

Mackinac Island—Of Lilacs and Long Ago



By Graceann Macleod

There's something in the "otherness" of Mackinac Island, in the upper peninsula of Michigan, that draws me back every few years. Even though it is an extremely crowded place in the summer, it never feels overwhelming, as so many other tourist spots tend to do. There are times when I just have to be among the horses and bicycles again (because one of Mackinac's many claims to fame is the fact that no cars are allowed).

Mackinaw City

Though I am terrified of bridges, I navigate the Mackinac Bridge with only a few trembles, and gratefully reach terra firma in Mackinaw City at Fort Michilimackinac, which sits at the Southern end of the Bridge. There is rich history displayed here through interpretive programs, reenactments and visits with costumed docents. Archeological digs are ongoing and continually fruitful at this fur-trading outpost and village that first belonged to the French and then the British in the Colonial Era. Those who wish to climb the towers at the corners of the Fort are treated to a gorgeous view of the Straits and the Bridge.

After some shopping and touring in Mackinaw City (no matter how it's spelled, it's always pronounced "MackinAW,") we cross back over the Bridge (I ask my companion to drive this time so that I can look out at Mackinac Island) to our lodgings in St. Ignace. St. Ignace isn't quite as busy or crowded as Mackinaw City, and we have a room with a balcony overlooking Lake Huron. At this point, we were really looking forward to sitting out on that balcony and enjoying the view. After a quiet dinner, we turn in relatively early, because we need all our energy for the next day's exciting plans - a full day on Mackinac Island!



Mackinac Island—Your Carriage Awaits

There are several ferries that run to the Island from both St. Ignace and Mackinaw City - during the Summer months they leave every 30 minutes or so. The different companies compete heartily for your business, offering all sorts of incentives. There was no glamorous reason for the one we chose - it was closest to our hotel.

Second only to the pleasures of the Island itself is the marvelous way you get there. I love water, as those of you who have read my St. Simons articles already know, and I adore being on the boat traveling from the mainland to Mackinac Island. Mackinac is inordinately beautiful when seen from the water - the yellow umbrellas of the café at the Fort; the long awning of The Grand Hotel, and the many mansions that dot the bluffs - it all looks so warm and inviting from the water. I'm so pleased to say that the feeling continues when you step off the boat and get your first glimpse of Mackinac Island up close and personal.

My Kingdom for a ... Oh wait, they're everywhere!

The first thing you notice when you step out from the awning at the dock and into Main Street is the fact that there are horses and bicycles everywhere. Bicycles are a speedy, efficient way to navigate the area, but I prefer the leisurely elegance of the horses; there's something so magical about those enormous equines. The first priority for me is to head over to the Carriage Tour, which gives an excellent overview of the Island and helps me get my bearings. All the major landmarks are given their due, and there is the added attraction of being able to disembark at the top of the very steep hill upon which Fort Mackinac resides. Having climbed that hill many times over the years, I can tell you that this is a feature I appreciate beyond measure.

After our informative and relaxing tour of the Island (a common-sense tip - don't sit directly behind the horses - Phew!), including a stop at the beautiful Arch Rock and a drive alongside the Grand Hotel, we stopped at Fort Mackinac for lunch at the Tea Room. This is quite possibly the most beautiful view available anywhere on the Island, and the food was absolutely delicious. We sat and enjoyed the vista in front of us for as long as we dared, for our table was much in demand, and then made our way down that steep hill to visit a couple of the Museums and do some shopping.



Dr. William Beaumont and History Made at Mackinac

Mackinac is home to one of the stranger stories of medical research. In 1822, Alexis St. Martin was accidentally shot in the abdomen, and while the wound was not fatal, it never completely healed. Dr. Beaumont used this opportunity to conduct more than 200 experiments on Mr. St. Martin with regard to the digestive process, completely revolutionizing knowledge on the subject. Some adults are mildly creeped out by the details of these experiments, the specifics of which I will spare you, but kids find this museum absolutely fascinating. The experiments certainly didn't harm Mr. St. Martin - he outlived Dr. Beaumont by 27 years.



Somewhere in Time and the Lilac Festival

As many people may already know, *Somewhere In Time*, the classic romantic film starring Jane Seymour and the late, beloved Christopher Reeve, was filmed on Mackinac Island. The lush beauty of that story draws many tourists to the Island, and most shops have items relating to the film and the book on which it was based. So great is the pull of that story, more than 25 years since it was released, that there is a festival celebrating it at the Grand Hotel every October, complete with period costume and visits from people who worked on the movie. Also very popular is the Lilac Festival, held in June, and lilacs are prominent throughout the decorating schemes of hotels and shops. Since lilacs are my favorite flower, I feel right at home.

Back Across the Lake We Go

Many people bring their luggage and stay on the Island for several days, but sadly, my companion and I were only daytripping. After all the touring, eating and shopping, it was time to make our way back to the Shepler's dock in order to return to St. Ignace. I was much more subdued on the ride back to the mainland than I had been that morning, not only because I was tired out, but because I knew I wouldn't be able to return for another couple years. More than anything, I was glad that I had decided to park at the dock rather than walking over, because I'd done more walking in that one day than I normally do in a week. We tidied up at the hotel and then ventured out for a quiet dinner together. The topper to the day was hanging out in the hot tub at the hotel (boy, does that feel good on sore feet), and then slept like rocks until quite late the next morning.



Just a couple tips to make your trip more enjoyable:

- Grab Brochures Wherever You Go

The Straits area is an embarrassment of historic and natural riches. You never know what might be available, so leave plenty of wiggle room in your schedule in order to take advantage of that stray lighthouse tour or art festival.

- Pack your "Eating Clothes"

Throw that diet plan out the window when you're visiting Mackinac. You'll get lots of exercise, but you'll also get lots of food, most especially, fudge, which is a local specialty. Unless you have truly amazing willpower, you will put on a pound or two.

- Layers are a Good Idea, as is Sunscreen

The days start and end on a cool note, and get warm in between. It's wise to start with a sweatshirt that you can shed as the day gets warmer and then don again in the evening. Sunscreen is a must (actually, it should always be in your travel bag). Don't forget comfortable walking shoes, either, or you will be very sore, very soon.

I'm so avidly looking forward to returning to Mackinac. It's the perfect summer getaway. See you on the carriage tour!

<http://www.mackinacbridge.org/> (The Bridge)

<http://www.mackinacparks.com/> (The Historic sites in the Mackinac Area)

<http://www.mackinac.com/> (Information about Mackinac Island)

<http://www.mict.com/> (Carriage Tours)

http://www.james.com/beaumont/dr_life.htm (Dr. William Beaumont)

<http://www.somewhereintime.tv/intro.htm> (Somewhere in Time)