



# Getaway TO Grand Marais



NOT MANY TAKE THE ROAD TO THIS KICKED-BACK TOWN FRINGED WITH WILD, SATIN-SOFT BEACHES AND SUMMER'S GENTLE GITCHE GUMEE SURF. BOOK A CABIN OR STAKE OUT YOUR CAMPSITE IN **MICHIGAN'S OUT-OF-THE-WAY OASIS** BEFORE THE SECRET'S OUT.

TEXT BY **EMILY BETZ TYRA** PHOTOGRAPHS BY **TODD ZAWISTOWSKI**

## EVERYONE'S TALKING ABOUT

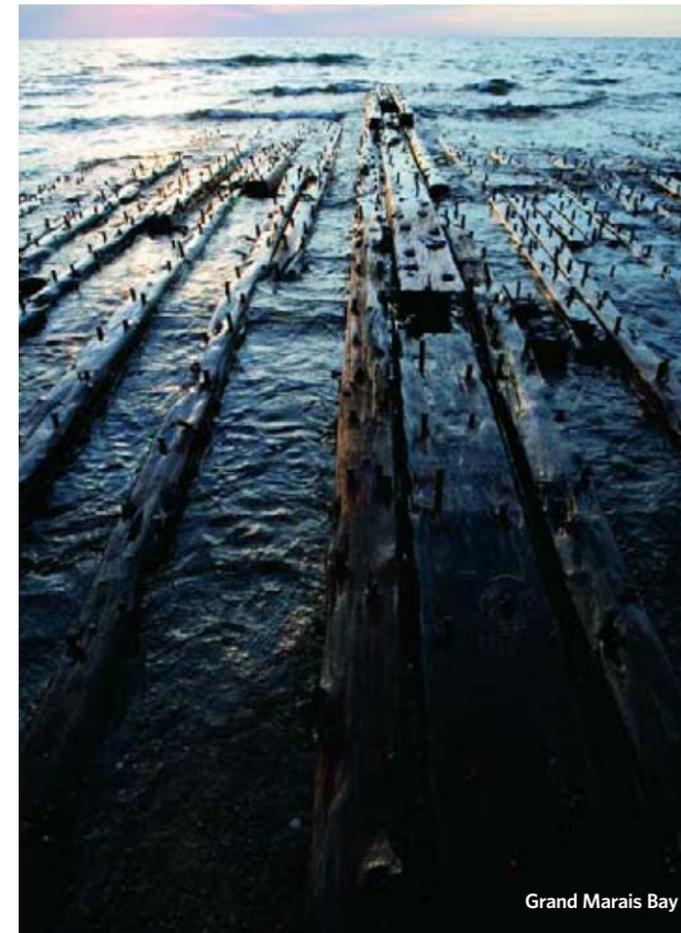
the bun-eating bear that came to the West Bay Diner overnight. It lumbered out of the woods and went to town on the utterly seductive buns owner Ellen Airgood left rising in the kitchen. Miraculously, the bear left the pure maple syrup and the crate of blueberries and exited through the ripped screen, leaving no buns and no trace but one giant greasy paw print on the stainless steel proofing rack.

Highly unusual bear behavior, but it's been dry and hot in Grand Marais the past few weeks, leaving the woods berryless and the animals hungry. Also a rarity, today the Lake Superior beach is crowded, which is to say there are just three small clusters of people on the expansive shore: bikers who eschewed their leather to take a dip, a girl on a blanket plucking a mandolin, and us. Even though this glorious shore town is only a two-hour trip from the bridge, it's only reachable via sandy, bumpy H-58 or the dead-end M-77, so it is never overwhelmed with vacationers. Those who do make their way to Grand Marais know it possesses that elusive combo of true beauty and absence of pretense that makes a vacation spot feel so authentic, happened upon and all yours.

Those wanting luxury accommodations and several dinner choices may prefer somewhere less off-the-path, but if you're into getaway in its truest sense, Grand Marais is your spot, and August is your month: the black flies have skedaddled, and the water in the natural harbor has melted from bone-rattling cold to just refreshingly brisk.

Local kids, one in a Batman costume, zip around on bikes, and sea gulls caw in chorus. It's a few steps from downtown to the cool, soft-as-flour beach for an afternoon nap—the church bells that ring on the hour gently wake us before we sunburn. We check out the quirky pickle barrel house, beach comb (the oldest agates on Earth wash ashore here), then rove the dunes and body surf in the waves at Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore.

