

Travelers come from all around for  
Mackinac Island's stuck-in-time feel.



Mackinac Island, Michigan, is a secret most Midwesterners would prefer to keep. But because it's surprisingly easy to access from cities such as Detroit and Chicago, it also makes a perfect pit stop for travelers passing through those urban centers, too.

Mackinac Island might be only four square miles, but it's got no shortage of personality. After all, it was hailed as [the friendliest island on Earth in 2015](#) — possibly because locals have an endearing habit of calling out-of-towners “fudgies.” (Legend has it the nickname stuck because no tourist leaves without sampling the island's famous fudge.)

For many, Mackinac Island is the embodiment of the American family vacation. Here's everything you need to know before booking your trip.



## History of Mackinac Island

Tourism got going here in the 1950s, but the island's history stretches back much further than that. Native Americans were the first to inhabit Mackinac (the name Mackinac, pronounced "Mackinaw" derives from the Ojibwe word, *mishimikinaak*). Meaning "big turtle," the island's earliest residents thought it resembled the shape of a turtle.

It wasn't until 1780 that Fort Mackinac was erected here, though it was later the site of two major battles in the War of 1812; today, it's been transformed into a sprawling [military history museum](#), complete with thrilling battle reenactments and cannon demonstrations.



But the island's charm isn't limited to just history. As a result of its separation from the mainland, over the years, Mackinac has emerged as something of a novelty destination, famous for its many quirks and quintessential summer vacation vibes.



[sstevens3/Getty Images](#)

## **Facts About Mackinac Island**

### **It's Like Traveling Back in Time**

Yes, the rumors you've heard are true. The entire island is car-free, and has been since 1898 — only horses and bicycles are allowed, giving the place a laid-back vibe.

## **You Can Lounge on the World's Longest Front Porch**

Guests staying the [Grand Hotel](#) — which happens to be celebrating its 130th anniversary in the summer of 2017 — can spend afternoons lazing on the world's longest front porch (660 feet!) Travelers arriving from the Straits of Mackinac can't miss it.

## **It's Home to the Country's Oldest Grocery**

Downtown, the famous [Doud's Grocery](#) claims to be America's oldest family-operated grocery store, having opened in 1884. Come here for everything from beer and wine to fresh cheeses and snacks.

## **Most of Mackinac is Just Park**

A whopping 82 percent of Mackinac Island is parkland, with 70 miles of trails (including several that are perfect for horseback riding) that help you explore the island's forest and undeveloped back roads, as well as the scenic routes that connect spectacularly preserved Victorian houses. In fact, when the government officially set aside this land in 1875, it became the nation's second-ever national park (after [Yellowstone](#)).



# When is the Best Time to Visit Mackinac Island?

While Mackinac Island is accessible year-round, the bulk of tour companies, shops, and restaurants tend to get going in May, with the season winding down in October. And on Mackinac Island, the weather is at its best during the summer, with highs hovering around 75 degrees and moderate evenings dipping only down to the 50s. All you really need is a light sweater.

Several Mackinac Island hotels and restaurants do, however, remain open in the winter, for those who wish to show up in December for cross-country skiing. Believe it or not, it's a popular option, particularly for locals.

## Where is Mackinac Island?

Located at the intersection of two Great Lakes, Mackinac Island is technically floating on Lake Huron, between the Upper and Lower Peninsulas of Michigan. Of all the Michigan islands (and there are about 35,000) few are better known than Mackinac.

## How to Get to Mackinac Island

### Mackinac Island Ferry

Ferries run from both Mackinaw City and St. Ignace, depending on whether you're coming from the north or south. Two ferry companies, [Star Line Ferry](#) and [Sheplers Ferry](#), traverse the same 30-minute route each day (\$24 per adult round-trip, and kids under 5 ride free), giving travelers plenty of options.



## Mackinac Bridge

Travelers arriving to the island via the 26,372-foot-long Mackinac Bridge (currently the fifth longest suspension bridge in the world) should be prepared to pay a \$4.00 per car bridge toll.

Oversized or unusual vehicles, including motor homes, will be charged a \$5.00 Mackinac bridge toll per axle.

## Nearby Airports

If you happen to be coming from out of state, Delta offers daily service from Detroit to Pellston Regional Airport, the closest air hub.



