

OurTopSpots.com

# Travel Guide

## Number 1



Updated 11/16/20

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore & The Heritage Trail

# Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore

Glen Arbor, Michigan

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While we were doing research to take various trips ,we got frustrated and tired of not having one source which would give us honest reviews and in-depth guidance on what to do, where to stay and best locations to eat.

Each of these OTS Travel Guides is meant to be a review of our experiences during each of these trips to unique destinations and to perhaps make your visit much more enjoyable. We will share what worked for us and what we feel we could have done to improve the experience. Our goal is to travel while enjoying great food and accommodations and finding great destination bike trails.

We will provide links in our OTS Travel Guides to all key items mentioned and provide links to all of our social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and our live streaming podcast available on iTunes or through or [website](#) where you can find extensive videos from this and other trips.

## Overview:

I had lived in the Midwest for six decades and had never heard of [Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore](#) (SBD) until the winter of 2017 and even then I am not sure how this best kept secret in the lower 48 surfaced in the gray matter of my mind.

When I started to do research for a possible trip a recurring theme I found was that this single location had been declared “The Most Beautiful Place in America” by several media outlets. Now I have been to the Grand Canyon, stood in the valley at Yosemite, watched my father be followed around the outside of our car by a black bear he was trying to take a photo of in Yellowstone and stood in awe of the Grand Tetons, so I assumed this claim of “The Most Beautiful Place in America” must have been some marketing ploy of the local chamber of commerce.

And that assumption was wrong, it is definitely one of the most beautiful places and quite possibly is indeed, hands down, THE most beautiful place in America!

One year my parents took my sister and I on a four week car trip from our home in northern Illinois to almost every National Park west of the Mississippi and North of Texas. It was one of the best times of my life and I did not appreciate the impact it would have on my life in the future having had this experience.

The last couple of years my wife and I kept saying we had to get a [National Park Pass](#) and recently we turned old enough and we qualified to buy a senior lifetime pass, which we did this past year in 2018. What I didn't know was that there were a total of four National Lakeshores in the United States which are part of the National Park system. And all of those National Lakeshore National Parks are here in the Midwest. It was time to pay a visit to one in our backyard on the other side of Lake Michigan, in the great state of Michigan.

I had attended [Michigan Tech University](#) which is located on the southern end of the breathtaking Keweenaw Peninsula and was well aware of the natural beauty Michigan had to offer. It was time to see what impressed everyone who has visited Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore and the Heritage Trail.

## How did we get there?

Living in southeast Wisconsin, we could choose to either drive south around the bottom of Lake Michigan through the chaos they call Chicago traffic or we could take one of the two ferries which although they do not save a lot of time, greatly enhance the enjoyment of the trip while allowing you to see scenery you can't see on I-94.

Our ferry choices were the high speed [Lake Express](#) ferry which leaves just south of Milwaukee and takes 2 1/2 hours to cross Lake Michigan or we could take the more traditional steam ferry [S.S. Badger](#) which departs from [Manitowoc](#) which is located about one and a half hours north of Milwaukee and takes about 4 hours to cross Lake Michigan.

We opted to take the Lake Express high speed ferry which had more daily crossings and looked like more fun. We purchased our tickets online about two months ahead of time to insure access to the ferry even though Lake Express says they keep a portion of the capacity of each ferry for drive up customers.

The cost to travel by ferry is determined by vehicle size plus an additional fee per occupant of the car. Although not inexpensive, (my father always said there is nothing expensive, you just don't have enough money) we really wanted to enjoy this vacation, have the ferry experience and avoid traffic so we purchased a round trip ticket for our car and my wife and I. The 2018 cost to do this was \$568.00.

We enjoy traveling by ferry whenever we have a chance and have enjoyed crossing [Lake Champlain](#) from New York to Colchester Vermont as well as the [ferry](#) connecting Hatteras Island to Ocracoke in the Outerbanks of North Carolina and lastly the [ferry](#) from Hoboken to the Javits Center in NYC. None of these previous trips were very long but they offer breathtaking views of the scenery.

The high speed ferry is a very large catamaran, with the vehicles carried between the hulls and the passenger cabins located above the vehicles, which cuts through the waters of Lake Michigan, like a hot knife through butter at a top speed of about 37 miles an hour. We opted to take the 6 AM ferry which would allow us to 1) take the rest of the day to sightsee as we traveled from Muskegon to Glen Arbor, Michigan and 2) watch the sunrise as we crossed the lake, since this was in early September.