Afterward we sip Lake Superior Brewing Company microbrews at the Dunes Saloon, and eat a giant whitefish fillet with lemony homemade tartar at the diner. Read on for more of the goodness to be found in this tranquil getaway.



Grand Marais Bay



West Bay Diner

### BEACH COMBING

#### Amazing Lake Superior Agates

The beaches at Grand Marais are excellent hunting grounds for the ancient Lake Superior agate, a semi-precious stone made up of concentric circles of microcrystalline quartz reddened by iron. Here's the lowdown on what you're seeking.

**Nickname:** Lakers

**Formation:** Formed during lava eruptions in the area that is now Lake Superior. Bubbles of gas were trapped in the molten lava; after the lava cooled, water seeped into the holes, depositing iron, quartz and other minerals in beautiful layers. During the Ice Age, glaciers swept across the region, releasing agates.

**Claim to fame:** Lake Superior agates are the oldest agates on earth, formed 1.2 billion years ago. The next oldest are the Montana moss agates, a mere 370 million years old.

**The most prized:** Highly contrasting red and white bands (called Candy Stripers), eyelike patterns (eye agates) and hologramlike appearance (shadow agates).



**What to look for:** A pitted or peeled texture. A glossy, waxy appearance on chipped surfaces. Rust- and yellow-hued iron oxide staining. Translucence produced by their quartz content, causing a glow easily observed on sunny days, or when the rock is backlit with a flashlight.

### WHERE TO EAT

#### West Bay Diner

John F. Kennedy's staff ordered him two cheeseburgers with everything to go from this 1949-vintage diner during its former life in Pennsylvania. It sat in fields in New Jersey, New York and Michigan before Rick Guth and Ellen Airgood trucked it across the Mackinac Bridge in 1997 to restore the stainless and curved Formica to their retro-fabulous glory and adding a woodstove for a Northern twist.

A disclaimer on the menu "similar orders are prepared together," means it's likely your food won't come out all at once, but Chef Guth calmly, precisely prepares feasts worth waiting for. Cheeseburgers (venison or buffalo when available) come on homemade onion buns, and there is a salad bar of dreams: smoked trout, olive salad, a spicy black bean-corn mélange and a big metal bowl brimming with plump blueberries. Don't debate too long over Airgood's deep-dish cherry pie or a classic malt— hours are "open to close, dessert until dusk." E21825 VETERAN ST., 906-494-2607.

#### Dunes Saloon

Duck through the classic saloon facade and find a merry crowd inside: a mix of locals, craft brew fans on pilgrimage, and folks who've stumbled upon this laid-back tavern and can't believe their good luck. Being at the Northern end of the U.P. food delivery route, it's possible there will be no tomatoes for sandwiches, but firm, fresh Lake Superior whitefish is always abundant and fried to perfection for sandwiches. Taps rotate (Hematite Stout, Granite Brown, Sandstone Pale Ale, seasonal cherry and blueberry beers) and pints are pulled with an easy Yooper friendliness. N14283 LAKE AVE., GRAND MARAIS, 906-494-2337.



Karen Brzys

**ATTRACTIONS AND CURIOSITIES**

**The Pickle Barrel House**

Once upon a time, this storybook-cute pickle barrel house with peek-a-boo windows and a ceiling like a giant Japanese parasol belonged to cartoon artist William Donahey, creator of the Teenie Weenies, the longest running cartoon series continuously drawn by the same artist. The two-inch-tall characters that lived beneath a rosebush in structures made out of hats, rusty tomato cans and pickle barrels debuted in the *Chicago Tribune* and were an instant hit; by 1923, the cartoon had been syndicated in 70 newspapers across the country. Reid-Murdoch's Monarch Foods used Donahey's Teenie Weenies to successfully market carrots, pickles, beets and other canned veggies kids might not have otherwise liked, and, as a thank you, had the Pioneer Cooperage Company of Chicago build a life-size replica of the Teenie Weenies Sweet Pickles barrel for

Donahey and his wife Mary Dickerson Donahey. It was their summer home on Sable Lake for 10 years, until the flow of tourists through it became too much for the shy Donaheys. Later, the house was moved smack in the middle of downtown Grand Marais and is now a museum open for tours run by the Grand Marais Historical Society. Downtown at Lake and Randolph. Open daily 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. in July and August.



