

A silver Airstream trailer is parked in a wooded area. The trailer has red awnings extended over the side. A white planter with red flowers is hanging from the back of the trailer. The background is filled with green trees and foliage. The text "SUMMERTIME IN THE GREAT LAKES STATE" is overlaid in white on a dark background.

# SUMMERTIME IN THE GREAT LAKES STATE

FROM TRAVERSE  
CITY TO SLEEPING  
BEAR DUNES

By Stephanie and Jeremy Puglisi



*When we were undergrads, we spent a winter semester together in Michigan studying Herodotus and Chaucer, and each other. We were both broke and buried under snow and term papers, but we lived in a dumpy building affectionately known as the “Hobbit House,” and kept each other warm. Our apartment had no bedroom, so we shoved a mattress into a closet under the staircase. There was a marriage proposal in that closet. And an engagement.*

**W**e fell in love with each other, but not with Michigan. We made snarky comments when our Michigander friends talked about spending summers at “the beach,” and we thought that Michigan had no culture or history outside of Motor City and Motown. We were painfully wrong, and would like to apologize to the entire state.

After a brutally cold winter semester filled with hard work, and fueled by ramen noodles and coffee, we escaped The Mitten State’s icy grip to head back to New Jersey’s warm waves and sandy beaches. We didn’t return for almost 20 years.

Now we have discovered what so many others know—that Michigan is a great state for camping, and that camping culture, and a love for the great outdoors, runs deep in the souls of its sturdy people. We also discovered the blissful pleasures of summertime in the Great Lakes state—where life is lived just as much on water as it is on land.



## Traverse City

The Holiday Park Campground in Traverse City sits upon the warm, swimmable water of Silver Lake. If you book a lakefront site, like we did, you'll find a wild heaven. We launched the kayaks from our site and our kids spent hours searching for frogs and guppies along the edge of the water. Holiday Park used to be "Airstream only", and that history is still alive, even though the park is now open to everyone. The crystal-clear waters of Silver Lake are ringed by aluminum and rivets; dozens of Airstreams—all shapes, sizes, and eras—still occupy waterfront sites at the park. A morning walk with coffee in hand feels like time spent at a vintage Airstream rally.

Holiday Park serves as a perfect base camp for exploring the food, culture and beauty of Traverse City, Old Mission Peninsula, and Grand Traverse Bay. We rented stand-up paddleboards from The River Traverse City, an outfitter located on the bay; warmed up with coffee from Brew; filled our backpacks with books by local authors from Brilliant Books; then grabbed "ales by the rails" and delicious gourmet pizzas at The Filling Station

Microbrewery, which was packed with locals who had worked up a sweat by biking right up to the outdoor tables.

We spent another warm summer day driving out past wineries with sparkling views of the bay to Mission Point Lighthouse. The structure sits at the tip of Old Mission Peninsula, which juts out from downtown Traverse City like a long, elegant finger, and splits the bay in half. We didn't spend much time in the lighthouse, since it wasn't as compelling as the gorgeous beach and swimmable waters right out front.

The boys found rocks to jump from and driftwood to play with. They swam for hours—and so did we. After working up an appetite, we headed to Jolly Pumpkin Restaurant and Brewery for a locally sourced lunch and craft beers. We loved the food and drink so much that we left with a few of their charming T-shirts—certainly not our usual *modus operandi* when it comes to souvenirs.

## Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore

After leaving Traverse City, we drove half an hour south to one of America's most beautiful regions. Sleeping

Bear Dunes National Lakeshore is a magical place surrounded by turquoise water and filled with wind-sculpted sand. We camped at the Platte River Campground, an American classic, and spent our mornings tubing on the river. The clear, warm water near the campground slowly winds its way towards the cooler waters of Lake Michigan. There is a thin strip of sand that runs between river and lake at the end of this ride, and families jostle for the best spots early in the morning so that they can spend the day surrounded by water on every side.

Evenings at the campground meant riding bikes to the amphitheater for ranger-led programs about weasels, water pollution and stargazing, followed by roasting marshmallows around the campfire at our spacious and deeply wooded site.

The national lakeshore itself also won our hearts. Our first stop was the 7.4-mile Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive loop road, which features a covered bridge and a variety of overlooks that frame the forest and dune ecosystems that define this national lakeshore. The highlight of the drive is a walk out to Lake Michigan



Overlook, which is dramatically perched about 450 feet above the turquoise water.

The “Dune Climb” is just a short drive away, and here our kids ran wild, launching themselves into the air and landing in the soft sand. Once we were all exhausted, we drove to Glen Haven historical village and spread our towels out on the thin strip of beach to cool off in the just-warm-enough water of Sleeping Bear Bay.

Later, we summoned enough energy to explore the Empire Bluff Trail, a 1.5-mile round trip from the trailhead to the overlook deck—heartier souls can extend the hike to the north or south of the deck and experience stunning vistas of Lake Michigan, South Bar Lake, Empire Dunes and Sleeping Bear Dunes. This was a perfect hike for a family with young children, and by the halfway point our boys were shirtless, basking in the warm summer sun.

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When we spent that semester together in Michigan many years ago, we felt constantly blanketed and buffeted by never-ending snow. We would go for walks at night and listen to the unique silence of a Michigan snowstorm. We both dreamed about returning home to New Jersey’s sun and waves.

But now, when hordes of city-goers invade the Jersey Shore in July and August, we dream of cooler waters and points further north—places like Traverse City and Sleeping Bear Dunes—where you can find lakes and rivers so crystal clear that you can count the stones at the bottom. **R**

To follow the Puglisi family on their travels, visit [rvtravelfamilyatlas.com](http://rvtravelfamilyatlas.com), or their Instagram page at [@rvfamilytravelatlas](https://www.instagram.com/rvfamilytravelatlas).

