

The Great Lakes

America's Third Coastline



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NOT MANY PEOPLE KNOW THAT THE LONGEST STRETCH OF COASTLINE IN THE STATES IS SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE. THE GREAT LAKES OF MICHIGAN AND OHIO GIVE A TOTAL SHORELINE WHICH IS ALMOST HALF THE CIRCUMFERENCE OF THE EARTH. THEY CONTAIN A FIFTH OF THE WORLD'S FRESH SURFACE WATER, AND PRODUCE 95% OF THE AMERICAN DRINKING WATER SUPPLY. ALL THIS LIQUID AND NO SALT TO ROT THE SEALS ON YOUR DRY CLOSI

Last summer, my boyfriend, Alun, and I left behind the rocky cliffs and fast tides of North Wales for the serene, calm waters of Lake Michigan – or so we thought. We were invited to join a group of local paddlers on a three-day camping trip to North and South Manitou. I'd been told they were small sandy islands about 10 miles offshore with no permanent residents. We probably wouldn't see another soul, except for maybe a few deer and lots of birds.

When we arrived at Sleeping Bear Dunes, our initial suspicions were confirmed. The water was a gorgeous clear turquoise with not a ripple on the surface. It looked so inviting, almost tropical. That preconception was soon shattered though as I pulled up my trousers and strode into the shallows. It might LOOK tropical, but there is a reason why many local paddlers wear dry suits, even in

the height of the summer.

The Sleeping Bear Dunes is a national park, and the largest stretch of freshwater sand dunes in the world. After we launched, we paddled a few kilometres along the coast and were soon tilting our necks back to gaze up at 300 metre high yellow mountains. It's amazing to think that these dramatic dunes are just sand and glacial moraine. They were created over 10,000 years ago, at the end of the last ice age. In places trees have taken over and dominate the landscape, but where the dune face is really steep the sand remains the boss.

After a lunch stop at the base of the biggest dune, we set off on our 10 mile crossing to North Manitou. There's an impressive white lighthouse half way there, so we had something to focus on. I don't think I've ever paddled on such calm, lucid

water – the only ripples were on the sandy bottom, which we could see clearly, passing beneath us. I love the way that kayak and paddle seem to literally cut through still water. Maybe it gives me a sense of power or of belonging – just for a few minutes I can leave my mark on nature. It's as close as I'll ever get to being an artist with a clean canvas.

Local paddler, Keith Winkle had organised this trip so I could do some filming on Lake Michigan for a DVD. 'This is the Sea 2'. It seemed to me that he'd invited everyone he knew, who had then invited their friends, there were 12 of us on the water and most people only knew two or three of the other paddlers. It could have been a recipe for disaster, but it was actually great fun! Paddled alongside various new friends and before I knew it we were at the lighthouse.

A couple of us climbed up the vertical ladder to the 10metre square platform beneath the white tower. It was a great vantage point and judging by the smell we weren't the only ones to think so. A few cormorant nests told us of some permanent residents.

From the lighthouse I could see that North and South Manitou are part of a chain of islands between Michigans Upper and Lower Peninsulas. If we had had more time we could paddle around this area for a week or more, hopping between the islands. Today, we were continuing for another two hours, to a wilderness campsite on North Manitou. As we reached the island we turned left and paddled along a couple of miles of dunes. It was strange for me not to see a single rock. Everything was yellow and green, with impressive looking trees (Ying like a blanket over almost the whole island.

We landed by a 'bow out' in the dunes – a raised fairly flat area without any trees. This was to be our home for the next two nights: everyone unpacked quickly in a race to be first up the hill to choose their preferred camping spot. Over the next hour tents shot up, and stoves started to roar. Alun had decided we should eat well and we'd brought asparagus to have in our stir-fry. Keith finished his quick and easy meal and came to watch us as we tried to boil and then stir fry the asparagus. I could see him trying not to laugh as we attempted to fit the whole stalks into our mounts gratefully.

The evening was spent on the beach passing whisky bottles around the group and getting to know each other a little better.

Next morning, I slightly regretted leaving my winter kayaking clothes behind. Suddenly I understood what the

more adrenaline-oriented paddlers had been trying to tell me. It can be very windy on the Great Lakes and with such a big fetch across the bigger stretches of water the waves can be impressive and steep. Wave heights on Lake Superior have been recorded at 31 feet, and on Lake Michigan the waves are between five and 10 feet high for a third of the winter. It might not be the ocean, but I can see why the Great Lakes are known as 'inland seas'.

Our situation this June wasn't quite so dramatic, but it was decidedly chilly and waves of three to four foot slammed into the beach. We decided to go for a day trip to nearby South Manitou. We'd be battling into the wind on the way there, but could look forward to good surf on the way back. Once on the water, I enjoyed the contrast with the day before. After the initial shock of cold water slapping me across the face, I relished the immersion in



a different facet of nature. My kayak bounced and jerked over the moguls on the sea-making slow but sure progress towards the smudge in front of me. South Manitou may have only been four miles away, but the low cloud shrouded all details in mystery.

Three people in the group were using 'Greenland style' wooden paddles or toothpicks as they are affectionately called. I was interested to watch how they coped in the rougher water, because my only real experience of Greenland style paddles was as a tool for various different roles. Another preconception shattered! One of the paddlers, Doug VanDoren, has spent years studying writings and old video of Greenlanders using the original wooden blades. He is convinced that the paddle

was designed for just that, paddling. If it worked for the Greenlanders for thousands of years then it's safe to conclude that it's a good design. Doug is a living example that the toothpick can do everything that a 'Euro' paddle can. I enjoyed watching him skillfully hold the paddle near one end to create a longer level in the water on the other side. Alan borrowed a Greenland style paddle for the trip and he loved it. He's since bought several toothpicks and always uses one with his sea kayak.