EMILY TYRA

**Gitche Gumee Agate and History Museum**

Finnish fisherman, inventor, boat builder, musician and legendary agate picker Axel Niemi opened his brightly painted Gitche Gumee Agate and History Museum in 1954 to tell the world (or at least the folks that made it to Grand Marais) about his beloved agate. From age 5, a curious Karen Brzys hung out here, learning mineral science from her rockhounding mentor. She was blind until age 10, and "the first thing I saw in my life were agates," she says.

Brzys reopened the museum in 1999 to display agates from near and far and Niemi's inventions like the four-foot-tall agate view-box with handles and a glass bottom that he took into the shallows of Lake Superior to see rocks below.

Poke through bins of agates, thimble-sized and up. Ask Brzys to slip on her goggles to examine your own possible agate finds. Marvel at the fish tug—a classic Great Lakes fishing boat—the *Shark*, built by the Niemi family, designed for Lake Superior's rugged wave patterns and the last handmade fish tug left intact in the Great Lakes region.

Also at the museum find juicy Grand Marais history (tales of a 45-pound lake trout with two more fish found inside it like Russian nesting dolls), Niemi's bear coat, homemade puppets, gizmos (check out the Niemi-designed chastity belt!) and a gift shop with an excellent mineral collection and agate plates, lamps and wind chimes crafted by Brzys. For a small fee, she also offers a 20-minute agate class to help you with your hunting and showings of the museum's "Wowser Rocks" mineral specimens. JULY AND AUGUST HOURS: 1 P.M. TO 8 P.M. MONDAY THROUGH SATURDAY, 5 P.M. TO 8 P.M. ON SUNDAY, E21739 BRAZEL STREET, 906-494-2590, AGATELADY.COM.



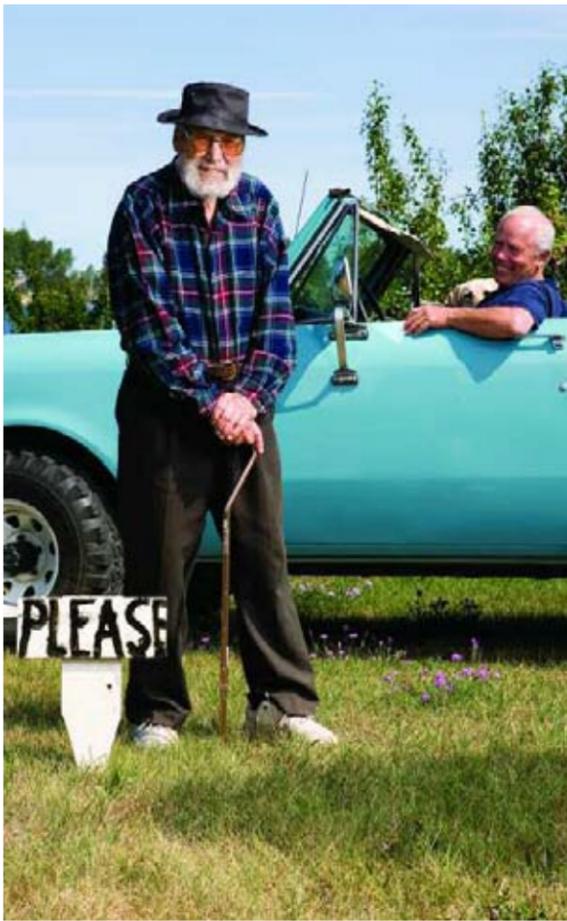
**EXPLORING**

**Hike the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore**

Grand Marais is the eastern gateway to the National Lakeshore. Here are a few natural destinations.

Feel clearheaded from the fresh air and crystal view at the **Log Slide Overlook**, just shy of a half-mile from the trailhead off H-58.

A section of the **North Country Trail** runs the entire shoreline of the park and provides serious and scenic hiking with spectacular vistas. Several spurs intersect to allow shorter hikes. A favorite is the three-mile walk from the lower **Hurricane River Campground** leading past exposed shipwreck skeletons in the sand to the historic **Au Sable Light Station**.



**TRAVEL TIP**

**BELOW:** Camping sites at the municipal park and in the Pictured Rocks are all nestled right on the water. They go like hotcakes on holiday weekends and between mid-July and late August, and all are first come, first served. Arrive late in the morning to secure a spot.