Once your car is in the loading area, you have the option to go into the indoor waiting area. When it is time to load the ferry, they will make an announcement and ask the drivers of the vehicles to return to their cars to load the ferry. Any passengers in the vehicle will walk onto the ferry and keep in mind your vehicle is not accessible once it is loaded and you leave the car deck. This is for safety considerations. Be sure to have your sunglasses, lotion and phone to shoot videos and photos.

Cheryl may have been the wiser of the two of us as she opted to stay inside the cabin of the ferry and enjoy the very comfortable chairs and atmosphere of the passenger cabin. I, instead, opted to walk up the stairs and was immediately met with 30+ mile an hour winds as I stuck my head above the stairs and attempted to walk across the observation deck and stand at the front of the ferry like the movie Titanic.

In reality, I found myself bracing my 6'4", 250 lb. frame against the wind, one hand holding onto the railing, my baseball cap turned backwards and my other hand attempting to shoot video with my iPhone. Since this was the early morning ferry, I found that I was the only one daring enough to stand on the observation deck. Ultimately I spent about 30 minutes with the wind, the water and the sun rising over the lake. Well worth enduring the conditions and inspirational in many ways. On the way back from Michigan we had an

afternoon trip and sat on the very quiet back deck, out of the wind and caught a few rays from the sun. That lower back deck is the best kept secret of the Lake Express ferry. There are only about fifteen seats in that area so you may want to hustle out there once you get your car loaded onto the ferry.

The high speed ferry takes you to [Muskegon](#), Michigan which is about 2 hours south of Sleeping Bear Dunes. When you approach the shores of Michigan you enter a small canal bordered by a combination of homes and large sand dunes which then opens into a larger lake where collections of fishing boats part to allow the much larger ferry to pass through their favorite fishing spots at the entrance to the canal. It appeared the ferry gives one loud blast on their horn to warn the fishing boats it is time to move to the side to allow passage of the ferry.

The ferry loads and unloads very quickly so don't be concerned about where you are in the loading que. There are no bad spots and the staff of Lake Express are very friendly and helpful as you load. We would highly recommend taking one of the two ferries if you are coming from the west and passing through our home state of Wisconsin this allows you to pick up some great cheese, sausages or enjoy our custard.

Once you are off of the ferry , you are about 2 1/2 hours (144 miles) south of Sleeping Bear Dunes and the Empire/Glen Arbor area, however you simply hop on MI 31 which is a divided highway for most of the trip until you are about 30 minutes away from the Glen Arbor area and then follow the signs to your destination.

## Lodging in [Glen Arbor](#)

Unfamiliar with the area, I thought we had done ample research to find a great resort with condominiums which had gorgeous views of Lake Michigan. We did indeed have a million dollar view of Lake Michigan, however, we were not happy with the overall condition of the property and the staff. With that experience in mind and having spent several days driving around the area we have some other recommendations for staying in the area which will offer a great experience and we will take advantage of during our next visit.

Our recommendations? We became familiar with the area as we wandered through the countryside for five days and rode our bikes on the Heritage Bike Trail and did a little more research online where we found great homes available through [Airbnb](#) or [local realtors](#), which were near the beach or located on beautiful [Glen Lake](#). Next time we visit this area, we are definitely going to rent a home on Glen Lake. If you like to camp, there is a great campground, [DH Day](#), located right on Lake Michigan and the [Heritage Trail](#).

You could also find some great lodging in the small towns surrounding Sleeping Bear Dunes through the websites/apps mentioned above or over in [Traverse City which has a lot of great accommodations](#).

# Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore

## [Map of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore](#)

## Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive

To say the expansive view is breathtaking when you are standing on the top of the dunes at Station #10 on the Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive is an understatement. I thought we had an idea of what we were going to see when we drove on this looping scenic drive, but as they say, you simply cannot imagine the beauty of the dunes as far as you can see, the crystal clarity of Lake Michigan and the Manitou Islands unencumbered by any signs of civilization.

As you approach Empire from the East on Highway 72 we saw signs for the Sleeping Bear Dunes [Philip A Hart Visitors Center](#). Since we were traveling midweek in September, the parking lot was home to a variety of motor homes, campers and a lot of SUVs, most of which had a variety of bikes clinging to trailer hitch mounted bike racks, eagerly awaiting their chance to be unloaded and get onto the local trails.