# Fun Things to Do on Mackinac Island

## Outdoor Activities

### Hiking

Above all, Mackinac Island “is an outdoor experience,” Liz Ware, head of communications at Mission Point Resort, told *Travel + Leisure*. She recommends hiking out to Arch Rock, a remarkable limestone structure located on the Lake Huron shoreline. Created thousands of years ago by water erosion, it forms a perfect eye-hole soaring 146 feet over the turquoise-blue lake. You (or your kids) will have to fight the urge to climb up to the top, though. A clearly marked sign warns all visitors to “Keep Off.”

### Bike Rentals

Dozens of bike rental shops are scattered throughout town, but the Mackinac Island Bike Shop is a great choice, and they offer everything from tag-a-longs and tandems to mountain bikes, and island-style bikes with baskets. Rates start at \$8.00 per hour.

### Horseback Riding

While horseback tours are one way to explore Mackinac, visitors can even rent saddle horses (check out [Cindy's Riding Stable](#)), which are available at hourly rates. Horseback riding is a great way to navigate those seemingly endless miles of trails.



## Tours

### Carriage Tours

Should you opt for something a little more leisurely, you can't go wrong with a horse-drawn carriage. [Mackinac Island Carriage Tours](#) bills itself as the "oldest and largest horse and buggy livery," and they've been in the business since 1948. Today, they possess a fleet of 100 carriages, and the tour company has had ample time to perfect its route, which traces a loop through some of the island's most important landmarks. You'll pass the [butterfly conservatory](#), Arch Rock, and the [Avenue of Flags](#). On a hot summer's day, sitting back and letting the horses and the guide do all the work for you isn't such a bad idea.



## **Attractions**

### **Fort Mackinac**

Families looking to brush up on their history of the American Revolution would do well to spend a half-day at [Fort Mackinac](#). Now a faithfully restored museum, the site remained an active military outpost from 1780 all the way up to 1895. The fort's strategic location along the Great Lakes meant it was bitterly contested, and the site alternated between British and American control until it was ultimately handed back after the war. In addition to touring the soldiers barracks — furnished just as they were in the 1800s — and cheering along to battle reenactments, you can even reserve a spot to fire the canon yourself.

### **Lilac Festival**

If you're planning to visit during the early summer, be sure to check out the [Mackinac Island Lilac Festival](#). This 10-day celebration in June includes concerts, a grand parade, and the ceremonial crowning of the Lilac Queen.

### **Fudge Festival**

As if anyone needed an excuse to eat lots of Mackinac Island fudge, the island's annual August fudge festival has a full calendar of fudge-related events and activities. There are fudge tastings and demonstrations, beer and fudge pairings, and sugar sack relay races, among others. If you can't make the fest, any one of the island's candy and fudge shops will do. Murdick's Fudge is the original, and they've been serving homemade fudge, peanut brittle, and nut clusters since 1887. Visitors can also try a whopping 25 flavors of fudge at Joann's.



## Best Restaurants and Bars on Mackinac Island

### For a Fancy Dinner

When you're in the mood to celebrate, stop in at the brand new [Reserve, a Tasting Room](#). Tiny (there are only 17 seats) and best-suited for snacking, the focus here is charcuterie boards featuring venison cherry sausage, *salame tartufo*, and Prosciutto di Parma — alongside Michigan-sourced cheeses, glazed figs, and olives. Wash it all down with a glass of rosé from the Loire Valley.

## For Live Music

For a slice of real island history, plan on doing lunch or dinner at [Horn's Gaslight Bar & Restaurant](#), which has remained in business since the 1920s. With its pressed tin ceiling and saloon-like vibe, you can't help but feel swept up in the place's relaxed, good-time vibe. The menu skews Southwest (nachos, fresh guacamole, chicken fajitas), and if you like some tunes with your tacos, this is the spot for you. There's live music and dancing almost every night.

## For Brunch

At the [Chuckwagon](#), you'll find islanders hunched over a narrow wood counter, chatting amiably with each other while bacon, eggs, and hashbrowns sizzle on the griddle two feet away. Officially Mackinac Island's tiniest eatery, the old-school diner dates back to the 1950s. If you're willing to put up with the cramped seating, you'll be rewarded with what locals say is the best burger in town (and at \$7 for a third-pounder, certainly the most cost-efficient).

## For Drinks

The [Pink Pony](#) scores points for being one of the island's most colorful—and tourist-friendly—dining spots. Order the Pink Pony Martini (dragonberry vodka, watermelon pucker, lemonade, cranberry) or the Pink Pony Punch (dragonberry, Peach Schnapps, and lemonade).

