 9am-2:30pm Saturday and Sunday thru mid-October.

If You're Feeling Really Lucky

Four Winds Casino and Resort is just down the road in New Buffalo. With its sheer magnitude and Potawatomi-designed influences, this Las Vegas-style gaming, dining, shopping, and entertainment venue is something to see. Four Winds Casino and Resort even meets the train and provides shuttle service to and from the resort. Fourwindscasino.com.

Dining Recommendations

Gourmet dining at Timothy's in Union Pier's historic Gordon Beach Inn. Fabulous salads and sandwiches at Wheatberry Tavern in Buchanan. Fun, rooftop experience and lovely harbor views at The Stray Dog. Oinks for ice cream in New Buffalo.

Looking Ahead

Harbor Country is a year-round destination, so make plans for these upcoming events:



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Harbor Country offers everything from family-friendly beaches to world-class wineries.

+ Aug. 12-14, *New Buffalo Ship and Shore Festival* - Boat parade, music, food, kids' activities, art, and fireworks. Newbuffalo.org.

+ Aug. 20, *The Umbrellas of Harbert* - Artistic beach umbrellas will be auctioned off for charity with music, food, and wine. Harbert-michigan.com.

+ Sept. 25, *Apple Cider Century Bicycle Tour* - Routes of a 15-100 mile bicycle tour of the orchards, forests, and wine country. Applecidercentury.com.

As I drove up and down Red Arrow

Highway, I couldn't help but be taken in by the simplistic charm of these beachside towns with their quiet serenity and relaxing cottage neighborhoods - all so close to Chicago. I'm happy it's nearby. I'm planning to go back. And often. Harborcountry.com.

Mira Temkin is a Highland Park-based freelance writer whose articles have appeared in Chicago Tribune, Family Time Magazine, and six-00-three-five magazine. In addition, she is a high-energy copywriter working with advertising and marketing services clients. She can be reached at miratemkin@gmail.com.

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