



# Hitting the Pure Michigan Trails

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Pure Michigan

To celebrate Michigan's vast system of trails – biking, hiking, paddling and even horseback riding – the state Department of Natural Resources created the Pure Michigan Trails (including Water Trails) and Pure Michigan Trail Towns designation program in 2019.

Since that time, the program has grown in terms of the number of communities a



organizations looking to highlight the unparalleled experiences that can be found off the beaten path around the Great Lakes State.

Statewide, Michigan has more than 13,400 miles of state-designated trails, in addition to routes that fall under local, county or federal jurisdiction. More than 2,600 miles of old railroad lines have been converted for recreational use as part of a growing rails-to-trails program – like the 33.5-mile Kal-Haven State Park Trail, which connects Kalamazoo to South Haven (one of the first Pure Michigan Trail Town recipients).

A 2013 study by the Outdoor Industry Association found that 2.1 million people participate in non-motorized trail activities in Michigan annually, spending \$1.7 billion a year (on average) for those activities. The report also noted that 4.1 million people participate in non-motorized outdoor recreation in Michigan – hiking, biking, skiing, snowshoeing, or paddling – collectively spending \$8.8 billion.

Outside of trail usage, overall outdoor recreation generates \$18.7 billion in consumer spending in Michigan, while also creating over 190,000 jobs. At least 63 percent of Michigan residents participate in some type of outdoor recreation each year.

## **Pure Michigan Trail Towns**

Charlevoix and South Haven, both in the Lower Peninsula, along with Houghton and Newberry in the Upper Peninsula, were the first communities recognized, followed by Cheboygan, Orion Township and Reed City in 2020; Trenton in 2021; Big Rapids, Cadillac, and Elk Rapids in 2022; and Chelsea and St. Ignace, announced at the Pure Michigan Governor's Conference on Tourism in April.

“The City of Chelsea [population of nearly 5,400] has long been a proponent of trails and parks that provide a wide variety of natural, cultural, and historic resources and events for residents and visitors of all ages, abilities, backgrounds, incomes, and interests,” said Tim Novak, DNR State Trails Coordinator, during the conference. “In and around Chelsea, you’ll find well-maintained walking, hiking, biking, and multi-use trails that can be enjoyed year-round. The vast trail network connects Chelsea’s lively downtown area to nearby neighborhoods, parks, and economic, recreation, and social areas.”

Located in Washtenaw County, Chelsea hosts art and historic walking tours through its downtown area including a “Sculpture Walk” and a “Chelsea Trail Challenge” presented by Ugly Dog Distilling. The Washtenaw County Border to Border Trail – a portion of the Iron Belle Trail – is under development and will ultimately run through downtown Chelsea, connecting it with Dexter to the east and Stockbridge to the northwest.

According to the Michigan Trails website, “The Iron Belle Trail [which is about 71% complete] is Michigan’s showcase trail that touches hundreds of municipalities and crosses through 48 different Michigan counties. Using existing trails, networks, and new connections, the trail extends more than 2,000 miles from the far western tip of the Upper Peninsula to Belle Isle in Detroit, with a route of bicycling and a route of hiking.”

From Belle Isle, the biking section travels through the eastern part of the Lower Peninsula around parts of Saginaw Bay and the sunrise side before diverting north to the U.P. and then heading west skirting the northern coast of Lake Michigan and ending along the Wisconsin border.

The hiking portion meanders from Detroit westward through the Lower Peninsula and along the northern part of the U.P., encompassing 1,000-plus miles of the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) – the nation’s longest footpath which stretches for 4,800 miles between Vermont and North Dakota (eight states overall, with the largest section of 1,150 miles being in Michigan).

Both routes overlap in the Straits of Mackinac, including the towns of Mackinaw City and St. Ignace.

“As the gateway to the Upper Peninsula, St. Ignace is the convergence of hiking, biking, equestrian, snowmobile and ORV trails,” Novak said. “In St. Ignace, you are never more than a few minutes away from a variety of trails that can be used in all seasons.”

Boasting a rich Native American history, St. Ignace (population approximately 2,300) is also one of Michigan’s oldest cities. Founded by French Jesuit explorer Father Jacques Marquette in 1671, the town once was a bustling hub for fur traders, Today, tourism is the primary industry for this port town – which was named the first NCT “Trail Town” in

the Upper Peninsula nearly a decade ago.

