

## Light Work on this Vacation

**Wanted:** Lighthouse keepers. Must be in excellent health, able to climb stairs, work long hours and have a passion for history. Paid daily in sunrises and sunsets.

"Staying in the keeper's quarters brings you closer to the past. Even with the modern conveniences, it's like reliving history," says Barbara Vos of Grand Rapids. She and her husband, Bob, just finished their first year in the volunteer light keeper's program at Big Sable Point Lighthouse (pictured) in Ludington State Park, just north of Ludington on the central Lake Michigan shore.

They're among the 100 fortunate history buffs selected to serve two-week tours of duty as volunteer keepers each summer. About half are repeaters who can't stay away; some come from as far away as California, Washington and Florida.

"There's no other lighthouse, that I know of, that has a volunteer program that offers the participants an opportunity to live for two weeks in a 138-year-old lighthouse," says association director Nancy Gerts. Six volunteers serve at a time, putting in minimum eight-hour days and seven-day weeks. In addition to greeting visitors, leading tours and operating the gift shop, volunteers maintain the facility by sweeping—a never-ending task when you're beachside—removing trash, watering flowers and whatever else needs doing. Jack and Elaine Buege of Sparta, Michigan, have volunteered at Big Sable for three years. Elaine prefers to work in the gift shop, but Jack, a retired elementary school teacher, says his favorite part of the job is working the tower.

“My first year, I set a goal of climbing the 112-foot tower 100 times.”

—Jack Buege,  
volunteer light keeper

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"My first year, I set a goal of climbing the 112-foot-tall tower 100 times," he says. "One of my fellow keepers delighted in pointing me out to visitors. He'd say 'See that guy over there? His goal is to climb the tower steps 100 times while he's here. My goal is to let him.'" That summer, Jack climbed those steps 102 times. The second year, it was 105 times. The third year, he reached his all-time record with 106 climbs. For those counting, that's 338 trips or 43,940 steps over three years.

Of course, it's not all work and no play. At the end of the day, volunteers share meals, walk the beach, gather around a campfire or just watch the sunset. They talk, laugh and build friendships. In fact, many of the volunteers who return year after year select dates based on when their keeper friends will be there.

They all come to know the history of the Big Sable Point Lighthouse as well as their own. Built of Milwaukee Cream City brick in 1867, the deteriorating tower was encased in iron plates in the early 1900s, and the black and white daymark was introduced. In 1949, Big Sable was the last Great Lakes light to be wired for electricity, with the last civilian keeper retiring in 1969.

Now, volunteers keep Big Sable running. Why? Each has a different reason. Barbara says lighthouses have always been special to her, and she thrilled at the opportunity to tend the light, if only for two weeks a year. The memories, experiences and friendships forged make this beacon even more important to her. Would she recommend the keepers' program to others? With a smirk, she answers, "No... but only because I don't want to lose my spot!"



# Magnificent sessions

Maybe you've always dreamed of being a lighthouse keeper or perhaps you're longing to sail a schooner on the Great Lakes or be a race car driver, if only for a day. These dreams and others come true on this sampling of Michigan getaways. Don't settle for a mere vacation; make the memories of a lifetime! For details about these trips and more choices, visit [michigan.org/experiences](http://michigan.org/experiences).