## For Seafood

For families looking for a solid lunch or dinner spot, [Seabiscuit Cafe](#) is a safe bet. Handsome and pub-like with carved mahogany banisters and original brick walls, evidence of the famous racehorse can be found everywhere, from the art on the walls to the menu itself, which is divided into categories like Winner's Circle (the oven-roasted Saratoga Ribs are a favorite), Starting Gate, and Finish Line (Mackinac dark chocolate fudge cake, anyone?).





Courtesy of Mission Point Resort

## **Best Accommodations on Mackinac Island**

Travelers looking for lodging on Mackinac Island should note that there is a nice variety of cozy inns, family-friendly resorts, and bed & breakfasts scattered across the island.

## Best Inns and Lodges

### Inn at Stonecliffe

Surrounded by scenic woods on the island's west side, the elegant [Inn at Stonecliffe](#) has changed hands many times in its 100-plus-year history, but its old-world charm remains intact. Guests can stay in the mansion proper, with 16 recently renovated rooms (some with large windows overlooking the Mackinac Bridge), or in the Summer House, which offers suites equipped with kitchens and balconies. Downstairs, there's the [Cudahy Room](#): a wood-paneled cocktail lounge housed in the mansion's original library.

### Cottage Inn

For something a little more low-key, try the [Cottage Inn](#), which sits right next to the shops and restaurants downtown, and just two blocks from the ferry docks. Guests rave about the daily breakfast here, which has hot items along with fresh-baked muffins, and yogurt with fresh fruit (in the afternoon, the owners even put out plates of fudge and peanut brittle for a pre-dinner pick-me-up). Rooms are charming, with bright, floral decor and mismatched furniture, though all have air conditioning and flat-screen TVs. For a romantic getaway, book the one suite located in the turret. Its position affords beautiful views of the harbor through a generous bay window.

## Best Mackinac Island Hotels and Resorts

### Mission Point Resort

An easy go-to for families, the famous [Mission Point Resort](#) is surrounded by lush gardens, and counts a pool, a movie theater, and an arcade room among its kid-friendly amenities. Not that you'll be spending too much time inside, but the themed suites make for a handsome home base. Some even come equipped with Jacuzzis, four-poster beds, and separate dining rooms. Meanwhile, on the hotel's vast lakefront lawn — the biggest on the island, in fact — you can play bocce ball and croquet, or just lean back on one of the hotel's Adirondack chairs and gaze out over the lake.

### Grand Hotel

This Gilded Age property is one of [the best family beach hotels](#), thanks to its mix of old-time fun (croquet and bocce on the lawn after dinner) and modern recreation. Parents, in particular, will appreciate the full-service Aveda Salon and Spa, though the kids will probably prefer paddling around the heated swimming pool. Rates are a bit steeper than they were when the property opened in 1887 (a cool \$5 per night), but in many ways, it will feel like nothing at the [Grand Hotel](#) (like that perfect view of Lake Huron) has changed.





Courtesy of Mission Point Resort

## Top Points of Interest Near Mackinac Island

### Top Cities

#### Mackinaw City

From Mackinac Island, it's entirely feasible to plan a day or half-day trip to several nearby attractions, like the access port of Mackinaw City. While most folks tend to think of this as just a transit point on their way to the island, travelers should absolutely consider spending time at the nearby adventure park, [Big Bear Adventures](#). Here, families can enjoy hours of kayaking, rafting, and inner tube trips along the Sturgeon River, as well as 18-holes of adventure golf and a ropes challenge course.

## **Detroit**

If you're based in Motor City — or want to tack on a visit during your trip to Mackinac Island — you'll find plenty of [fun things to do in the major Midwestern city](#). Detroit is only a short, hour-long flight to St. Ignace, though road-trippers might consider the scenic five-hour drive. There, you'll want to make time for the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) and a cup of Great Lakes coffee at Urban Bean Co.

## **Top Attractions**

### **Shipwrecks**

The waters around Mackinac have not always been a friend to sea captains, thanks to treacherous shoals and shallows. The last shipwreck near the island went down in 1965, but there are literally scores of other submerged vessels hiding in the vast depths of the Straits of Mackinac, as well as within the larger Lake Huron, Lake Michigan, and Georgian Bay. As a result, many [regional dive centers](#) offer unique chartered tours and dives around Mackinac's 14 documented shipwrecks.

### **Great Lakes**

If you're in the mood to set sail on the Great Lakes surrounding Mackinac Island, cruise companies like [Blount Small Ship Adventures](#) offer epic 15-night itineraries that pass through four of the Great Lakes, along with stops in Chicago, Wyandotte, MI (home to the Henry Ford Museum), and of course, Mackinac Island.