

Note to Editors and Writers: The Traverse City Convention & Visitors Bureau can arrange a limited number of guided kayak expeditions for accredited reporters or travel writers who have secured story assignments. We can provide guides who will provide any kind of trip – from a challenging eight-mile camping voyage to the rugged Manitou Islands to a gentle kayaking tour of some of the area’s lakeside wineries, restaurants, B&Bs and resorts. Contact me at the phone or email address listed below to arrange a summer paddling adventure.



ISLANDS, DUNES, ORCHARDS AND VINEYARDS: KAYAKING MICHIGAN’S GRAND TRAVERSE BAY

A Press-Ready Travel Feature From the Traverse City Convention & Visitors Bureau

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Photo Credit: Traverse City Convention & Visitors Bureau

Cutline: A pair of kayakers head south along Lake Michigan’s Grand Traverse Bay near Traverse City. The region’s glacier-scoured terrain features dozens of long, narrow bays and lakes where paddlers can enjoy the freedom of open water kayaking and remain protected from wind, waves and currents by the surrounding hills.

Cutline: A favorite stop for kayakers exploring South Manitou Island is the wreck of the Francisco Morazan, a Liberian freighter that ran aground on the isolated island in 1960. Today the wreck is home to a large colony of double-crested cormorants.

(Other high-resolution photos available on request.)

By MIKE NORTON

TRAVERSE CITY, MI – Michael Gray and Eric Cloneman spend the winter months kayaking in Central America, guiding clients through the Bay Islands of

Honduras. But every spring they return to the place where they prefer to do their paddling: the northwest coast of Michigan.

Gray and Cloneman are guides and instructors with Uncommon Adventures, a tour company that specializes in kayak trips, corporate retreats and backcountry flyfishing expeditions to such destinations as Alaska, Iceland, Montana and the Caribbean. But their home base is in the small village of Beulah, about 15 miles south of Traverse City.

“I’ve gone everywhere, but the Great Lakes are my passion,” said Cloneman, a certified coastal kayak instructor. “There’s really nothing like this anywhere else.”

The attractions are subtle, to be sure. The kayaking waters of Grand Traverse Bay and the nearby Manitou Passage don’t feature craggy peaks, glaciers, sea caves or whale-watching opportunities. Instead, they’re bordered by 400-foot dunes of golden sand and gentle wooded hills, where neatly-manicured orchards and vineyards bask in the summer sun. But they also include uninhabited islands, picturesque fishing villages, innumerable coves and bays to explore – and water so clear that there are times when paddlers can feel as though they’re suspended in mid-air.

Canoe paddlers have long known about the hundreds of lakes, streams and rivers that flow into Grand Traverse Bay and its adjacent waters, but over the past decade the area has also become one of the nation’s premiere open water kayaking destinations. Today almost every coastal community in the Traverse City area has at least one kayak rental outlet, and the area is home to several full-service outfitters who offer instruction and guiding services to open water paddlers.

The region’s most dramatic coastal kayaking is along the Lake Michigan shoreline at the **Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore**. Here, towering dunes of tawny sand rise hundreds of feet from the water’s edge, and there are miles of secluded beaches that are perfect for a sunbathing break.

Experienced kayakers are particularly drawn to the rugged Manitou Islands eight miles offshore, whose attractions include isolated coves, lighthouses, giant trees and a shipwrecked freighter. But first-time paddlers are not encouraged to make the trip, even with an escort; the waters that separate the islands from the mainland are among the most unpredictable in the Great Lakes

“If the water and weather is stable, the crossing is a simple two-hour paddle, but in that time things can get rough quick if you’re not paying attention,” said veteran kayaker Randy Elder of Pittsburgh. (He recommends that novice paddlers cross on the island ferry and use the Manitous as a base for shorter, less perilous trips.

Fortunately, most of Traverse City's paddling options are substantially less intimidating. One of the region's greatest assets as a sea kayak destination is its abundance of sheltered waterways; the glacier-scoured terrain includes dozens of long, narrow inlets and lakes where paddlers can enjoy the feel of open water but remain largely protected from strong winds, waves and currents.

The twin arms of **Grand Traverse Bay**, for example, are over 20 miles in length but rarely more than four or five miles wide, providing dozens of different routes for coastal kayakers. Starting in Traverse City, a novice kayaker could travel up the east shore of the Leelanau Peninsula, along the western coast of the mainland to the village of Elk Rapids, or around the narrow vineyard-spangled Old Mission Peninsula, which lies between them.

The bay even has its own uninhabited 200-acre island: heavily-wooded **Power Island** on the west shore of Old Mission. Once the property of auto pioneer Henry Ford, today it's a county park complete with a campground, hiking trails, swimming beaches and a picnic area. It's an easy 15-mile paddle along the coast from Traverse City – or an even easier three-mile trip from the boat launch at nearby Bowers Harbor.

The narrow fiord-like shape of Grand Traverse Bay is mirrored in a number of nearby lakes that also make excellent destinations for kayakers. In the center of the Leelanau Peninsula, for example is **Lake Leelanau**, 22 miles long and rarely more than a mile wide, nestled between steep and spectacular hills. And just to the east of Traverse City is the fabled **Chain of Lakes**, a series of 14 connected lakes and rivers that wind for over 50 miles through the rolling farmlands of Antrim County. They include several large lakes that are major paddling destinations in their own right, especially lovely **Torch Lake**, which is 18 miles long.

And since these sheltered waterways have been vacation destinations since the 19th century, it's relatively easy for kayakers to create paddling itineraries that reflect their own tastes and aptitudes -- whether that means ending the day at a backcountry campground, an elegant beach resort or a cozy small-town bed & breakfast. Several outfitters, for instance, feature food and wine trips that take paddlers to some of the region's best-known waterfront restaurants and wineries.

"One of the pleasures of this job is that we not only get to introduce people to the sport of kayaking, but we also get to show them this beautiful region and all the things it has to offer," said Gray, whose company is planning a series of fall "Water and Wine" expeditions in the Leelanau Peninsula wine country. "There's so much going on."

Mark Waldrup, owner of Northwest Kayak Outfitters in Traverse City, is trying to formalize some of those arrangements by developing a system of "water trails" for kayakers along the Leelanau and Old Mission peninsulas. The project is

similar to the Atlantic Coast water trail in Maine, which brings thousands of paddlers to New England each year.

“We believe the Grand Traverse region is even better suited for a successful water trail with its protected bays, instead of the extreme weather that can occur on the Atlantic Ocean,” said Waldrup.

For more information about open water kayaking and other recreational opportunities in the Traverse City area (including a list of kayak outfitters and rental outlets) and for help with restaurants and overnight accommodations, contact the Traverse City Convention & Visitors Bureau at 1-800-TRAVERSE or on line at www.VisitTraverseCity.com

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