This National Park Service information office had the usual nice displays explaining the history of the lakeshore, a small gift shop and staffed with volunteers who happily shared their passion for Sleeping Bear Dunes and the surrounding area.

Now armed with a map of the area and some strong recommendations of the staff, we decided to visit the [Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive](#) since it was Thursday and we could avoid the anticipated weekend crowds based on the forecast good weather.

Just a short drive up the street from the visitors center and we arrived at the entrance gates to the Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive with only one car ahead of us. The entrance fee for an individual car is \$20 and is good for seven days and as expected, our National Park Senior Pass which we had purchased earlier this year was good for entrance to this National Lakeshore as well.

This scenic drive is a 7.4 mile one way loop on top of the dunes including passing through a short covered bridge. At some of these overlooks the parking is simply achieved by pulling off to the side of the road to allow other vehicles to pass while a couple of the stations offer larger diagonal parking. There is limited parking for motor homes in these parking lots and you had better bring your best driving skills to maneuver these beasts if you are driving one.

You can ride your bicycle through this scenic drive, however I would not recommend it due to the extreme grades and tight traffic lanes.

Allow plenty of time to stop at the various overlooks along the drive with area #9 being the highlight for awe inspiring overlooks. From the parking lot to the overlook, the walk is a few hundred feet up a slight incline. There is a wooden structure overlook perched 450' above the lake from which you can enjoy the sweeping panorama of Sleeping Bear Dunes, Lake Michigan and the Manitou Islands.

In another section of the park is an actual area you are encouraged to climb some shorter dunes, however if you are daring and top athletic shape you may want to climb down and up the 500' dune at at this overlook. There is a warning sign that encourages you to enjoy the view from the top and IF you should attempt to go down and climb back up and fail, there are some very high costs you would incur to be rescued. Maybe next trip.....

## [Glen Haven Historic Village](#)

We actually had not really planned to stop by this section of the park and in the end, we were glad we did stop by at first by car on our first day and later on, by bike as the Heritage Trail runs right through this historic district.

All that remains of this village is the blacksmith, general store and fruit cannery, now turned into a boat museum.

The highlight for us was the blacksmith shop where two seasonal volunteer blacksmiths shared the history the blacksmith shop played in the village repairing passing ships and repairing wagons while demonstrating the skills blacksmiths used at the time. We asked if we could purchase one of the items they were making and they said we could, but it is referred to as making a donation to the non-profit blacksmith shop. One of the blacksmiths made us a great combination trivet and come and get it dinner bell which is now proudly displayed in our kitchen next to a photo of the blacksmith making the trivet.

From the blacksmith we walked the half a block down to the waters edge of Lake Michigan where I saw the clearest water I had ever seen, prior. The combination of the clear water and rock bottom of the bay with a blue sky made it look like diamonds were rippling in the water. This is a great place to enjoy a break from the Heritage Trail and eat your lunch on the beach and take a dip in the lake if it is a hot day.

We were told that the U.S. Life-Saving Service Station Museum just west of the historic district (you can easily walk there) is a great display, however it was only open on weekends when we were there and we diid not swing back by.

For those of you who like to camp and bike there is a great campground adjacent to the historic district and located on the shores of Lake Michigan called [D.H. Day Campground](#). The Heritage Trail winds through the campground so we got to see the area and it looks like a very nice campground.

# Heritage Bike Trail

Riding the [Heritage Bike Trail](#) (HBT) was really the main purpose of our visit to Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore and we were not disappointed. When we rode the trail it was about 20 miles end to end and the local volunteers are working on plans to expand the trail to the east end of the trail.

You can access the trail from either end or from various access points along the trail. Although we could hop on the trail adjacent to the entrance to the resort we stayed at, we opted to pick up the trail in the [parking lot of the Sleeping Bear Dunes Dune Climb](#). We arrived pretty early on a Saturday to be pleasantly surprised by a large, mostly empty parking lot. There is ample parking for both autos and motor homes and you are sitting at the bottom of a gorgeous dune that you are welcome to climb if you are up to the task.

We knew the bike trail had some areas with very steep, extended 10-15% grade hills which may be fun to ride down, but are a challenge to ride up.....unless you have an electric assist bike :)

And I was under the impression those hills were north of where we started so we opted to start off going south only to find out, that I had indeed misremembered (my word) or misread the map and we were immediately heading into the hills. I should have thought better when I saw most everyone heading north out of the parking lot.....

