

Centuries — and cares — slip away

Leave your car and your busy life on the mainland, rent a family-sized fleet of bikes (one speed: SLOW) and smell the lilacs — on Mackinac Island

We flew out the door, slammed the minivan doors shut, clicked our seat belts, and hit the highway.

It was the very first morning of summer vacation, and my husband, three children and I were in an all-fired hurry to go have a great time on Mackinac Island.

Whipping through that seven-hour drive in just six and a half, we threw the minivan into park in the St. Ignace, Michigan parking lot, extracted our luggage from the way-back, and hurried over to the ferry. Stepping onto the deck of the Starline Hydro-Jet Ferry bound for the island, we plopped into our seats, sighed — and smiled.

That ferry ride would be the last fast anything we'd do for the next three days.

As our sleek white boat cut through the ice-blue Lake Huron water, the mainland receded into the distance. We skipped across the waves as the white spray jettisoned 30 feet in the air, like a puff of smoke that would make normal life disappear.

Mackinac Island (pronounced MACK-i-naw) came into view just like the misty picture I'd always seen in my mind's eye: postcard-lovely, with “cottages” nestled into green hillsides, lilacs about to bloom, horse-drawn buggies clopping down shaded, tree-lined streets.

Stepping off the boat and onto the long wooden pier was like arriving in a bustling New England village port of some 150 years ago. Uniformed porters hoisted our luggage onto carts to be wheeled to the white clapboard Lakeview Hotel where we'd be staying for the next three nights.

We walked through the ferry port building and emerged onto Main Street. Surrounded by one- and two-story 19th-century buildings, visitors to the island — as well as people employed by its inns and restaurants — cruised past us on one-speed bikes or milled about on wide sidewalks. Horses pulled buggies carrying people and drays with luggage for just-arrived city folk on holiday.

There are 2,200 acres and 144 miles of roads and trails on Mackinac Island and not one single car.

As we walked, my gaze moved to the ample veranda of our hotel. Long and low, it retained the grace and charm of the simpler time which it was constructed — 1858, when Wisconsin had been a state for only a decade, but life on the island was already chugging along.

The French arrived at Mackinac in 1750, the U.S. flag was raised over Fort Mackinac in 1796, and Congress declared Mackinac Island its second National Park in 1875.

By then, a burgeoning stream of affluent summer visitors was flocking to the hotel for its cooler summer weather, and the infamous Grand Hotel — the world's largest summer hotel at the time and still today — was constructed in 1887.

Just as history began early on the island, time seems almost to have stopped around the turn of the last century.

Thank the horses for that. The first automobile brought to Mackinac scared them, and the four-wheeled beast was sent packing.

If you want to get somewhere on Mackinac, you rent a bike, hail a horse and buggy, or hoof it.

We only had to cross a car-less street with our children once to know we were going to love this lack of motorized traffic — although it may take a couple of days to suspend the “look both ways before you cross” habit.

Blue water, bikes and butterflies

A larger realization about car-less travel comes over you more gradually on Mackinac. You realize that if you had a car, you'd use it. You'd get places faster, you'd get back faster, you'd cram more stuff into your schedule — just like you do at home.

This isn't home, but it quickly becomes as comfortable as your favorite rocking chair. Part of that comes from Mackinac's accessibility. Main Street's five-block long business district — with gift shops, fudge shops, and clothing shops, restaurants, small hotels, a little grocery and several bike rental businesses — can be walked in less than an hour (or three if you stop in every shop you'd like).

But you're in no hurry, so you stroll Mackinac. Strolling gets you closer to your surroundings than speeding past life in a car. Strolling leads to discovery on Mackinac, where families can take their pick from among an enjoyable history lesson or botany presented through the Butterfly House's 75 species (located behind Saint Anne's church: children, \$5 adults).

Strolling up a hillside, you might discover the Benjamin Blacksmith Shop, a working museum where kids can learn about the blacksmith's art (admission included with a Fort Mackinac ticket), naturally of interest in a horse-drawn town.

The 1817 Stewart House Museum exhibits artifacts from the historic fur trade era on Mackinac (\$1.50 to \$5.25 per person).

You'll climb 150 feet of stairs up the ramparts (meaning protective barrier) to Fort Mackinac (\$4.25 to \$5.25 per person). Adults will love the view, and kids will thrill to live demonstrations of musket and cannon firings — blanks, of course.

