

# Fall foliage lights up the backroads of Door County



**KATHERINE RODEGHIER**

**Brilliant fall foliage lines roads in Door County, Wis., in October.**

Wineries,  
lighthouses,  
harbor-side  
hamlets add  
to autumn's  
appeal

**BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER**

Special to the Post-Dispatch

Lost. 🗺 Wisconsin signposts its rural roads in capital letters — T, EE, A, ZZ — and I'm mired in an alphabet soup of confusion as I attempt to navigate my way through Door County. 🚗 But I don't mind. Each wrong turn leads me down a country road tunneled in trees ablaze in fall colors. Red barns and white church steeples pop up along fence rows, and I catch a glimpse of Green

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The Tower Trail in Potawatomi State Park begins at an overlook that was once a ski hill. Part of the trail joins the Ice Age Trail that meanders 1,000 miles through Wisconsin.

PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

# Go for the wine, lighthouses, hiking

## DOOR COUNTY • FROM H1

Bay from a hilltop, blue sapphire against the garnet and topaz hues of the surrounding forest.

No one stays lost very long in Door County. This skinny thumb on the mitten map of Wisconsin extends less than 45 miles from the bridge at Sturgeon Bay to Gills Rock near the tip of the peninsula, and it would take just 20 minutes to cross overland

from the bay on the west to Lake Michigan on the east — if only I knew the way.

In short order, my GPS rights itself and I check in at a white frame inn for a weekend of wine tasting, hikes in the woods, lighthouse gazing and dining on culinary claims to fame.

## BLESSED BY GEOGRAPHY

Rural and maritime, 300 miles of shoreline link Door County's five state parks and more than a dozen communities, most mere hamlets bereft of fast-food franchises and chain hotels. Limestone cliffs, part of the Niagara Escarpment stretching all the way from Niagara Falls, rise to the interior of the peninsula where farmers grow fruit on thin, alkaline soil. Bay breezes create a microclimate kind to cherries, apples and grapes.

During the summer peak vacation season, families fill up inns and bed-and-breakfasts, prowl the art galleries and gift shops, wait for tables at ma-and-pa restaurants and set up umbrellas on the beaches. The county quiets down when the kids go back to school, then fires up again in mid-October when fall colors usually peak. For those who don't mind a morning nip in the air, it's the best of seasons, less crowded and so vivid when the maples, hickories, oaks and birches light up back roads and bluffs along the waterfront.

See them on a hike through Potawatomi State Park beginning at an old ski hill overlook that marks the start of the Tower Trail. It passes a 75-foot observation tower offering views of Sturgeon Bay from above golden treetops. At Peninsula State Park, bicycle the easy Sunset Trail or hike the rugged Eagle Trail along 150-foot cliffs. The park's Eagle Bluff Lighthouse, built in 1868, has a museum open until mid-October.

More beacons light the way at the Ridges Sanctuary, a nonprofit nature preserve founded in 1937 when concerned citizens saved one of the state's most biodiverse lands from becoming a trailer park. Five miles of hiking trails lead through this odd landscape, a series of crescent-shaped ridges formed over centuries by the ebb and flow of Lake Michigan's shoreline. A boreal forest more akin to Canada grows over the ridges and marshy pools between them giving shelter to rare flora and fauna. Ever see a flying squirrel?

Trails lead to the Baileys Harbor Range Lights, a pair of beacons that once led mariners safely into harbor.

Door County has 11 lighthouses, the second-largest collection in the U.S., but only a few are open to the public in autumn. A preservation group manages tours of the Cana Island Lighthouse May through October. Climb 97 steps inside the gleaming white tower to access a windy catwalk for views of woodlands dressed in fall colors and white-caps dancing on Lake Michigan.

