



Magical
MACKINAC
ISLAND

Father & son team David & Ewan Whyte take a magical mystery tour of one of America's most fascinating islands.

STORY AND PICTURES BY DAVID & EWAN WHYTE



"One of the first things that hit you as you step out onto Mackinac's Main Street is the smell, an unusual blend of... well, I couldn't quite put my finger on! Then it hit me; horse manure and fudge! Mackinac is famous for the soft, sugary candy and there are a dozen stores on Main Street making and selling it."

We were on a six-week Road Trip across the United States covering no less than nine states, my 16-year old son Ewan coming along for the ride. It's a bit of a worry towing your offspring along on a golf adventure especially when he's not an avid golfer. But Ewan applied himself with good grace and seemed to be improving his game with every round. And there were quite a few!

I was particularly keen to introduce him to a unique island I had discovered many years ago just off the north coast of Michigan. I'd been to Mackinac Island twice already and fallen in love with the place. It's unusual, old-fashioned and it has two golf courses that are really quite fascinating. From the ferry dock at St Ignace, we sped across Lake Huron in about 15 minutes, passing The Grand Hotel, our prestigious accommodation for the visit and on to enigmatic Mackinac Island.

MACKINAC MAIN STREET

One of the first things that hit you as you step out onto Mackinac's Main Street is the smell, an unusual blend of... well, I couldn't quite put my finger on! Then it hit me; horse manure and fudge! Mackinac is famous for the soft, sugary candy and there are a dozen stores on Main Street making and selling it. At the same time, there are

horses; around 600 of them. In case this is beginning to put you off, let me assure you this unusual aroma might be one of the very best things about Mackinac Island! You see, there isn't a car to be seen! Or heard, or to be



wary of. Motorised vehicles were banned here in the late 1800's and it's stayed that way ever since. There are instead 600 horses to pull horse-drawn carriages or simply ride on. And during the summer months as many as 10,000 bicycles freewheeling around Mackinac's 3.5-mile circumference. And what a breath of fresh air it is! It's amazing just how relaxed you very quickly become when there are no cars about. We live in such a car-dominated world and on Mackinac, it's apparently a far better world without them!

FUDGE

As for fudge, you've just got to try some. Fudge and Mackinac have been synonymous since the late 19th century when Main Street shops began to produce the creamy treat for summer vacationers. Locals refer



to visitors as "Fudgies"; a term of endearment, I assure you! Ewan and I had fudge to eat and a horse-drawn cab especially laid on for guests of The Grand Hotel. My son was invited to ride "shotgun" next to the cab driver and was considering the cab driver's life on Mackinac as a possible summer job later this year. "Drive horses, eat fudge. What can you complain about?" asked Ewan. "Tourists!" was the driver's glib reply.

And there are lots of them, perhaps the only downside of Mackinac. Mackinac Island is about 8 miles (13 km) in circumference and 3.8 square miles (9.8 km²) in total area. The island has a year-round resident population of 492 but it sees around 15,000 visitors every day through the summer. Main Street resembles something out of 18th century American Wild West. For me, it's all part of the charm!

THE GRAND HOTEL

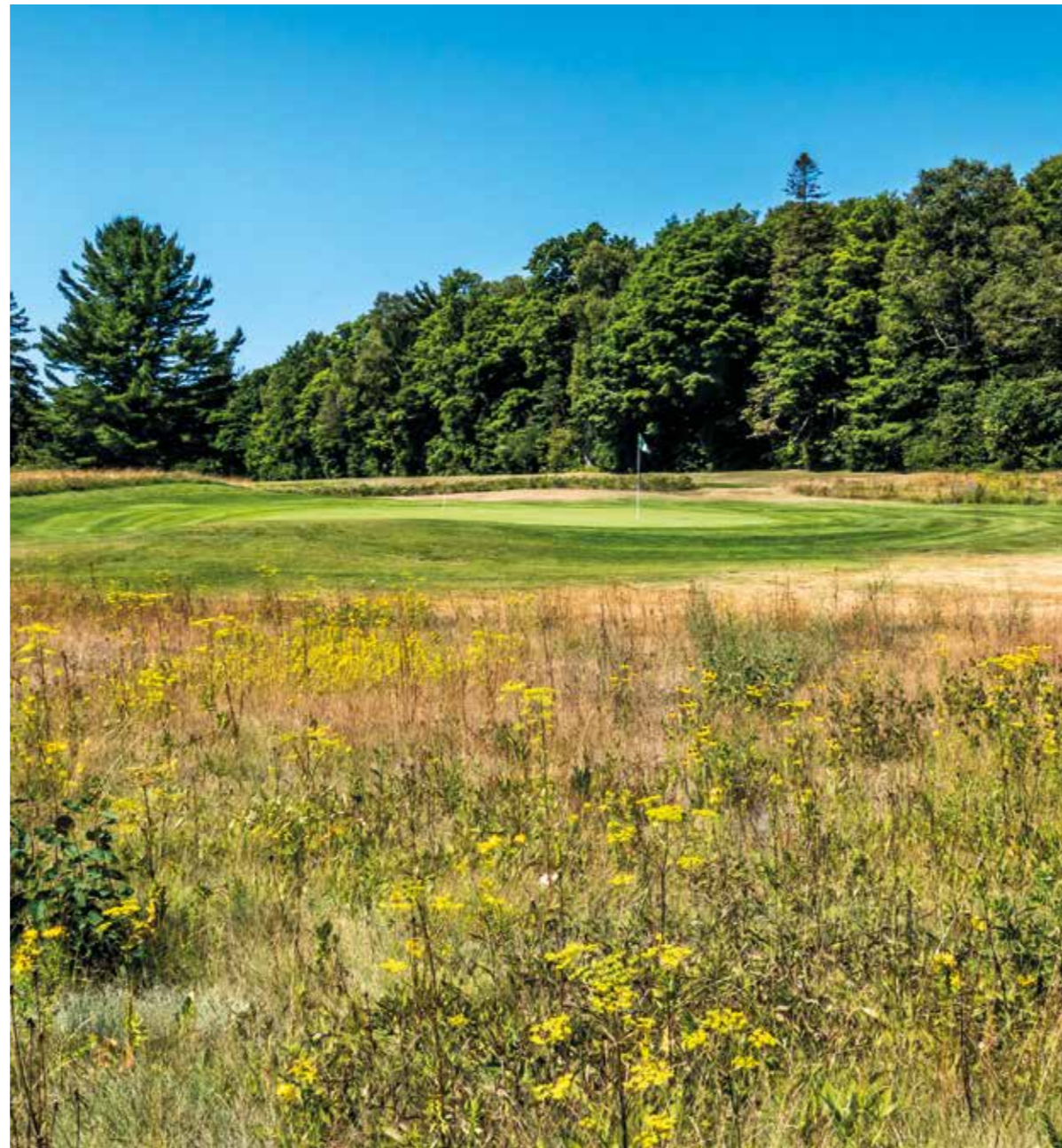
Talking of charm, The Grand Hotel sits above the town, the crown jewel of Mackinac's Victorian architectural splendour. It's once one of the largest resort hotels in the world. Built entirely of Michigan White Pine, the hotel was put together in no less than 93 days. The Grand Hotel was billed as a summer retreat for Midwest vacationers who arrived in droves by train or lake steamer from Chicago, Erie, Montreal and Detroit. Nightly rates back then ranged from \$3 to \$5 a night and they'd sold all 180 rooms for the "Grand" opening. The resort quickly became a retreat for US presidents such as Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Gerald Ford, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. Mark Twain was a regular.

