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MANY LAKE BEACONS KEEP THEIR DOORS OPEN FOR TOURS, OVERNIGHTS

Lighthouse Touring

Let these wonderful structures guide you toward an unforgettable experience.

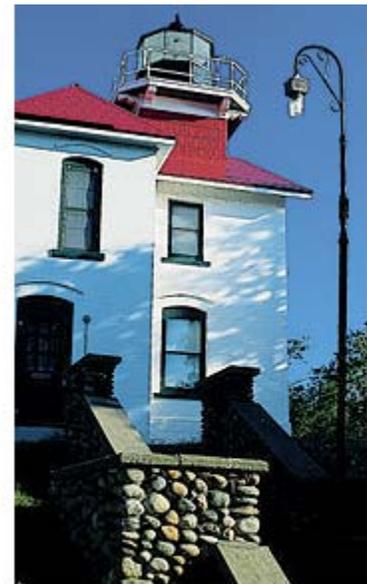
BY DIANNA STAMPFLER

While some travelers admire Michigan's historic beacons from afar, dedicated lighthouse lovers make pilgrimages far and wide, down one-lane roads and deep into wooded areas to see the stately structures that have aided mariners for generations. Lighthouse aficionados aren't content just viewing the state's famed lights. They want to walk the floors and climb the towers, just as keepers did generations before.

LIGHTHOUSE TOURS

Lighthouse enthusiasts now can access Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse in [Mackinaw City](#), opening for tours June 12. The light, which was extinguished in 1957 with the completion of the Mackinac Bridge, is operated by Mackinac State Historic Parks.

The entire first floor will be accessible, and tours to the top of the tower will be available. Throughout the building, displays and hands-on exhibits will highlight the history and operation of the station. The original brass and glass Fourth Order Fresnel lens, which was returned to the light last summer, also will be on display.



A stairway constructed with stones leads to the Grand Traverse Lighthouse in Leelanau County. Photo: Charles Cook

A public grand opening ceremony, featuring an evening dinner cruise and concert is scheduled for June 26. For seasonal hours, contact (231) 436-4100 or www.mackinacparks.org.

Point Betsie Lighthouse in Frankfort opened its doors last summer to visitors looking to view the majestic keeper's residence and climb the tower. The 1858 beacon is the oldest operating light on Lake Michigan. Located at the southern end of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, Point Betsie marks the entrance to the Manitou Passage. It is Benzie County's most famous landmark and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Point Betsie is open for tours from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursday through Saturday and from noon to 5 p.m., Sunday, from Memorial Day through Labor Day, and on weekends through mid-October. (The lighthouse will be closed June 5.) Admission is \$2 per person.

For more information, contact (231) 352-4915, (231) 352-7666 or www.pointbetsie.org. Restoration of the lighthouse is scheduled to begin in September. Call or consult the Web site for last-minute changes due to construction.

VOLUNTEER KEEPERS

Only a handful of lights offer the opportunity for extended overnight stays, which are working vacations instead of relaxing getaways.

In 1987, the Big Sable Point Lighthouse Keepers Association in Ludington was organized to repair a sea wall and prevent the 112-foot tall beacon from toppling into Lake Michigan. Over the years, the organization has grown, both in numbers and in its efforts to maintain one of the grandest lighthouses in the state.

A benefit of being a member of the association is the opportunity to apply for one of the coveted reigns as a resident volunteer lighthouse keeper. This is considered one of the best two-week lighthouse working vacations. It is so popular, it attracts lighthouse enthusiasts from all over the United States. On average, more than 100 adults take part in this program each year.

Daily duties of the keeper include greeting as many as 200 visitors, staffing the on-site gift shop, interpreting displays, sharing lighthouse history at the top of the tower, sweeping sand from the steps and walks, answering questions and maintaining the keeper's residence area.

Located in Ludington State Park, the lighthouse is a 1.5-mile hike via the beach or bike path. The light is open May 1 through Oct. 31. On June 12, June 19, July 24 and Sept. 18, bus transportation is available for a minimal fee. To join the association or to receive information about tours, contact (231) 845-7343 or www.bigsablelighthouse.org.

The Grand Traverse Lighthouse Museum, located nine miles north of Northport in Leelanau County, is accepting applications for volunteer lighthouse keepers. Keepers will live in the northern apartment of the keeper's residence for two weeks.

The primary responsibilities of the keepers are to greet visitors and provide historical information about the museum. Keepers also will assist in the gift shop and help with maintenance of the buildings and grounds. Keepers must be in excellent physical health, be able to climb stairs and be able to work long hours. They must also be comfortable speaking with the public.

The program begins April 1 and continues through December. There is a \$300 program fee for museum members, \$350 for non-members. For information, contact (231) 386-7195 or www.grandtraverselighthouse.com.

