



# Summer in “The Snows”

Those who have explored Michigan’s 36-island Les Cheneaux archipelago realize what a hidden treasure this area is. Tucked into the northern coastline of Lake Huron, the communities of Hessel and Cedarville remain anchored to their history while cruising toward their future.

*by Dianna Stampfler*





LEFT PHOTO COURTESY OF TEDOTTAWAY.COM; KAYAK PHOTO COURTESY OF LES CHENEVAUX ISLANDS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



PHOTO COURTESY OF LES CHENEAUX ISLANDS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The narrow waterways weaving through Les Cheneaux Islands in northern Lake Huron have welcomed an array of boats over the past 350-plus years — from the early Native Americans and French voyageurs in birch bark canoes to generations of tourists arriving by steamer, and later residents cruising along in their wooden runabouts.

Pronounced “Lay-Shen-O” and affectionately called “The Snows,” this area stretches for 12 mainland miles and encompasses an idyllic 36-island archipelago that appeared on maps hand-drawn by Father Jacques Marquette as early as 1670. Residents would ultimately name their largest island after this Jesuit missionary.

Accessible exclusively via boat, Marquette Island is home to Les Cheneaux Club (founded in 1888 as the Les Cheneaux Island Resort Association). The earliest members summured in canvas tents perched upon wooden platforms or unfinished frame cabins. Over time, the elite from large Midwestern cities constructed cottages and boathouses, as well as a large clubhouse and hotel.

Among those early families were Wisconsinites Carl and Clara Leopold, and their son, (Rand) Aldo, who would go on to become a noted American naturalist, ecologist, conservationist, environmentalist and author of “A Sand County Almanac” (1949). Each June, his legacy is celebrated with an annual nature-focused festival.

Boaters can access Marquette Island at Leopold

Landing on Duck Bay (operated by Clark Township) and explore the nearly 1,700-acre Aldo Leopold Nature Center — one of three island sites maintained by the Little Traverse Conservancy. Marquette Island has no roads, so visitors should be prepared to hike.

Marquette Island is also the home of Les Cheneaux Yacht Club, a reciprocal member of the Yachting Club of America, which represents approximately 150,000 boaters and over 600 registered yacht and sailing clubs throughout the country.

Just off the northeast side of Marquette Island is Les Cheneaux’s one-of-a-kind house on Dollar Island. Legend has it that the government sold this 0.6-acre island for a single dollar (thus the name) and over time an elaborate three-bedroom, two-bath “Aladdin”-esque cottage — complete with a three-stall boathouse, wraparound deck, gazebo and waterfront “kissing booth” — has been constructed.

Sitting just under 2.5 miles apart along the M-134 North Huron Scenic Byway, Hessel and Cedarville are midway between St. Ignace to the west and DeTour Village (the access point to Drummond Island) to the east. Together, these mainland cities evoke a laid-back coastal vibe.



Dollar Island



Aldo Leopold Nature Center

“Many bays among the islands offer protection from winds, so boaters can usually find an area of calm waters, no matter the wind direction,” says long-time local resident Norman Brood.

Recreational boating has been the lifeblood of the Les Cheneaux area since its founding.

E.J. Mertaugh Boat Works in Hessel opened in 1925, becoming the first Chris-Craft dealership in the world. These handcrafted wooden boats were built downstate in Algonac before being motored up Lake Huron to Hessel. Given both of these companies were founded during the Prohibition era, it’s no surprise that some of these now-classic vessels were used to smuggle bootleg alcohol to speakeasies on nearby Mackinac Island.

The docks here are also the setting for one of the Great Lakes’ most prestigious in-water events — the Antique Wooden Boat Show — held annually on the second Saturday of August. Since 1978, this impressive exhibit features as many as 150 timeless beauties from legendary manufacturers such as Chris-Craft, Century, Hacker Craft, Lyman, Thompson and Gar Wood, among others.

“My Father kept his 1930 Triple Cockpit Chris-Craft in Hessel at Mertaugh’s during the early 1980s,” says Bill Veneklasen, who was raised in Holland, Michigan, but now lives in South Carolina. “We would tour the waters and islands in that boat for hours. Years later, our family purchased a home on Coryell Island. Exploring the other islands and their special places within ‘The Channels’ are forever ingrained in my memory even though it’s been 10 years since my last visit.”