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**A couple walks a trail outside St. Ignace.**

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From the northern end of the 5-mile Mackinac Bridge, the NCT continues through Straits State Park into downtown St. Ignace where it merges with the Huron Boardwalk (along the Lake Huron shoreline) and beyond to the Hiawatha National Forest.

“This trail has historical interpretive signs along the downtown portion where you can scan a QR code on your phone and listen to a recording on the historical significance of the portion of the trail,” says Novak.

“This same walking tour is available in a free booklet that can be obtained at the Visitors Bureau Welcome Center.”

In its continued efforts to create, expand and promote its trails, St. Ignace has mounted an all-out community initiative which includes the City of St. Ignace, Downtown Development Authority (DDA), St. Ignace Chamber of Commerce, St. Ignace Visitors Bureau, and Moran Township.

“We have ramped up efforts in recent years to improve trail signage and access, as well as creating and maintaining connector trails making travel between different trail systems safer and more accessible,” says Quincy Ranville, events director for the St. Ignace Visitors Bureau. “We have a long way to go in these endeavors but obtaining Pure Michigan Trail Town designation is an honor and we continue to move forward, bringing our trails to the forefront of the many reasons why guests come to Discover St. Ignace.”

St. Ignace leaders have also worked in partnership with Rock Solid Trail Contracting out of Copper Harbor in the development of the Silver Mountain Bike and Hike Trail (completed in 2021). Plans are being made to add signage along that route which will include traditional Anishinaabe translations and histories from the local Native American tribe. The Visitors Bureau is also helping fund the Heart of the Great Turtle Island Park, with trails to the Father Marquette National Memorial, amphitheater, and learning commons to be completed in the near future.

## Pure Michigan Trails

Two new Pure Michigan Trails were also added to the program this year – the Paint Creek Trail in Oakland County and the Cass River Water Trail in Saginaw and Tuscola counties, joining nine other such pathways throughout the state.

“Historically, it is believed that the Paint Creek was a transportation corridor for indigenous peoples through the Paint Creek Valley,” notes Novak. “The current Paint Creek Trail also follows along the creek on an old Penn Central railroad bed and allows visitors to enjoy northern Oakland County’s scenic beauty.

The Paint Creek Trailways Commission was formed in 1981 in order to purchase the abandoned right-of-way. “Since that time, the commission has remained dedicated to providing a non-motorized route of transportation and maintaining the natural beauty of the trail,” he says.

Opened to the public in 1983, the 8.9-mile Paint Creek Trail was the first non-motorized rail-to-trail in the state of Michigan – a conversion of a former Penn Central Railroad line. Over 100,000 people use this trail annually as it travels through Rochester, Rochester Hills, Oakland Township, Orion Township, and the Village of Lake Orion.

Named a Michigan Millennium Legacy Trail in 1999 and a National Recreation Trail in 2006, the Paint Creek Trail connects to the Polly Ann Trail via a connector path and is part of Michigan’s Iron Bell Trail.

At nearly 17 miles long, Paint Creek is one of Michigan’s premier cold-water trout streams. Since the 1940s, the river has been stocked annually with trout and it is reported that the population exceeds 600 fish per mile in some sections – with some trout approaching 20 inches in length.

The 37.5-mile Cass River Water Trail – a development of the Cass River Greenway – flows between Saginaw and Tuscola counties and six townships, featuring 13 access sites and two portages.

“Our Cass River Water Trail offers a great outdoor recreational opportunity, with great natural habitat, scenic views, and paddling level that suits almost anyone,” says Bill Wheeler, Parks & Recreation Director / DDA Coordinator for Bridgeport Charter Township. “With the number of access points along the river visitors can plan a trip to suit them whether it is two hours or six hours they are looking for and with great businesses along the trail in the communities that the river passing through makes for a perfect day or weekend trip.”

The Frankenmuth City Paddle is especially fun, at just one mile it takes less than an hour to leisurely coast through this quaint Bavarian town – including views of the beloved 239-foot Holz Brücke Covered Bridge.

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