## FRUIT OF VINE AND BAY

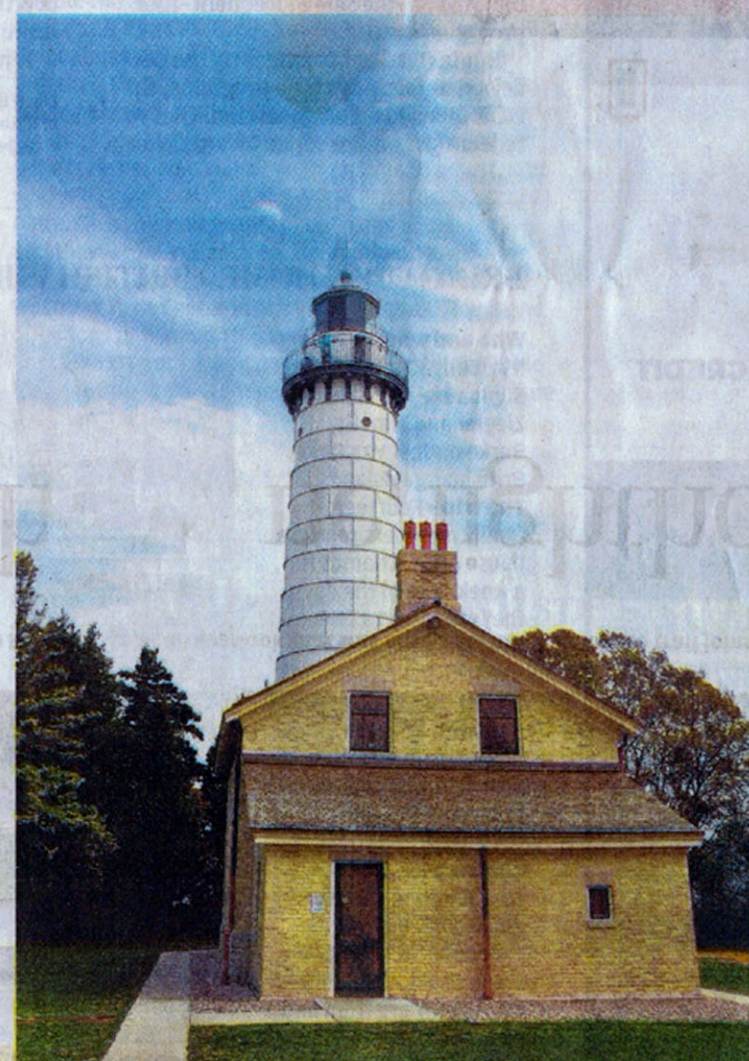
Four lighthouses star on tours offered by Door County Trolley. The bright red vehicles also crisscross the peninsula on autumn scenic and culinary itineraries, tours of the county's two



Lautenbach's Orchard Country Winery and Market near Fish Creek turns its cherries, grapes, apples and pears into wine and food products. It also offers tours of its winery.



Autumn foliage lights up the woodlands of Door County. Colors usually peak around mid-October.



Door County has 11 lighthouses along its 300 miles of shoreline. Visitors can climb up the Cana Island Lighthouse to take in the view of Baileys Harbor.

## DOOR COUNTY



Rooms at the Landmark Resort near Egg Harbor have water and woodland views.

## IF YOU GO

**Door County Visitors Bureau • 1-800-527-3529, doorcounty.com**  
**Where to stay •** Eagle Harbor Inn, 9914 Water Street, Ephraim, Wis., white-frame inn with nine bed-and-breakfast rooms in the lodge and two- and three-bedroom suites in six farmhouse-style buildings, from \$113 per night in October, 1-800-324-5427, eagleharborinn.com.  
 • Landmark Resort, 4929 Landmark Drive, Egg Harbor, Wis., 294 one- to three-bedroom suites with full kitchens, water or woodland views, from \$84 in October, 1-800-273-7877, thelandmarkresort.com.

microbreweries and four of its seven wineries.

Lautenbach's Orchard Country Winery and Market not only gives visitors tours of its winery and tastings of its products, but it also takes them into the vineyard and orchard for a talk on crop production. Cherries were Door County's No. 1 crop 60 years ago when it grew 95 percent of the red fruit in the U.S. Output dropped to 9 percent after tourism picked up and farmers gave up the intensive labor of cherry cultivation to turn their land into housing developments.

Lautenbach's still grows cherries as well as apples, pears and grapes, all used to make wines, some named for the owner's grandchildren. Its market sells a variety of cherry products, too, including the quintessential Door County cherry pie hot from its bakery oven.

Another Door County culinary staple, the fish boil, is as much an event as a meal. Boil masters get a kettle of water boiling outside over an open fire, add potatoes and onions and, finally, fresh-caught whitefish. They pour kerosene on the fire causing flames to leap into the air as the kettle boils over, taking unappetizing fish oils with it. Scandinavian settlers used fish boils to feed hungry lumberjacks and fishermen a century ago. Local churches put on boils as fundraisers, and when tourism brought visitors to the peninsula, several restaurants adopted the practice.

Rowley's Bay Resort employs a storyteller who shares anecdotes and snippets of colorful history to guests seated around its fish boil. Don't care for fish? The contents of its kettle join myriad foods on a 14-foot-long all-you-can-eat buffet spread with meats, salads, side dishes and desserts.

Door County's Scandinavian roots show up on the menu at Al Johnson's Swedish Restaurant. In its warm, wood-paneled dining room adorned with rosemaling, waitresses in folk dresses serve plates of Swedish meatballs and thin square pancakes with a side of lingonberries. The eatery may be the biggest importer of lingonberries in the world, but it is most famous for the goats that graze on its thatched roof. Started as a gag birthday gift, the goats have become a fixture with four or five up top at a time, weather permitting.

Al Johnson's serves 3,000 people a day in peak season. Your wait will be shorter in the fall, but not during the Sister Bay Fall Festival when thousands show up right outside the restaurant's door. Now in its 71st year, the fest bills itself as the granddaddy of Door County festivals with a parade, classic car show, craft fair, live entertainment and the traditional Ping-Pong ball shoot when 10,000 of the light, white globes are launched into the air. Grab one marked for a prize.

This year's fest takes place Oct. 14-16 in Sister Bay. You won't get lost; just follow the crowd.