

## Northern Michigan Vacation: Two Friends Reunite

**Northern Michigan Outdoors: Two longtime pals rediscover their friendship and newly discover a great region on a fishing vacation to the Upper Peninsula.** Apr 23, 2013 John Frisbie

Northern Michigan Outdoors: What happens when two old friends from high school graduate from college, settle down on opposite coasts, have kids, and decide to reunite for a fishing adventure on Michigan's Upper Peninsula? It seems an unlikely vacation choice for two guys who grew up in the northern New Jersey suburbs of New York City. We haven't done much to enhance our outdoorsmen credentials as adults either. My friend, Jack, lives in L.A., and I'm in Atlanta ... not exactly bucolic settings. But there was something about the whole Hemingway thing that attracted us—his writing about Northern Michigan, Nick Adams fishing on the Two Hearted River, etc. Neither one of us had ever been to the Upper Peninsula, but it seemed like the right place to go. Even Longfellow conspired to promote the place with his poem *Hiawatha*, creating word pictures of a pristine, primal wilderness that now exists in the Hiawatha National Forest on the Upper Peninsula. Surely Longfellow's "the shores of Gitche Gume" had to be on Lake Superior or Lake Michigan or perhaps even Lake Huron, all lapping the coast of the U.P., and all calling to us.



After landing in Traverse City, we hopped in our rental car and headed north. Our plan was to explore the top part of the Lower Peninsula before crossing the Mackinac Bridge to the U. P. Let me start out by saying that when we were kids, our families spent our summer vacations on Cape Cod; and I had spent time in Maine, so we were both kind of biased toward the New England coast. Certainly we didn't expect anything in Michigan to rival the historic architecture and charm we were used to back East. I have to say, we were pleasantly surprised. Some of the little towns we explored, like Charlevoix and Harbor Springs, were as inviting and architecturally attractive as those in New England. The views of Lake Michigan are much like looking at the ocean. In fact the word "lake" sells it short. Looking across Lake Michigan you get the same sense of expansiveness and wonder you do looking at the ocean. It's really a fresh water sea.

**"It's really a fresh water sea."**

We continued exploring and ended up in the village of Petoskey just before dinner. Here was another delightful little town. The historic architecture was preserved along streets that meandered up a hill giving a great view of the sea, sometimes called Lake Michigan. Gaslights lined the streets, and little shops invited exploration. But dinnertime was approaching, and we'd put in a long day, so we ducked into a place called City Park Grill.

While waiting for our food, we noticed people up front walking around, setting something up, but we didn't think anything of it. Toward the end of dinner, musical notes penetrated our conversation, and we realized a band was getting ready to play. Jack and I were both in a band in high school, so we were more than a little interested in checking out this little ensemble. We quickly paid our tab and found a table right up front next to the band.

Sitting on a bar stool, a guy picked the strings of an electric guitar. He had a lot of personality and introduced himself as Larry Garner and talked about the Larry Garner Blues Band. There were three other members of Larry's band sitting behind him, and he introduced them one by one. The first was the bass player, a big guy with bleached blond hair named Honey Bear. Next came the drummer, a



free spirited young fellow named Mad Dog. Finally, there was the keyboard guy. As the band started its first number, Jack and I looked at each other and wondered what his name was. Apparently we'd been talking or not paying attention when he was introduced, or maybe he wasn't introduced at all. We weren't sure.

Larry was the sole vocalist and played a mean guitar as the band regaled us with Juke Joint Woman and other great pieces. With any blues band there is a certain casual, soulful mood created, as the band members get into the music and generally feel the message. As Larry, Honey Bear, and Mad Dog became one with the music, experiencing it with their body language, the keyboard guy sat stiff as a board, expressionless, staring blankly ahead. His fingers danced skillfully over the keys as if operating independently from his body. This guy became a real puzzle to us. He was tall with a military crew cut and chiseled features. The other band members would talk to each other between songs and look at each other from time to time; not this guy. He stayed in his own world. He looked like a stern German, and we felt obliged to give him the name, Klaus. It really seemed to fit. I mean everyone else had a name. This guy needed one too.

In the course of playing, each musician would occasionally have his own solo opportunity. Larry would do his own thing on the guitar for a bit, and we would all clap and acknowledge his artistry. On another song, Larry would say, "Take it, Mad Dog," and Mad Dog would go nuts on the drums, and we would all clap and say, "Way to go, Mad Dog." On another song, the bass took over for a little solo, and we would all clap and say "Right on, Honey Bear." There was clearly a strong group dynamic at work, a unity between the band and the audience. Larry invited us in, and we all obliged. The one hold out in this group love fest seemed to be Klaus. While he did have his solo opportunities, and he executed them perfectly, he didn't seem to feel the experience. He didn't really bond with the audience; he didn't even seem to have bonded with the band.

