



Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore preserves 40 miles of Lake Superior shoreline in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Road-tripping up to the UP

Exploring 120 miles of Michigan's Lake Superior shore

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This better be worth it, I thought, as we began the walk down a gravel road to the lighthouse.

Lake Superior waves pounded sandy beaches on the left, a tangle of trees merged with dense woodlands on the right. Then just as my calves began to scream "stop," I glimpsed the white beacon in a gap between branches dead ahead. Drawing closer, the trees gave way to a windswept cliff where Au Sable Light Station has stood since 1874 in all its 86-foot-tall glory.

Forgetting my aching legs, I climbed 98 steps to the top for a sweeping view of Michigan's Upper Peninsula and the vast expanse of the greatest of America's Great Lakes.

We could have spent weeks exploring the UP's Lake Superior shoreline from the Keweenaw Peninsula in the west to Sault Sainte Marie in the east, but my husband and I carved out a four-night road trip across a 120-mile section near the midpoint with Marquette, Michigan, as home base.

Lighthouses, waterfalls, hikes to lakefront overlooks and a cruise along Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore were scenic highlights interspersed with UP history and the story behind the making of a classic film.

First National Lakeshore

Forty miles of Lake Superior shoreline stretch along Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore just outside Grand Marais, Michigan, the eastern terminus of our road trip. America's first national lakeshore, established in 1966, takes its name from rock cliffs 50 to 100 feet high mottled in shades of ocher, tan, brown and gray with traces of green and blue. Minerals in groundwater — iron, copper, manganese, limonite — leak through cracks in the rock, each leaving a distinctive stain.

The colors are best viewed by boat, so we booked an excursion with Pictured Rocks Cruises, a National Park Service concessionaire. For more than two hours, the crew skimmed the shoreline pointing out caves and fanciful rock formations carved into 500-million-year-old Cambrian sandstone by wind, waves and ice off Lake Superior. Cameras clicked as we passed Lover's Leap, Indian Head and Chapel Rock. Kayakers, launching from beaches and excursion boats, paddled alongside us, darting under arches as we passed.

We found plenty to explore on land in the national lakeshore, too. Six miles across at its widest point, it comprises inland lakes, towering dunes, waterfalls and a network of hiking trails.

Three viewing platforms overlook



Au Sable Light Station has been warning ships about dangerous Lake Superior waters since 1874.

Miners Castle, one of the most popular and accessible natural landmarks along the lakeshore, though a rock-fall in 2006 knocked down one of the "castle's" turrets. A hike on Sable Falls Trail led us down 168 steps to the base of the falls where we followed Sable Creek to the beach at Lake Superior. On the Log Slide Overlook Trail, we hiked through a hardwood forest to

the top of Grand Sable Dunes and the spot where long-ago lumberjacks slid logs down a wooden chute 175 feet to the lake. Au Sable Light Station, our next destination, appeared as a tiny stalk on a distant cliff.

After all that climbing on stairs and sand, I was not happy to learn visiting the lighthouse requires a three-mile round-trip walk. Nineteenth-century

lighthouse keepers had it worse. For them, the nearest town, Grand Marais, was a 12-mile hike on a narrow path along the base of the 300-foot-tall dunes, a route impassable in rough weather. Supplies could be dropped off by boat, but in winter the keeper and his family often would be snowed

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It's a Marquette, Michigan, tradition: Jumping into chilly Lake Superior from Blackrocks in Presque Isle Park.



The outline of a murder victim is painted on the floor of the Lumberjack Tavern in Big Bay, Michigan. The 1952 murder here is depicted in the classic film "Anatomy of a Murder."

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Maritime Marquette

in and resorted to hunting to supplement their food supply. A 1901 journal entry states an assistant keeper killed a bear so large it took two men to drag it to the light station.

A service road opened in 1943, the same road we walked to reach the light station just in time to join one of the park service's ranger-led tours. Walls of the lighthouse measure 8 feet thick at the base, 4 feet at the top and are sunk 23 feet deep into bedrock to withstand gales off Lake Superior, said the ranger. When it was installed, the light from its Fresnel lens could be seen for up to 17 miles, warning ships to avoid a sandstone reef off Au Sable Point. At first, the light was fueled by lard oil, then kerosene. Now the 2,000-pound lens is just for show; an automated LED light runs on solar power.

We had a close look at the lens after climbing a winding metal staircase to the top of the tower, then fought the wind on an outdoor catwalk to view the distant dunes and blues of Lake Superior stretching to the horizon.