We finally reached South Manitou, where better weather revealed it to be much the same as North Manitou, just a little smaller. The highlight of the day for me was paddling up to an impressive shipwreck that was covered in hundreds of cormorants. 'The Cormorant

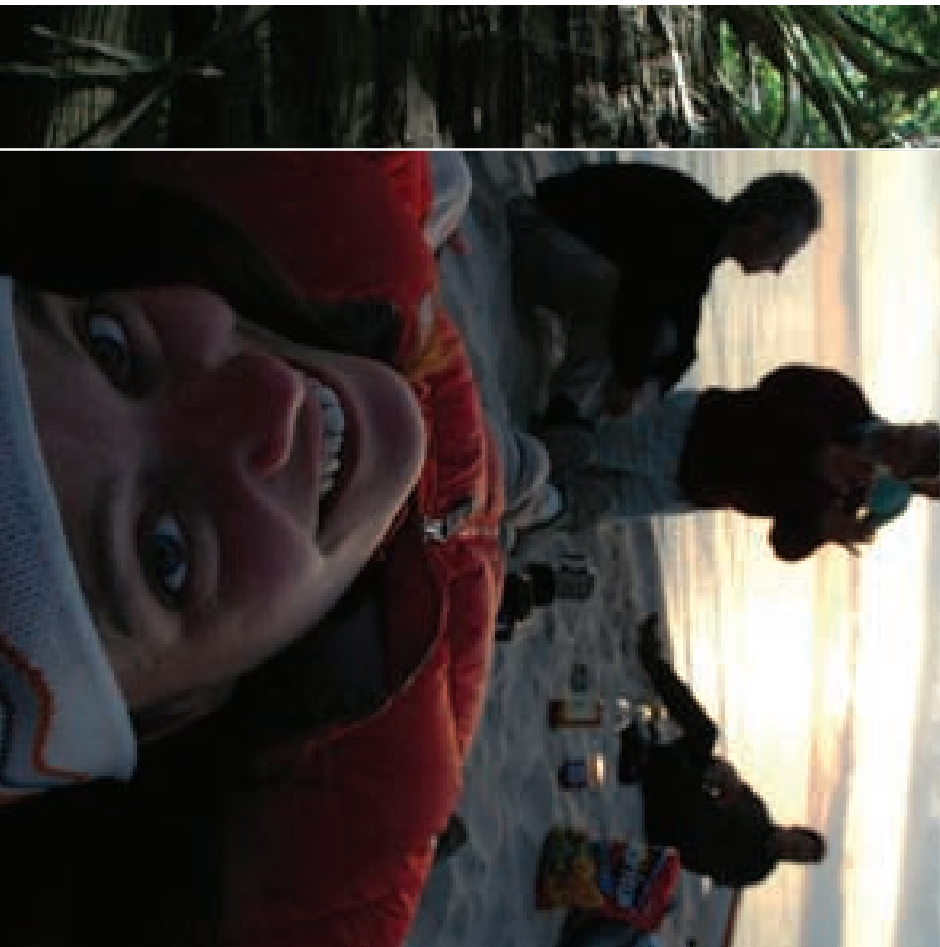
Hotel' as one paddler remarked. The sight of the rusty hull rising six or seven meters above the lake was only overshadowed by the smell. It was definitely best appreciated from down wind. The ship went aground here in 1967 - another testament to the unpredictability of the Great Lakes weather.

We landed on South Manitou for lunch and took a half hour walk to an impressive stand of 500 year old white cedar trees. Most of the big trees on the island were felled for the lumber trade a century ago, but for some reason these ones escaped. Up to 100 foot tall, they are one of only a few stands of virgin timber in all of Michigan. I got my camera out and interviewed some of the paddlers about them.

"They're often quite thick at the butt and quite narrow at the crown," Ken Fink informed me. "I know some people that way". Doug laughed. "Kind of like a paddler I know!"

After admiring a chipmunk and a snake, we headed uphill to the top of the highest dunes on South Manitou. From here, we could look across to the mainland and back to North Manitou. A few hundred yards away bare trunks stuck up spectacularly from the sand; this ghost forest would have been buried by a sandstorm decades ago, and revealed again more recently.

Time was marching on and we headed back down to our kayaks. The paddle back was fun with lots of small waves to try and surf towards North Manitou. In the



shallow waters near both islands there were breaking waves to try to avoid - or play with. Again, I was impressed by the Greenland paddlers and a little jealous of the way they could extend their paddles to make the most of edging their boats and surfing.

The next day was still choppy, as we paddled back to the mainland with the wind on our side. The kayaks rose and fell on the swell as we fought a little not to be turned downwind. Once we were within a mile of the shore the dunes sheltered us from the wind and the water was clear and flat again. We relaxed and slowed our pace, savouring the last few minutes of our journey. As I pulled my boat onto the sandy beach at Sleeping Bear Dunes I reflected on my increased respect for the Great Lakes. I hadn't expected to experience such a range of paddling conditions or to enjoy such a variety of natural history. The opportunities for paddling are as vast as the Lakes themselves. The words of Belinda still ring in my ears. "In Michigan, you're always less than five miles from a body of water."

FACTS FOR VISITORS:

<http://www.beelanau.com/mantou/islands/> has more information about the Mantou islands.

Visitors to the Mantou Islands are required to get an entrance pass to Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Park Passes (Valid for seven days), cost \$10.00 and an annual Pass (Valid for 12 months) is \$20.00.

Camping at the Village on North Mantou or under wilderness camping conditions is \$5.00 per night. Groups, up to 10 people, wishing to wilderness camp, pay \$10.00 per night.

Justine's fantastic DVD "This is the Sea 2" is available from the Paddles books and videos page.