As Jack and I downed another beer, it became increasingly obvious to us that it was our job to bring Klaus out of his shell. The next time he had a solo, we applauded loudly and yelled, "Way to go, Klaus." We felt a little positive reinforcement would help him get into the spirit of things. We continued to cheer the other members of the band, but our applause and verbal encouragement for Klaus were cranked up to the highest level. Unfortunately it had little effect on the enigmatic musician. He sat there, ramrod stiff, emotionless, executing his keyboard stylings with complete efficiency. Of course he may have been more responsive if his name had actually been Klaus, but at the time that seemed like a minor detail. We wondered if he was perhaps in the witness protection program and just wanted to keep a low profile. Maybe he was an informant for the U.S. Marshalls and they inserted him into bands playing in Northern Michigan in order to keep him one step ahead of the mob. If so, I hope we didn't blow his cover.

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e left our motel the next morning and headed north to the U.P. One stop we had to make

on the way was Mackinac Island. There's no bridge, and no cars are allowed on the island, so we parked our rental, got on the ferry, and headed out. Once on the island, the first thing you notice is the sense of quiet that comes from the absence of cars. It shocks you at first, but you gradually get used to it. The growing peacefulness starts to become your new norm. You wander around. The architecture has been kept simple and not overly commercialized ... kind of old-fashioned looking. People get around in horse-drawn carriages. There are no visible telephone or electric wires. Gaslights line tree-shaded streets. You don't realize it, but you're slowly getting drawn into a time warp that takes you to another plane of experience. The client meeting you have set up next week doesn't exist on this plane. The dent in your new car doesn't exist.



As you walk, you relax into the mood of the place. You follow your instincts and eventually you'll find yourself walking toward the epicenter of this time warp energy. You'll walk up a sloping drive bordered by trimmed shrubbery and flowers. You'll look up and, nestled in the trees at the top of the rise, you'll see the long, white, colonnaded porch of The Grand Hotel. It commands the location with a feng shui and power that lets you know you're in a special place.

Like lemmings, we walked up the front steps onto the big porch, sat down in wooden rocking chairs, and looked out over the expanse of water in front of us. We sat. We talked. Occasionally we'd hear the clomp, clomp of horses hooves and watch a carriage make its way up the drive to let someone off. We didn't want to leave.

It was hunger that finally drove us off the porch and into a local restaurant before boarding the ferry. The day was half over and we still had to find our cabin, unpack, and get oriented to our new location for the next two days. Our destination was in the town of Curtis, located on a strip of real estate between two lakes, Big Manistique Lake and Little Manistique Lake. We found our rented cottage at the end of a long drive on the banks of Big Manistique Lake and settled in. We then hopped in the car and headed for a fishing tackle store in the neighboring town of Newberry. The proprietor fixed us up with the right equipment, rods, reels, lures, and fishing license. He gave us a map and showed us how to get to the Two Hearted River.

By this time it was dinner hour. The place we rented had a full kitchen, and the original plan was to cook our own meals. That plan lasted about thirty seconds. We found a nice place in Newberry called Timber Charlie's and ended up eating virtually all our meals there. In fact the height of culinary achievement actually reached in this cottage involved placing ice cubes in two glasses, and mixing water with the right amount of Jack Daniels we had purchased.



After breakfast at Timber Charlie's the next morning, we followed the directions given to us and ended up on what looked like an abandoned dirt road in the middle of total wilderness. It was here where the Two Hearted River snaked its way north and spilled out into Lake Superior, and here where Hemingway fished as a young man and forged the background for some of his best writing. Driving deeper into the woods, I was struck by an overwhelming sense of quiet. The lack of traffic on Mackinac Island was one thing but this was the forest primeval, nothing but raw nature. We followed the road, parked the car, and then we saw it—the Two Hearted River flowing through woods to the huge expanse of Lake Superior.

We fished along the riverbanks and shore of the freshwater sea all morning. We climbed over rocks, we explored sand dunes, and drank in the unspoiled wildness of the place. You settle into the stillness. It's seductive. You could almost feel the trees growing, and the regenerative natural forces around you. The fact that we caught no fish almost didn't matter.

After lunch, we spent the afternoon in a place called Tahquamenon Falls State Park, a preserve of old growth forest punctuated with a spectacular array of waterfalls and gurgling rapids. One area called the Upper Falls has the largest waterfall between the Rocky Mountains and Niagara Falls. I think it's about 50 feet high and more than 200 feet across. Another area called the Lower Falls, consists of five smaller falls, each one cascading down and feeding the next one. Water splashed against jagged boulders. Pine trees hovered over the banks along with a smattering of white birch. The rush of water and raw natural energy made you pause and just soak it all in. Pathways ran next to the water, and observation platforms offered great views. The rugged natural beauty of this place was incredible.



## "Here we were, two grown men with wives and children at home, scaring each other in the middle of the woods."

After dinner we performed a little culinary magic with water, ice, Jack Daniels, and some Dutch Gouda we had purchased. We then went for a walk outside to get some night air. Once outside we were shocked to discover how pitch black it was. We could barely see our hands in front of our faces. The dense cluster of trees surrounding our cabin and its long driveway blocked out all light from the moon, stars, and planets. It's a good thing we left the lights on in the cabin or we never could have found our way back. Undaunted, we pressed forward, trying to stay on the long driveway leading out onto the street.