We learned more about Lake Superior lore in Marquette, the largest city in the Upper Peninsula with a population of about 20,000. Our hotel overlooked the city's downtown Ore Dock, a massive metal structure where iron ore from UP mines once was transferred from railway cars to waiting ships.

A second dock in Marquette's upper harbor still serves freighters bound for Midwest steel mills, a process detailed in a diorama in the Marquette Maritime Museum. Other exhibits explain the history of shipping on Lake Superior, including the many vessels lost to shipwrecks. A large section is devoted to the 1975 sinking of the ore freighter Edmund Fitzgerald, a story immortalized in a Gordon Lightfoot song.

We met tour guide Greg Sandell outside the museum for a short walk to the Marquette Harbor Lighthouse. Built in 1853 and rebuilt in 1866, the bright red lighthouse holds more maritime artifacts. Next door, the U.S. Coast Guard Station was staffed from 1891 to 1991 by nine guardsmen who



The Sable Falls Trail drops 168 steps along the edge of Sable Falls in the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore.

were revered by the local population, said Sandell. “The grocery store wouldn’t take their money and they probably drank for free in the taverns.” In the station’s early days, kids spent summers playing on the grounds and alerted guardsmen when they spotted an inspector’s boat approaching. Everyone scurried to clean up the building and grounds, the kids each earning a nickel from the guardsmen, said Sandell.

Today, kids get their kicks jumping from 10- to 15-foot cliffs in Presque Isle Park. They clamber over the dark rock formation at Blackrocks, screaming as they plunge into always chilly Lake Superior. In 1891, city leaders asked landscape architect Fredrick Law Olmsted, famous for creating New York City’s Central Park, to take a look at this peninsula north of downtown and advise them how to make use of it. His response: “Don’t touch it.” Presque Isle Park remains a 323-acre forested peninsula with great views of Lake Superior not only from Blackrocks but from Sunset Point. Viewers line up nightly to watch the sun dip behind the distant Huron Mountains as the lake reflects a sky shimmering in pastel colors.

We had another view of Lake Superior from Sugarloaf Mountain, six miles north of downtown. A 1.2-mile loop trail took us to the summit where viewing platforms jut above the massive lake. Not only is Superior the largest of the five Great Lakes, it’s the world’s largest freshwater lake measured by surface area, 31,700 square miles. It’s so vast it acts like an inland sea, impacting the climate and generating legendary storms.

A murder and a movie

Back in downtown Marquette, we popped into the 1904 county courthouse where one of the staff was kind enough to lead us up its grand Italian marble staircase to the main courtroom, resplendent under a stained-glass dome. Fans of classic films recognize it from the trial scenes in the 1959 movie “Anatomy of a Murder” directed by Otto Preminger and starring Jimmy Stewart, Lee Remick, Ben Gazzara, Eve Arden and George C. Scott.

The film is based on a murder case portrayed in a novel written by defense attorney John D. Voelker under his pen name, Robert Traver. Voelker got the murderer off after a seven-day trial arguing an “irresistible impulse” made him not guilty by reason of insanity. The lawyer went on to write several more books and became a justice of the Michigan Supreme Court.

Our curiosity piqued, we drove 27 miles northwest to the hamlet of Big Bay where the murder took place. On the way we hiked up Thomas Rock, another Lake Superior viewpoint,



The Ore Dock in downtown Marquette, Michigan, no longer functions but stands as a monument to the iron mining industry in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

and stopped by the red brick Big Bay Lighthouse, one of the few working lighthouses in the country operating as a bed-and-breakfast. It’s on the National Register of Historic Places.

In Big Bay, a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it town, we sought out Lumberjack Tavern where on July 31, 1952, an Army lieutenant stationed nearby fatally shot a man he accused of raping his wife. Murder and movie memorabilia hang on the walls and an

outline of the victim’s body has been painted on the wood floor. Owner Jack Bourgeois showed us the murder weapon, pulling the gun from under the bar. The Smith & Wesson .38 Police Special has the front half of the trigger guard cut off. His nephew had the gun nickel plated after the trial.

As a 9-year-old boy, Bourgeois remembers seeing Jimmy Stewart walking around Big Bay. Eighteen years ago, Bourgeois bought the bar,

kicking out troublemakers known for instigating barroom brawls.

“They’re still mad at me,” he said. Now in his 70s, he’s ready to retire. The agreeably seedy North Woods watering hole, with its long bar, pool table and kitchen turning out burgers and pizza, is up for sale. “I love the bar; I love this place,” he said about the off-the-grid lifestyle in this tiny corner of the UP. “It’s a good place to hide up here.”