Nearly a century later, Mertaugh’s continues to service locals and visitors alike, with its fuel dock, Ship’s Store and North Coast Shop, featuring sweet treats like ice cream, fudge and specialty coffees.

Sailing is also a vital part of the Les Cheneaux experience, where Fleet 31 of the Ensign Class can be found. This is the largest fleet of its kind in the world, featuring more than 60 registered boats. This area is so well respected that the Ensign national championships were held here in 2010.



E.J. Mertaugh Boat Works



Antique Wooden Boat Show



North Coast Shop

PHOTOS COURTESY OF (LEFT-RIGHT): SANDY WHITE, ALDO LEOPOLD CENTER, MERTAUGH FACEBOOK, BOAT SHOW FACEBOOK, NORTHCOST FACEBOOK



Woods & Waters excursion



Aldo Fest

## Annual Summer Events

**Aldo Leopold Festival**  
First weekend of June  
[ALDOLEOPOLD.FESTIVAL.ORG](http://ALDOLEOPOLD.FESTIVAL.ORG)

**Red, White & Blue Run/Walk**  
Fourth of July  
[LESCHENEAX.NET](http://LESCHENEAX.NET)

**Antique Wooden Boat Show & Festival of Arts**  
Second Saturday in August  
[LCIBOATSHOW.COM](http://LCIBOATSHOW.COM)

**Les Cheneaux Farmers & Artisans Market**  
May thru September (Sundays, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.)  
[HESSELSCHOOLHOUSE.NET](http://HESSELSCHOOLHOUSE.NET)

### Getting there

Les Cheneaux is a picturesque layover for cruisers heading into the North Channel or into the Straits of Mackinac. Access — which is less than a quarter-mile in width at its most narrow point — may seem daunting, but there are four primary access points to this maze of islands:

- East entrance (between Booth Island and Strong Islands)
- Middle entrance (between Marquette Island and Little La Salle Island)
- West entrance (between Point Brûlé — named for French explorer Étienne Brûlé — and Marquette Island, beginning at Marker G1, is the main entrance to Hessel)
- Fourth entrance (unnamed on official charters but often referred to as “Yacht Entrance” for the many yachts that access Government Bay for overnight anchorage).

“On a nautical chart, the passages marked by buoys appear very narrow, contributing to the feeling when you come off the big waters of Lake Huron that you are entering a special, more intimate environment. But in years with good water and fewer weeds, these passages have plenty of room for two boats to pass,” says Sandy White, who has often navigated Les Cheneaux with her husband, Nicholas DeGrazia, on their Tiara 3500 Express, *Old No. 7* — named for the early 1900s toy electric train designed by Joshua Lionel Cowan (Nicholas is a former president of the Lionel Trains Inc.). “Mariners in 2021 reported having found excellent anchorages in Search Bay, Wilderness Bay and Marquette Bay.”

Government Island is a federally owned, uninhabited part of the Hiawatha National Forest System — the only totally public island in the region — maintained by Les Cheneaux Watershed Council. Once home to a Coast Guard Station, the island now boasts an extensive shoreline trail system and no-trace camping for those looking for a unique wilderness experience.



Les Cheneaux Culinary School

Nature truly abounds throughout the Les Cheneaux area, with many sites under the umbrella of the Little Traverse Conservancy open to the public for individual exploration. Woods & Water Eco Tours in Hessel offers a plethora of guided opportunities for kayaking, biking, hiking and birding. Public programs for adults and children are also available through the Friends of the Les Cheneaux Trails.

### Culinary

Start your day with a visit to Les Cheneaux Coffee Roasters in Cedarville, a family owned, full-service artisan shop offering a variety of cold and hot beverages with fresh baked goods made daily. You’ll find bread, pastries and cakes, as well as homemade soups, salads, sandwiches and pasta at Little Buoy Bakery, also in Cedarville.

In the heart of downtown Hessel, Les Cheneaux Culinary School & Restaurant is a year-round, hands-on classroom offering educational programs from September through May, with students putting their skills to work at the farm-to-table eatery during the busy summer season. Among the featured beverages served are spirits from nearby Les Cheneaux Distillers.

“The distillery is definitely something that is unique to the area, since we make all of our own spirits, beer and wine,” says Katie Duman Bowlby, manager at Les Cheneaux Distillers, a local family owned, award-winning operation in Cedarville. “Both the Bohn and Bowlby families have been in the area for generations, and the local pride and support here in the area [for our products] is phenomenal. All of our spirits and cocktails are made with our area in mind. Marquette Island residents [among others] feel the extra love when ordering our ‘Marquette Mule.’”

