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After 6 weeks, 8,000 miles and 139 towns, this is the place

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BAYFIELD, Wis. -- This is a town with no traffic lights. In fact, there are no traffic lights in the entire county. House doors aren't locked at night. Car keys are routinely left in the ignition "in case somebody has to move it."

There is no McDonald's here. No Wal-Mart. No Holiday Inn. Someone wanted to put a gas station at the entrance to the town; the town bought the land and put a park there instead. Explained the mayor: "We didn't want the first thing people saw after the 'welcome' sign to be a gas station."

The local delicacy, whitefish livers -- deep-fried, or sauteed with onions and maybe a few slivers of sweet pepper -- are fresh, never frozen. Same for the rest of the whitefish.

They call their beaches "The Singing Sands." Why? "Because," said an enthusiastic local, "when you walk on them they squeak!"

They squeak?

"Well, sometimes they don't squeak. But . . ." Laughter.

On the town's fringe, a farmstand selling fresh, impossibly sweet strawberries has an open cash drawer and no cashier. Prices are marked. If no one's around, you take a pint, pay for it, take your change. Dollar bills and coins are right there, the bills exposed to the sunshine.

Through all the years, the owner said when she eventually came over just to pass the time, no one has ever swiped a quarter or a strawberry.

Ever.

This is a place where the lake is sparkling, the beaches clean, the fish abundant and hungry, the golf courses challenging and beautiful, the dining creative, the lighthouses photographable, the bike routes flat, the hiking shaded, the bears reclusive, the sunsets magical and the hours posted at the area's most intriguing saloon are "11 a.m. to whenever."

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This is Bayfield and the Apostles. This is not a rock group. This is paradise.

This, as a travel destination, is the Best Little Town in the Midwest.

Over the six weeks from Memorial Day to the 4th of July, covering more than 8,000 miles of mostly good roads, I checked out 139 towns -- many of them recommended by readers -- in Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, Iowa, Ohio and Illinois.

I also considered other towns enjoyed on recent assignments -- extensive tours of Iowa, Indiana and the Ohio River Valley as well as last year's journey through the 48 contiguous United States.

On the northernmost thumb of Wisconsin, I found what I was looking for.

Why Bayfield and the Apostle Islands? For the answers, let's review the guidelines that were set when this whole thing began, and how Bayfield fits.

- It can't be a big city. Bayfield's year-round population: 686. The Islands' population: about 150, most of it on Madeline Island, largest of the 22 Apostles. In high season, when people return to their summer homes, the combined total swells to maybe 2,500.
- It's got to be worth at least two days. With a Great Lake (Superior) for fishing and sailing, nearby trout streams, two golf courses (one designed by Robert Trent Jones), those 22 islands to explore (all but Madeline part of Apostle Islands National Lakeshore), lake cruises, six lighthouses, beaches, hiking trails, bike routes, galleries, gift shops, birding, a couple of casinos and the Big Top Chautauqua hosting something almost every night, one day isn't enough.
- It has to offer lodging. Eighteen inns and B&Bs, plus rental cottages, condos and a few motels. Camping at Big Bay State Park, Big Bay Town Park, commercial campgrounds and camping allowed on all but two of the Apostles.
- It has to offer strangers something to do, something to see or both. Go back and read "It's got to be worth . . ."
- It doesn't have to cater to kids. Madeline Island has one small miniature golf course. Bayfield and LaPointe (the village on Madeline Island) have town parks with playgrounds and places to buy ice cream cones -- but there are no water slides, no go-kart tracks, no wax museums or haunted houses, no amusement parks. There were, however, plenty of kids around during my two visits -- none of whom was observed whining. Not one.
- It can be a cluster. Counting Bayfield, LaPointe, the other Apostle Islands and the two reservation-run casinos up and down the road, it is.
- It can be good for you. Swim, bike, hike, jog, kayak. Breathe.
- It can be entertaining. There are concerts, shows (Johnny Cash, Arlo Guthrie and Garrison Keillor on this season's schedule) and other presentations Tuesday through Saturday nights in the tent at the Chautauqua. There's the Isle Vista Casino three miles north, Bad River Casino less than an hour the other way. And just enough saloons, one of them -- Tom's Burned Down Cafe in LaPointe -- about as free-spirited as a place can get without losing its license (assuming it has one).

- It can be delicious. At least four outstanding restaurants and more very good ones. Local whitefish and lake trout, seasonal veggies right off the farm, plus pick-your-own strawberries, raspberries, blueberries and apples, depending on the season. And no problem finding a good cup of coffee in the morning.
- It can teach us something. Try the Madeline Island Historical Museum (Europeans have been trading at Madeline since the 1600s), the Apostle Islands Visitors Center, an Indian cemetery, naturalist programs at Big Bay State Park and ranger-led activities for all ages at Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. There may be no better place anywhere to learn to sail; yes, there are folks who will teach you.
- And it can inspire us. Sunsets. Sunrises. Northern lights, if you're lucky. Billions of stars. Rugged, rocky shorelines. And maybe best of all, quiet walks with someone you like a lot.

