



Haven of Horses and History

Mackinac Island is a lush resort where the pace of life hasn't changed in over a century

By Wendy and Rob Lindsay

The 15-minute ferry ride to Mackinac Island is like a portal into another era. As you cross the Straits of Mackinac (pronounced MACK-in-aw), the graceful arches of the five-mile (eight-kilometre) Mackinac Bridge—which joins Michigan's Upper and Lower Peninsulas—loom to the west. As you near the shore, the scenery provides glimpses into the past: large Victorian houses (locally called “summer cottages”) cover the

hillside, a whitewashed stone fort commands the summit, and the stately white columns of the Grand Hotel look as regal as the day it opened in 1887.

And when you disembark, a line of horse-drawn carriages and coaches completes the illusion. No, there's no wedding or special occasion; this is the way things are done on Mackinac. Here horses are king, with bicycles a close second, ever since motorized vehicles were banned in 1898.

If you're staying at the Grand Hotel, look for the splendid maroon opera coaches that will carry you up the hill.

Horsepower

Located in Lake Huron south of Sault Ste. Marie, ON, the 9.8-square kilometre (3.8-square mile) island is home to about 500 permanent residents. You can rest assured that the radar-equipped passenger ferries will run fair or fog because the resort depends on a



Photo: Michael Strizich/Flickr.
Photo: Peter Arnold, Inc./Alamy (aerial view); Lindsay Editorial (carriage).

daily supply of workers and tourists from the mainland from May to mid-October. Every summer the population swells to over 17,000—“summer people,” tourists, workers, and more than 600 horses. The horses are ferried to work on the island early in the spring.

prancing up to your door. If you love horses, this is your haven.

There's a long history of Canadians working with the horses here. Armand “Smi” Horn, of Mackinac Island Carriage Tours, explains, “We've been employing Canadians for many years, both males and females,

as drivers, dispatchers, and even a farrier. Recently we've been slowed down by US visa rules for importing workers, but, despite that, there are always at least 10 or 12 Canadian workers with us each summer.” Smi adds with a grin, “Yep, Canadians know their horses and that's what we need here.”

Over at the Grand Hotel stables, which are open to the



public, horse master Ben Mosley proudly shows the impressive, gleaming collection of antique carriages used for special occasions. “We keep an eye on the horses at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto,” he confides. “Many of our island horses are Canadian bred.”

“Fudgies”

The island is like a wrinkle in time. There are neither garish neon lights nor gaudy signs along the streets filled with cyclists, walkers, and horse-drawn vehicles. The shops and houses look as if they belong in a Victorian picture book. Gardens are tidy and lush. Wide verandas are cool and inviting with porch swings and wicker furni-



The Grand Hotel (below) advertises its porch (left) as the longest in the world.

ture. The breeze off the lake is fresh and crisp. This is indeed a genteel summer spot.

The streets along the East Bluff and West Bluff are fun to walk or cycle. This land along the scenic ridges was originally leased to cottagers by the Federal, later the State Park, and the present owners were luckily “grandfathered in” before the practice was stopped in 1920. The original cottages were very modest summer dwellings, but after the opening of the Grand Hotel most were enlarged or replaced by the large elaborate Victorian homes there today. Many are among the numerous bed and breakfasts on the island.

The gardens here on the Bluffs, around the Grand Ho-

tel, and indeed all over the island are vibrant and beautiful, thanks in part to the horses and the abundant supply of manure. There are plans afoot to increasingly make the island green with the use of wind power and the possibility of using the manure to create methane gas. The Grand Hotel has won awards for its green initiatives.

A Mackinac Island Carriage Tour is a great introduction to the island. Your knowledgeable teamster/guide will point out the numerous historic sites and tell you about the island’s link to native lore, the legend of Skull Cave (a native burial

site), and how Arch Rock—a natural stone arch 45 metres (146 feet) in the air—was formed. The pristine natural park through which you travel covers 80 per cent of the island and was the second US National Park, created after Yellowstone. Later it was converted to Michigan’s first State Park.

The park and the rolling, wooded island are interlaced with 100 kilometres (60 miles) of trails. Lake Shore Road circles the island in one 13-kilometre (eight-mile) loop, making it ideal for biking or jogging. If you’re hungry after all that fresh air and exercise, you may wish to head downtown.

As you ride along the main street, there’s a sweet, sweet chocolaty aroma, even stronger than the inevitable “essence of horse.” It’s the other thing the island is famous for: fudge, the famous Mackinac fudge. It’s eaten on the spot, carried in bags, tucked into picnic baskets, or packed into fancy boxes to be mailed home. Apparently the first candy kitchen appeared shortly after the Grand Hotel opened and by the 1920’s the island was known for its fudge. A favourite attraction for tourists of all ages is watching candy-makers mould mounds of warm fudge on marble slabs. In fact, “Fudgies” is the nickname islanders give to visitors. Over a dozen shops create this enticing delicacy daily, and there seems to be a competition to have the largest variety of flavours—and they’re all good!

World’s Longest Porch

No trip to the island would be complete without at least a visit to the venerable Grand Hotel. A

stay here isn’t cheap, but full breakfast and dinner are included. (If you’re not a registered guest, there’s a small ad-

mission charge deductible from a hotel meal or a drink at the Cupola Bar.) It’s fun to stroll the famous 200-metre-long (660

Photo: Lindsay Editorial (ferry).

Photo: Lindsay Editorial (porch); Michael Ventura/Alamy.