The Grand Rapids Press

MACKINAC ISLAND

Make the most of island time

By Kim Schneider
MLive.com

Mackinac Island is not a best kept secret.

The intrigue of an island with a ban on cars, where horses and bicycles are the transportation modes of choice, has visitation continuing to climb.

Visitors climb, too — up to limestone formations paired with native legends, to storied forts and up heart-pumping bike trails that pass one-time battlefields and mysterious forest trails.

But many are first-timers who crowd, wide-eyed around ferry staffers and island regulars with the most pressing question of every visit day: What should I do on my island day trip and when should I do it? So we've compiled a general guide to making the most of island time.

9 A.M.: CLIP CLOP WITH A GUIDE

Horse-drawn carriages have been toting island visitors around since the first carriage license was issued in 1869, and at the height of the island's Victorian-era vacation craze, up to 80 carriage drivers at a time would rush the docks, starting occasional brawls over who would get to haul whom.

Things are a bit saner today, especially if you catch the first ferry of the day before lines grow. Head before the first (9 a.m.) tour of the day to the Carriage Tours booth next to the Visitors Bureau and be ready to soak in the tales — some, likely, of the tall variety.

A favorite story is how the nation's first — and noisy — car so spooked the island's horses that when one equine fell into a crowd and died, islanders banned the "horseless carriages" (aside from the fully motorized fire truck and police cars) for good.

Ask another favorite question: Have you ever seen a ghost? Some drivers are rumored to have picked up passengers dressed as soldiers who later vanished — a reason why ghost hunting TV production teams visit.

10:30-11 A.M.: A PORCH VIEW AND FILM SET FOR ROMANTICS

If your driver is ending the trip past the Grand Hotel, splurge and pay the $10 fee to walk the grounds for the chance to explore a resort that encapsulates the island's grand vacation history and serves as a living movie set for the Christopher Reeve and Jane Seymour cult romance, "Somewhere in Time." Or play bocce on the incredibly manicured lawns. Another $15 gets you a day-pass to the pool featured in the Esther Williams film "This Time for Keeps."

There is no fee, save for the price of a tasty cone, to check out the resort's ice cream parlor-with-a-view.

NOON TO 1 P.M.: A DOWNTOWN LIKE NO OTHER

It's downhill all the way to town, and this promenade scene is one not to miss. Visit the public library — on your right as you reach the waterfront — so surprisingly lovely inside (its decor was created by Grand Hotel designer Carleton Varney) It's worth a stop or pass-through to its waterfront seats with a great view of sailboats and ferries.

In the center of town, view the pastel-painted storefronts. Pick up a ticket to Fort Mackinac, which allows free entry into other attractions, such as the blacksmith shop and the Richard and Jane Manoogian Art museum. Pop in to the museum for the special exhibit, "Waters of Mackinac," and the permanent exhibit of fascinating tin-type photos of Victorian-era visitors posing by Castle Rock.

1 P.M.: A FORT THAT IS FUN FOR ALL AGES

Climb the daunting-looking steps to the pinnacle of Fort Mackinac, knowing payoff comes with the view from the sunny yellow umbrellas perched along the edge. The Fort Tea Room is a favorite for the sights — and sounds — and the famous Grand Pecan Ball dessert. The 1:30 p.m. rifle firing will shake you from your seat.

Relax at the bucolic park and view the water scene below and distant fifes and drums — all part of the adventure. The 1880s-era fort interprets island history around five F's: faith, fur, fort, fun and fudge.

(Tastings are focused downtown, where generous sampling is part of island culture).

Mid-afternoon is a great time to catch the 2:30 p.m. cannon firing, a humorous "Music on Mackinac" interpretation and the 3:30 p.m. interactive (audience members as judges) re-enactment of actual island court martials, often involving a soldier who got drunk downtown or fell asleep at his post.

4-6 P.M.: BIKE THE SHORELINE

Rent a bicycle (gear-less, decked out or built for two) at one of the many downtown options, then head west to tackle the hilliest sections early — knowing the shoreline road is flat enough even for children and bicycling beginners and that the gorgeous water and bridge views will offer plenty of excuses for rest stops.

Somewhere along the way, join one of the newest island traditions and make your own Inukshuk a stacked stone sculpture, a pasttime that also makes for some memorable shoreline photos. Stop for a shot, too, of Castle Rock from below, then round the bend for a dinner stop at Mission Point Resort.

6-9 P.M.: DINNER, A COCKTAIL AND WILD LIFE

New management at Mission Point is putting a focus on food, particularly fresh produce, herbs and locally caught fish showcased in casual sandwiches and high-end dishes, such as the whitefish caviar or smoked whitefish dip. On a nice night, you can't beat the vibe at the outdoor restaurant along the waterfrontt. Just outside the indoor restaurant, Chianti, bartenders snip herb from a new garden to create specialty garden-to-glass cocktails.

Your after-dinner waterfront stroll takes you past beavers busy building dens and the occasional otter.

The island's other wild life is found at stops such as the iconic Pink Pony. Take in the scene on the waterfront patio, or take a last downtown stroll for souvenir shopping — and fudge. Don't fight the urge. You won't win. A clever entrepreneur came up with the idea of fanning the rich chocolate scent onto the streets, the best explanation behind the many, many fudge bags toted on the last ferry back.

MAKE IT AN OVERNIGHT

The chance to hear the clopping of horse hooves outside your guest room window is reason enough to stay overnight on the island. The bonus is the chance to squeeze in more fun, and staying at one of the island's resorts, bed and breakfasts or inns is an affordable option if you plan for a late spring or early summer stay.

The Lilac Tree Suits and Spa, for example, is one central option with rooms that start at $139 midweek and some Fridays in June, and you can watch carriage-drawn life unfold in the center of main street.

Even the luxurious Grand Hotel offers some rooms at almost one-third of peak summer fares on specific days in June, and those Celebrate Michigan rates still include the multicourse dinner and a full breakfast.

Or try Mission Point Resort, where new ownership has brought room renovations, new dining options, a new spa and a popular cocktail menu. New make-your-own cocktail classes feature fresh-picked herbs from a hillside cocktail garden. There also is a rotating lineup of weekend musicians.

Visitors take a horse-drawn carriage ride along Market Street on Mackinac Island. (Mackinac Island Visitors Bureau photo)

Macaroons made by the chefs at Mission Point Resort.
(Kim Schneider/MLive.com)