BEACON GETAWAYS

The Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Association provides opportunities to be a volunteer light keeper at St. Helena Lighthouse in the Straits of Mackinac. On Jul 9-11, there will be a training session for those who would like to serve as leaders for future events at St. Helena. Volunteers will learn how to manage the light station, which includes safety drills, group management and systems operations.

For those who want a more relaxing visit to the lighthouse, day trips will be offered on Aug. 3, 4, 10 and 11. Enjoy lunch, a walk on the beach and a climb to the top of the tower. No work is required on this outing-just enjoy the view. Visitors leave [Mackinaw City](#) aboard the boat Cake & Ice Cream, which takes visitors across the straits, followed by an inflatable dinghy ride for an enjoyable, and sometimes wet, trip to shore.

For more information about these events, contact the GLLKA at (231) 436-5580 or www.gllka.com.

Themed getaways with lighthouses as the focus offer travelers an opportunity to see multiple properties, packaged with lodging, meals and the companionship of others who enjoy the historic beacons.

The Homestead in Glen Arbor will host its first Lighthouse Explorer's Weekend Sept. 24-26. The weekend's activities include a travelogue-style program called Lighthouses of Lake Michigan and tours of Point Betsie Lighthouse, Grand Traver Lighthouse, South Manitou Lighthouse and the Sleeping Bear Point Maritime Museum in Glen Haven. Space is limited to the first 50 people. For more information, contact (231) 334-5100 or www.thehomesteadresort.com.

For the third year, Beaver Island Boat Co. is hosting Haunted Lights of Lake Michigan, Oct. 9 and 10. The weekend includes round-trip transportation from Charlevoix to St. James (the village on Beaver Island) and a three-hour historic tour around the island, a climb to the top of the 1858 Beaver Head Island Lighthouse and a slide show presentation focusing on lighthouse ghost stories.

Space is limited to 50 people. For more information, call (888) 446-4095 or visit www.bibco.com. ML

Dianna Stampfler is the marketing and media director for the West Michigan Tourist Association.

AT A GLANCE

The 1,100-mile Lake Michigan Circle Tour meanders through four states-Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin-and offers visitors of all ages adventures in nature, history, culture and more.

AAA Resources: The complete AAA TourBook database, covering the four-state Lake Michigan Circle Tour and listing Show Your Card & Save partners along the route, is available online at www.aaa.com. For [TripTik® routings](#), [TourBook® guides](#), maps and other travel-planning needs, call the AAA Member Service Center at (800) AAA-MICH (222-6424) or visit any branch office.

Visitor Contacts: For specific travel information, contact these tourism organizations:

Michigan: www.michigan.org

Indiana: www.state.in.us/tourism

Illinois: www.enjoyillinois.com

Wisconsin: www.travelwisconsin.com

Great Lakes: www.great-lakes.net/tourism

Lighthouse Information: There are dozens of lighthouses circling Lake Michigan, and many are accessible to visitors. For more information, contact the West Michigan Tourist Association for a free Lake Michigan Lighthouse Guide at www.wmta.org or (800) 442-2084.

LIGHTHOUSE BED-AND-BREAKFASTS

Those looking for a more relaxed approach to an overnight lighthouse excursion may enjoy the two bed-and-breakfast properties operating in the Upper Peninsula along Lake Superior.

Big Bay Point Lighthouse, 28 miles north of Marquette, offers adults a secluded retreat from modern life. The light was built in 1896 and automated in 1941. The bed-and-breakfast features seven guestrooms with private baths, a common living room and library and a sauna with limited spa services. Mother Nature puts on a nightly show in the form of offshore lightning bolts, ice kaleidoscopes, dramatic gales and the colorful aurora borealis, not to mention sunrises and sunsets.

Big Bay Point Lighthouse bed-and-breakfast is open year round and offers a variety of seasonal packages. For more information, contact (906) 345-9957 or www.bigbaylighthouse.com.

Early-morning risers at the **Sand Hills Lighthouse Inn** near Ahmeek on the Keweenaw Peninsula will enjoy a spectacular sunrise from the rocky shore, front porch, private balcony or the tower. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Sand Hills Lighthouse is the largest and last manned lighthouse built on the Great Lakes.

Constructed in 1917, the light remained active until 1954. In 1961, Bill Frabotta purchased the light and its adjoining property, living in the fog signal station for more than 40 years. It wasn't until 1992 that he began the task of renovating the lighthouse, which he opened as an inn in 1995. He and Mary Mathews are the inn's co-keepers. Sand Hills features eight guest rooms, all with private baths.

For more information, contact (906) 337-1744 or www.sandhillslighthouseinn.com.