Without the electric assist Specialized bikes we ride it would not have been possible to enjoy these hilly, winding paths through the beautiful and constantly changing woodland scenery. The surface in this section was paved and smooth as a newborns behind. We were a little early for fall colors, but can only imagine how this fiery blaze of bright fall maples would make this ride even more beautiful.

We rode to the southern end of the path which stops in Empire, passing several bikers who were walking their bikes up the heart strengthening inclines and other riders who were hooping and hollering with big smiles on their faces as they coasted down the equally long downhills on the path.

We rode back through the Dune Climb parking lot and rode north towards Glen Haven Historic Village. You catch glimpses of the very large sand dunes through the trees on the left side of the trail as you head north and the path is once again paved and flat for all intent and purposes.

The trail pops out at Glen Haven and you can stop by the Blacksmith and the other historic buildings or if you brought along a lunch you could place your bike in one of the many bike racks and spread a blanket out on the beach and enjoy the sparkling blue water and view of [Manitou Islands](#) across the bay. We highly recommend some beach time to repower and relax while catching a few Vitamin D rich rays of sun, with of course the appropriate sun screen.



Continuing on, the bike path wanders through the very nice D.H. Day Campground and that is where we turned around as possible rain clouds gathered on the horizon. The weather did not cooperate the next couple of days so we did not get an opportunity to get in any more riding, but the north end of the trail looks as nice as what we had ridden today the only difference being the trail is compacted gravel.

If you are in the area for more than a few days, be sure to catch a ride on some of the great trails in the [Traverse City](#) area like the [Leenlanau Trail](#) or the [Tart Trail](#).

## Food

I am fortunate that Cheryl is a gourmet cook and her dishes are as good as any restaurant we go to and probably better and at a much lower cost. That is why we try to find condos to stay in if we are going to be in one place for more than a few days. On the other hand, if Cheryl is cooking each night, then it is not much of a vacation for her, so we do try to find great local diners and dives to eat in which serve great food. Here are a couple of highlights from this trip.

### [Art's Tavern](#)

Our first stop for lunch was at a watering hole that is about as local as you can get with a more than colorful survival story. Started back in 1934 with the original owner passing away accidentally, being electrocuted while trimming a tree near a power pole, another fire during a later renovation and today they showed electricity who was the boss by being completely powered by a generator during any power outage, insuring cold beer and tots will prevail.

The ceiling and some of the walls are covered with every imaginable pennant from any college team and if they don't have yours, bring one along and they will put it somewhere. You would think that's a lot of dust after a few years you say.....not to worry they are all brought down and washed each year when Art's does a thorough cleaning.

And be sure to ask about their disappearing pool table which usually magically appears during the winter when they have more room.

The menu specializes in more than your typical bar food starting with breakfast at 7 AM and closing when "when you are ready to go home". There is inside and weather permitting, outside seating.

Great food, staff and location.....

### [Tucker's of Northport](#)

In the small town of [Northport](#) overlooking Grand Traverse Bay on scenic [M22](#) you wouldn't expect to see this big combination restaurant/bowling alley/game/live music venue. While we were out exploring M22 one day we ran across this restaurant and were once again pleasantly surprised by the quality of food on the menu including the great pizza we had. Their menu includes soups, ribs, burgers, salads and a variety of other sandwiches just

steps away from the marina.....hence the name northport. I am sure many traveling boaters on the great lakes have stopped here for a night or two.

The highlight for me was the Tucker's Sauce which accompanied the french fries.....if my wife wasn't looking I probably would have picked up the bowl and licked it clean. Not sure how they make the sauce, but it has just a little kick and is great for dipping your fries in.

If you are visiting in the summer, be sure to check out their schedule of live music. As with most restaurants in the area there is both indoor and outdoor dining depending on the weather. Lots of motorcycles parked outside because this area is great for touring.

## Shopping/Day Trips

Although our main purpose on our trips is to find great trails to ride our bikes on, we also love to take in the local/regional flavors of adjacent towns and available activities.

### Kayaking

When we lived in northeast Pennsylvania we loved to flat water paddle our kayaks on gin clear streams, rivers and lakes, with the occasional visit to class two whitewater flowage. Prior to coming to the Glen Arbor area, online we had found what looked like a great place to paddle with an [outfitter located right on the Crystal River](#).

As I had said we have paddled a lot of great waterways and we were not disappointed with this paddling experience. When you visit the Sleeping Bear Dunes area you already feel like you are in the middle of nowhere surrounded with great scenery and yet on the Crystal River I became amazed at how peaceful and serene the paddle was.