Other popular places to eat and drink include Ang-Gio’s, Cattails Cove, Hilltop Drive-Thru, Narley Whale Fish Market, Snows Bar & Grill,

PHOTOS COURTESY OF (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): WOODS & WATER FACEBOOK, CULINARY SCHOOL FACEBOOK, ALDO FEST FACEBOOK



Cedarville Harbor Marina



Viking Boat Harbor



Cedarville Marine

and U.P. in Smoke Barbecue in Cedarville, along with Islander Bar & Grill and Runway Bar in Hessel.

### Attractions

The historic Hessel School House is home to the Avery Arts & Nature Learning Center and its new “Storybook Trail” for youngsters and their families. Winding through the woodland area around the school, the trail’s 18 stations highlight a variety of titles featuring Great Lakes lore.

Inside in the 1920s-era O.M. Reif Boathouse on M-134 in Cedarville, the Maritime Museum is chock-full of vintage boats, antique outboard motors and marine pieces, as well as historic photos that give a glimpse back in time to the area’s rich boating heritage. The nearby Historical Museum is housed in an authentic log cabin with countless displays focusing on the development of Cedarville and Hessel dating to the 1880s.

The Great Lakes Boat Building School opened in 2005 as a marine trades institution, and offers a 12-month comprehensive program. While not open to the public, the 12,000-square-foot facility complements the design of the region’s historic structures and is worth a drive-by.

### Marinas

Those seeking to overnight in the Les Cheneaux area will find plenty of spots for boats of all sizes.

Hessel Marina currently offers 24 slips with electrical and water hook-up and access to restrooms with showers, on-site laundry and pump-out service. According to Clark Township Supervisor Mark Clymer, they hope to expand the marina in the coming years to accommodate dockage demands from transient boaters, seasonal dock rentals, local day-use boaters and island residents, as well as develop an additional 115 feet of shoreline for the second yacht basin. (For reservations, visit [MIDNRRESERVATIONS.COM](http://MIDNRRESERVATIONS.COM)).

E.J. Mertaugh’s rents docks seasonally for a flat rate in its private marina in Hessel. There are limited slips available at the beginning of the season on a first come, first serve basis.

Cedarville Harbor Marina features 14 slips and a spacious marina building with a lounge, showers and restrooms. It is within walking distance to several local businesses, the Les Cheneaux Library and boat service operations. (For reservations, visit [MIDNRRESERVATIONS.COM](http://MIDNRRESERVATIONS.COM)).

Viking Boat Harbor in Cedarville has a half dozen slips for transient sailors, with a fuel dock and pump-out station, as well as water and power, restrooms, showers and laundry facilities. This full-service marina also offers engine, mechanical, electrical, fiberglass, woodworking and canvas repairs.

Tassier Boat Works is a full-service marina for boats up to 30 feet, operating in both Cedarville and Hessel. The marina offers restoration, maintenance and mechanical services, as well as dockage, gas and a ship’s store with a large selection of marine paints and hardware for wooden boats.

Cedarville Marine features 78 slips for seasonal and transient boaters, with typical basin depths ranging from 24 to 54 inches. Amenities include electricity, restrooms and showers, complimentary wireless internet, on-site parking, sanitation pump-out, gasoline, grill/barbecue and maintenance/repair, as well as a ship’s store. ★

## Resources

**Clark Township**  
[CLARKTWP.ORG](http://CLARKTWP.ORG)  
**906-484-2672**

**Les Cheneaux Historical Association**  
[LCHISTORICAL.ORG](http://LCHISTORICAL.ORG)

**Les Cheneaux Island Association**  
[ISLANDASSOC.ORG](http://ISLANDASSOC.ORG)

**Les Cheneaux Islands Chamber of Commerce**  
[LESCHENEAUX.NET](http://LESCHENEAUX.NET)

**Little Traverse Conservancy**  
[LANDTRUST.ORG](http://LANDTRUST.ORG)

**M-134 North Huron Scenic Byway**  
[MI134.COM](http://MI134.COM)

**Upper Peninsula Travel & Recreation Association**  
[UPTRAVEL.COM](http://UPTRAVEL.COM)