**FAR LEFT:** Ted Soldenski.  
**LEFT:** Ron Schmidt.

**WHERE TO STAY**

**Camping**

**Woodland Park** More of a grassy bluff than a woodland after many trees succumbed to the beech bark disease, this municipal park has 144 cozy-with-the-neighbors campsites with electricity, water and cable. In-town location means you're at the rim of the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore and only a stroll from eateries and the grocery. SITES RANGE \$18 TO \$25 PER NIGHT, 906-494-2613.

**Hurricane River Campground** 22 shady, private, rustic campsites where the Hurricane River flows into Lake Superior. Let the waves usher you into that deep U.P. vacation sleep. On H-58 12 miles west of Grand Marais in the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. \$14/NIGHT. 906-387-3700.

**Twelvemile Beach Campground** 36 shady, private campsites set on an enticing, pinch-me-I'm-dreaming plateau above Twelvemile Beach in the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. On H-58 about 15 miles west of Grand Marais. \$14/NIGHT. 906-387-3700.

**Cabins**

**Sunset Cabins** Snug and sweet mom-and-pop style cabins, with blond wood interiors, crisp kitchens, cable, decks, picnic tables, fire pits, charcoal grills and paddle boats. The cabins' perch on the Old Sucker River means you overlook Lake Superior but have a short stroll to the beach proper. Pets welcome. CABIN RENTALS ARE \$600 TO \$750, BY THE WEEK ONLY IN SUMMER, \$85 TO \$125 PER NIGHT, WITH A THREE-DAY MINIMUM, THE REST OF THE YEAR. 906-494-2693, EXPLORING THENORTH.COM/SUNSETGM/CABINS.

**Hilltop Cabins and Motel** New and homey cabins with full kitchens are moderately priced, clean and Northwoods charming, but bare bones enough to remind you that you should be living it up outside. Also a motel; two rooms with kitchenette. Walk down a steep hill to beach access. Pets welcome. CALL FOR RATES, 906-494-2331, HILLTOP CABINRESORT.COM. 

Emily Betz Tyra is associate editor of *Traverse*. ETYRA@TRAVERSEMAGAZINE.COM

**LOCAL COLOR**

**A Quick Introduction to Grand Marais's Genuine Inhabitants**

When Grand Marais's pine ran out in 1909, the Manistique Railroad picked up and left, and, with it, thousands of people who couldn't bear to eke out a life in a town cut off from the world. The few hundred who stayed hunted, sold berries and ferns, fished and ran taverns. The wild setting of Grand Marais—quiet and a little raw—still attracts and keeps a hardy 400 people drawn to an off-the-beaten-path existence. Here, meet a few:

Nonagenarian **Ted Soldenski** isn't the only one in town who remembers when each cow had a unique cowbell to tell whose was whose. His strong tan arms ("brown as berries," he says) coax a glorious garden out of a plot of sandy Lake Superior coast behind his house. Those same arms cut wood, put up ice, picked poison ivy, played ball for the Grand Marais team, and got Soldenski a job in Detroit during the Depression. Soldenski grew up here and returned, living on whitefish and venison most of his life. He walks to town every day in his blue American Way baseball cap—a breezy mesh for summertime. Soldenski waves down and talks to people he knows passing by in cars, even if it creates a little roadblock in the middle of the road that agitates the uninitiated. "To hell with them, let them go around," he says, waving his hand. Goal in life: "Let me live in my house by the side of the road and be a friend to man."

*Editor's Note: Ted Soldenski of Grand Marais passed away in February.*

For author **Ron Schmidt**, who is blind, summers are pungent, sweet and rich writing children's books and living deep in the woods with his seeing-eye dog, Patti. In a spartan cabin on a small kettle lake he calls Wolf Lake, Schmidt lives self-sufficiently, cutting his own wood, preparing his own meals, boiling sugar water for the hummingbird feeder, reading books in Braille and paddling the lake. He leaves a radio playing on the dock to lead him home on paddles, but otherwise enjoys a quiet so deep you can hear the hummingbirds.

Buy your daily newspaper at The Superior Hotel from innkeeper **Isabelle Capogrossa**. Her mother had triplets when there was no doctor in Grand Marais, only a veterinarian. Capogrossa grew up the daughter of a kind and gentle commercial and charter fisherman everyone called Grumpy, and helped her mother run a restaurant, which served coffee, trout steaks, potato, salad and homemade pie for 65 cents.