After a quick check and choosing sit-in vs sit-on kayaks to keep our center of mass lower, we were loaded right into a van with our boats on the trailer behind us. Because the Crystal River is so meandering you don't have to travel far to get to the put in location.

If you don't have any experience in paddling the staff will give you a quick introduction and that will be more than sufficient for this river. The river looked like a Disney ride the water was so clear and the scenery so interesting. In a normal paddling river the goal is to eliminate as many downed trees that cross the river as possible because they can become life threatening snags which can be very dangerous especially in swift moving water.

The water depth in Crystal River ranges from inches to a max of maybe 3' depending on the time of year you visit the area. There had been a fair amount of rain prior to our visit so the water was a little higher than normal so we never had to get out of the boats and walk along the river as our keels had plenty of clearance.

Massive roots and branches of the many downed trees have become magnificent sculptures, weathered by the flowing water. As you paddle you see exposed roots in the stream bed below you that are as smooth as silk and range from black to umber. I am glad I did not bring my iPhone with as I would have been stopping every few hundred feet to take photos of these works of nature.

There is plenty of wildlife that you may encounter including birds, deer and fish. A woman in front of us let loose with a creative grouping of curse words when she surprised a very large resting salmon which had journeyed up from the mouth of the Crystal River which empties into Lake Michigan. With a flick of it's powerful tail and a big splash it continued the journey up the river to spawn.

To paddle your way back to the outfitter you will need to make three very short portages as the river flows under roadways and the most of the culverts are too small to navigate with the exception of one where you can [paddle right through the culvert](#).

We paddled during the weekend, but started a little later in the day and avoided the crowds. The Crystal River is extremely narrow and a challenge to pass other kayakers while avoiding the downed trees. We saw a couple of other kayakers on our trip, but for the most part we were by ourselves.

It was about half way through our paddle when I took a minute to take my eyes away from the surrounding beauty and realized the dead silence we were surrounded by with a blue sky overhead. I mean dead, not a sound except the soothing gurgle of the slow running river. No traffic sounds, no the people talking, not even the rustle of any leaves. In today's fast paced, electronic driven society that is a very rare moment in deed.

We highly recommend that you stop by and experience all the Crystal River had to experience. And if you have your own kayak there are several other local rivers that are easily accessible to paddle, not to mention paddling on Lake Michigan.

## Leland, Michigan and Fish Town

We had one day that was a little overcast with sprinkles early in the morning and an iffy forecast for the rest of the day so we decided to go on a road trip to a couple of spots some locals had suggested. We decided to go to [Fish Town](#) part of a coastal community located in Leland about 18 miles from Glen Arbor which is about a 25 minute ride on great roads.

It was our lucky day as the clouds blew out and we had blue skies to enjoy a very pleasant surprise called Fish Town. Talk about Throw Back Thursdays.....Fish Town was more like Throw Back Almost A Century, actually 150 years ago is when Fish Town began as a small port to support the fishing industry in the area. Once again very clear water and a small dam which helped create Lake Leelanau.

We took this opportunity to pick up a couple of great prints from the area, created by local artists.

Fish town has a variety of little restaurants and artisan shops that line the small harbor which is connected directly to the village and [resort community of Leland](#) which has interesting events scheduled throughout the year. The day we stopped by there was a large car show along the entire main drag and some of the side streets of the village of Leland.

And if you want to charter a boat to fish out in Lake Michigan in an attempt to catch the resident salmon or Lake Trout there are plenty of opportunities to hire a captain in the harbor.

If you have time, there are plenty of other breweries, [wineries](#) and restaurants between Glen Arbor and [Charlevoix](#) to visit.

In Summary:

Once you visit this area you will quickly see that one visit is not enough and it just may become one of your top five places to vacation on a regular basis. We loved the never ending scenery along the coast of Lake Michigan, the bike paths, restaurants opportunities to paddle a kayak on a variety of rivers. We are adding Sleeping Bear Dunes and the [Leelanau Peninsula](#) area to our list of the top three places we like to travel to in the upper midwest.

## OurTopSpots Social Media Platforms/Links

Website: [OurTopSpots™](#) from our website you can launch any of our social media platforms.

[Instagram](#) We will post photos and short videos on IG which are automatically shared with our FB page.

Podcast Our live, interactive , streaming podcast will highlight some of our trips, talks with interesting people in the biking community and other thoughts related to enjoying life on a bike.

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