What helps separate Bayfield from so many destinations is its separation from so many of us. From Chicago, it's an 8 1/2 -hour drive. It's a four-hour drive from the Twin Cities. The closest real city (and that's a stretch) is Duluth, maybe 90 minutes away.

This is not a place swarming with accidental tourists.

"People don't stumble upon it," said Larry MacDonald, who owns an outfitter store, a bed-and-breakfast and, in his spare time, is mayor of Bayfield. "They have to want to get here."

"We're not on the way to anywhere," agreed Jerry Phillips, who with his wife, Mary, owns and runs the town's best little lodging, the Old Rittenhouse Inn. "We're the destination."

A destination so remote, so relatively undiscovered and modestly developed that Bayfield and Madeline Island combined have only 480 guest bedrooms, including the ones in rental cottages and a couple of modest low-rise condos.

(Try this for contrast: Las Vegas' MGM Grand alone has 5,005 rooms. That's contrast.)

The Bayfield Chamber of Commerce figures the area can house about 1,125 tourists. "When we're full here," said Julie MacDonald, Larry's wife and business partner, "it doesn't seem crowded."

The exceptions are the 4th of July and the annual Apple Festival (Oct. 3-5 this year), when day-trippers invade the place and things get a little crazy.

The rest of the time, it's . . . well, my wife, who accompanied me on a repeat visit, got it right.

"This," she said, "is what Door County must have been like before Door County became Door County."

Which means, among other things: "Rest," said Lisa Byrne, whose Woods Manor Bed & Breakfast (she owns it with husband Joe Oberzut) is one of LaPointe's treasures. "Relaxation. What you sell here is tranquility and peace."

But not boredom.

"We have a lot of things to see and do," said Julie MacDonald, "but you have to take the initiative to do it."

Bicycling is huge, especially on Madeline Island. With so little car traffic, whole families ride the island roads together, on their own bikes or on rentals -- and they may not see another bike for hours. Shade trees and cool

lake breezes keep things refreshed.

When it's time to stop pedaling and start smelling the flowers, the island's two parks, Big Bay State Park and Big Bay Town Park, have them -- and picnic tables, hiking trails and an extensive common beach along Big Bay; the water's cold, but people jump in anyway.

"If this were warm water on the Caribbean, there'd be 10,000 people on the beach," said Larry MacDonald. "The beaches on Stockton Island (an Apostle) are even nicer, just like the Caribbean -- until you put your feet in the water."

Big smile.

"Keeps the riffraff out."

But one way or another, everyone -- and we're not just talking about the island ferries (see accompanying information) now -- gets into or onto the water. "Sea" kayaking is all the rage, and the islands' buffering effect keeps this part of Lake Superior relatively calm. Fishing charters troll in search of some action and some dinner. Excursion boats haul passengers on half-day island tours and lighthouse expeditions.

Most of all, this is heaven for sailors drawn by the quiet water, favorable winds, minimal motorized traffic, broad channels and islands that enliven the horizon. Rentals are available. It's not usual for those of us who don't know a jib from a fleagle to meet new friends looking for the flimsiest excuse to leave the shop and show off their skills and their 38-footers.

And what about kids? Without a Surf City Wave Park, what do they do here?

I spotted a mom on Rittenhouse Avenue, Bayfield's main street, who was surrounded by four kids ranging from maybe 7 to 12 years old. Five people, five smiles.

"We spend a lot of time over on the island, hiking, biking, that sort of thing," she said. "And eating fudge."

Which all were doing.

"This is lunch."

No wonder they were smiling.

George Klein carves carousel horses, loons and other gentle creatures sold at his Hitching Post gift shop, dabbles in taxidermy, restores old Mustangs -- when he isn't teaching a full classload at the local junior high.

What's here for kids? Plenty, he said. "But they're not the 'amuse me' type of things," he said. "They have to amuse themselves."

Riding bikes. Skipping stones at the beach. A rare sighting on Madeline Island: an actual pickup baseball game (no uniforms, no coaches, just kids).

Alongside a pond at the Madeline Island Golf Club, two small boys searched stealthily for frogs; the day before at the same pond they had found turtles, but now they were after this more animated challenge.

They also, of course, found golf balls. My wife, searching for her own golf ball, instead found a large frog --

or rather startled a large frog, which leaped and startled my wife, who gave up on the golf ball and left it behind for two now-very-amused little boys.

You never know where the fun will come from in Bayfield and the Apostle Islands -- but what will come from Bayfield and the Apostle Islands is, indeed, tranquility and peace.

"We're originally from central Wisconsin," said Ralph Brzezinski, formerly of Wausau, who captains a fishing charter boat, "and that's something my wife really had to get used to here. It's real laid-back. No one's in a hurry."

Lisa Byrne and her husband, while living in Oak Park, kept looking for exactly this. They tried Lake Geneva, Wis., and Saugatuck, Mich. They tried Minocqua, and they found McDonald's.

"We kept going farther away," she said.

They found Bayfield and the Apostles. They found what they were looking for. They stayed.

"It's pretty remarkable," she said. "It's -- like the slogan? -- it's one of the last, best places."

It's the Best Little Town in the Midwest.

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