All of a sudden I realized there was no one walking beside me.

"Jack?" I yelled out into the darkness.

There was no response.

After I groped around for a few seconds, Jack jumped out from behind a tree and scared the hell out of me.

We continued our walk, and I quietly reached down and picked up two good-sized stones from the driveway. I let a little time pass. Then as we walked, I tossed one of the stones behind my back into the woods on Jack's side of the drive.

"What the ...?" Jack stopped walking. "Did you hear that?"

"I'm not sure," I said as we stopped and listened carefully. That's when I tossed the second stone about 10 feet into the woods on Jack's side.

He jumped a mile, and I laughed my head off.

Don't ask me to explain it, but when the veneer of civilized adulthood is stripped away, there is still a child buried deep within us that likes to play tricks. Here we were, two grown men with wives and children at home, scaring each other in the middle of the woods.

The next morning we went back to the Two Hearted River and fished again. It's said that Hemingway loved the life-giving forces of the river because they helped cleanse him of the destructive experiences he had in the war. You get a sense of that, standing by the river, watching it empty out into the vastness of Lake Superior. It's a serene, therapeutic feeling.

**A**fter catching no fish, we had a quick lunch at

Timber Charlie's and headed to Big Manistique Lake, our lake. After all, our cabin sat directly on the water. It came with a boat and outboard motor for our use. Why not take advantage of it and pull some fish out of our own back yard?

As we took the cover off the boat and started untying it from the dock, we noticed the wind picking up. We didn't lower the motor at first because we didn't want to scrape the propeller on the bottom. We pushed off,





and began to row out deeper into the lake. The boat rocked in the choppy water as the wind increased dramatically. We got farther away from shore. The farther out we got, the more the waves bounced our boat around like a cork. We could really feel the wind. The sky grew dark. Water slapped the side of the boat and sprayed all over us. I honestly thought we were in danger of sinking. There was no question in either of our minds that we had to turn the boat around and return to shore.

The wind was blowing away from land, so we had to overcome that obstacle. We needed the strength of both men. Jack and I sat in the middle seat by the oarlocks. He took one oar with both hands; I took the other. We pulled with everything we had. The wind was blowing us out into deeper and choppy water. At first our rowing efforts were chaotic. We managed to turn the boat around so the prow faced shore, but making any kind of headway was almost impossible. If Jack's oar reached the water before mine, we turned to the left. If mine reached first, we'd lurch to the right. If he pulled harder than I did, we'd veer off track. The same would happen if I pulled harder. We wasted precious time lurching left and right, as the wind blew us farther out into the lake.

Finally, we got into a coordinated rhythm. We called out the cadence: one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four. At one, our oars hit the water together. At two, we'd pull at the exact same strength. At three our oars came out of the water, and at four, we'd re-load, pushing the oars back before starting all over. Amazingly, we started to make progress. The bow began to slice through the rolling water. We kept a steady course toward shore, and slowly, we could feel the motion of the boat moving in the right direction. We counted out our cadence. Our hands were sore. Our backs and arms ached. A few glances over my shoulder and I could see the shore getting closer. We kept rowing. Finally we reached the dock. We jumped out, tied up the boat and staggered to the grass where we collapsed. I don't know how long we lay there on the grass. I hadn't felt that sore and exhausted in years. But it was a good kind of exhaustion ... the kind that comes from successfully defeating adversity. Eventually we got up, went in the cottage and cleaned up for dinner.

**"As I sat there, I realized I hadn't thought about my business or any of the cares of everyday life back home since arriving."**

We decided to treat ourselves to a nice meal at a local inn right there in Curtis. Chamberlin's Ole Forest Inn is a charming, white building with a wrap-around porch, sitting on a bluff overlooking Big Lake Manistique. The place has a cozy country decor with a huge stone fireplace and spectacular views of the lake. We ordered New York strip steaks and a bottle of wine. We talked about politics, religion ... all the things you're not supposed to talk about, but we discussed it all easily. We made several stunning observations about the close relationship between quantum physics and spirituality. We talked about our day and our heroic self-rescue on the lake. After several glasses of wine, it became clear to us that we had saved our lives. If it were not for our incredible athletic ability, our strength, cool headedness, and coordination, we would have surely drowned. The next day we were going home, and we were forced to talk about details like returning the rental car and mailing our newly bought fishing rods home. That conversation stood out in marked contrast to the escapist world I had been living in for the past three days. As I sat there, I realized I hadn't thought about my business or any of the cares of everyday life back home since arriving.

In 1928 Alexander Fleming went looking for some used Petri dishes he had piled up in his lab. Instead, he discovered penicillin. That happens sometimes. You go looking for one thing and by accident discover something else you were not even looking for ... something far better. Jack and I went to Northern Michigan looking for fish. We found something else instead. So the question remains. Can you go on a fishing adventure where you catch no fish and still have it be a successful trip? My answer ... absolutely.