Don't miss the interactive "Kids' Quarters" exhibits where, among many other interactivities, kids can get into uniform, then step into a video where a soldier instructs them on proper 1880s military procedures.

We strolled a lot the first day, then rented bikes (\$5 to \$8 per hour). There are thousands of them available on the island, and bicycle sightseeing is all the rage. While our 13-year-old Jonathan managed to mount a fairly modern-looking mountain bike, 10-year-old Elise and I chose a tandem, and my husband Gordon and six-year-old Christopher opted for a bike with a tag-along.

"One hour, please," I told the teenager manning the rental booth. Well, 60 minutes might be enough for a zippy ride around our Milwaukee neighborhood, but it's best not to live by the clock on an island where time doesn't dictate the details. Finding one activity all five of us enjoyed equally proved too much sheer fun to stop after just one hour.

We discovered that, in town, all bikes really do go just one speed: slow and steady. But soon the road opens to reveal the immense sloping front lawns of rambling Victorian summer-homes-turned-inns, then turns a gently rounded corner to reveal the panoramic vast blue waters of Lake Superior.

We went with the flow and flew like the wind, stopping where we wished, gazing at shimmering waters, or walking up steep stairs to see limestone formations like Arch Rock.

Slow pace stretches time

In the next few days, in no particular order, we visited Fort Mackinac, watched butterflies, and paused to gaze out from the world-famous Grand Hotel porch.

Watching our children enjoy island living, feeling quite carefree ourselves, Gordon and I marveled at how soon we relaxed upon arriving here, when on other trips it takes days to unwind. And because we had

all the time in the world on Mackinac, we rented bikes again on our second day and rode everywhere around that island.

We returned to a romantic dinner — for five! — filled with conversation about all we'd loved that day, topped off with dessert and contentment, followed by an evening swim and bedtime.

Then, the same clip-clop of horses' hooves that woke us up that morning and would wake us the next, lulled us to dreamy sleep on Mackinac Island.

(Sidebar 1)

Family-style events

25th Annual Lilac Festival - June 11-20

Since 1949, Mackinac Island has celebrated the arrival of summer with the Lilac Festival, when thousands of lilac shrubs are in full flower. Ten days of special events include the world's longest horse hitch parade and the "Taste of Mackinac" feast, at which chefs from the island's leading restaurants serve their favorite dishes. 800-4-LILACS.

City of Mackinac Island Recreation Department Fun & Games, July 4

Independence Day festivities include a stone-skipping tournament, patriotic music, and a 38-gun salute at Fort Mackinac. There's also an "American picnic" — with ribs, corn, hamburgers, desserts, and more — from the famous Grand Hotel kitchens served at Fort Mackinac. Evening fireworks finish the day with a bang.

Fort Mackinac Candlelight Tour

Take a special evening tour. (231) 436-4100. MackinacParks.com

(Sidebar 2)

Delightful dining!

We enjoyed the **Dockside Inn** so much for breakfast our first morning on Mackinac that we went back the next two. It's a clean little place overlooking the water located near the Star Line ferry with tasty, basic food.

Patrick Sinclair's (Main Street near Carriage Tours booth) offers a casual Irish pub atmosphere with a children's menu.

If you go for lunch at the **Ice House**, located in The Island House hotel (one block west of downtown), ask for an outdoor table, and order the lemonade slush and homemade potato chips with warm blue cheese dip appetizer.

The hosts of the **Yankee Rebel** (on Astra Street between Market and Main) make visitors feel most welcome. It features historic 1800s tavern decor and entrees like pot roast, chops, and a kids menu.

Each meal was good, but none was so grand as our luncheon at **Grand Hotel**. We dined in the 200-foot-long dining room with gracious Jamaican waiters anticipating our every need and making our children feel at ease in their rather adult surroundings. Our waiter Brian talked sports for five minutes with six-year-old Christopher when Chris asked if the dining room was as long as a football field.

Culinary delights included oysters, shrimp, salmon, prime rib, baked fish, cheeses, fresh fruits, cheesecakes, fudge — well, you get the picture — in abundance. After lunch, we meandered out to Grand Hotel's massive porch overlooking lush lawns, flowing fountains, and topiary wonders.

Lunch at the Grand is \$45 for adults, \$15 for children 12 to 17, and \$10 for kids 5 to 11. Other less-expensive lunchtime options at Grand Hotel include the Jockey Club, Pool Grill, and Carlton's Tea Store.