Ewan and I paid considerably more for the privilege but there are some things in life you just have to experience! Of course, you have to dress up for dinner; jacket and tie for gents and evening wear for ladies. This all adds to the sense of occasion as you parade past the hundreds of diners already seated in the enormous but

OPENING PICTURE FROM THE PREVIOUS PAGE: An arch rock overlooks the clear blue sea off Mackinac Island.

TOP ROW - LEFT TO RIGHT: Bicycles are a common mode of transportation on the island; The majestically perched Grand Hotel; Courthouse and Mackinac Police Department.

BOTTOM ROW - LEFT TO RIGHT: Scenes on Main Street; Ewan riding on a horse-drawn carriage; A typical Bed & Breakfast accommodation.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Jewel course just next to the Grand Hotel; The Woods Nine requires a commute by horse to get there; Putting at The Jewel; Teeing off at Wawashkimo; Probably the only phone booth in the world sitting in a golf course at Wawashkimo. Wawashkimo is simple, yet like a charming secret garden.

“Wawashkimo is one of Michigan’s ‘Most Historic Golf Courses’ established by Alex Smith of Carnoustie, Scotland back in 1892.”

somewhat unimaginatively named Main Dining Room. Actually, I noticed above the door it was more entitled “salle à manger” - that’s French for Main Dining Room!

After dinner, everyone parades along the expansive porch. Mackinac is so walking-friendly, we took our after-dinner stroll down to the water to enjoy the views and admired some of the lovely Victorian buildings in town, all beautiful preserved and presented. Main Street is a lot quieter at night when the day-tripping “Fudgies” have sailed back to the mainland.

THE JEWEL

It was time for golf. Mackinac offers two courses and both of them utterly charming. Take “The Jewel” for instance just across the street from the Grand’s entrance. The Jewel comprises two halves, the Grand 9 and the Woods 9 set towards the interior of Mackinac Island. The Grand 9 was built in 1901 and redesigned in 1987. The Woods 9 was added in 1994. It’s a half hour’s ride away and you get there by horse-drawn carriage so this makes the Jewel a unique encounter. It is not a championship test by any means but a feat of accuracy on holes such as the 7th, a long par-3 descending from a bluff and tightly tree-lined. The green is not unlike Sawgrass’s 17th almost completely surrounded by water.

WAWASHKIMO

Next, we rode our hire bikes a mile or so inland to Wawashkimo Golf Club, a wee touch of Scotland in the midst of the Midwest. Wawashkimo is one of Michigan’s “Most Historic Golf Courses” established by Alex Smith of Carnoustie, Scotland back in 1892. It’s a simple design over a flat track of land but it throws up some surprising twists, especially when you play it with a set of hickory clubs as we did, available for hire from the golf shop.

Playing with hickory is much different than with modern clubs. You could, as Chuck Olson, the club professional, gently warned us, easily snap a shaft. Hickories require a slower, more flowing motion to compensate for the shaft’s natural whippiness. We soon got used to them and enjoyed a tremendous round. “This is my favourite round of the entire trip,” said Ewan. The 3rd green is Wawashkimo’s most unusual, surrounded by a high, grassy circle, known as the “Circus Ring”.

You’ll also notice how “burned out” the grass looks at Wawashkimo, harking back again to old Scottish links when during the summer months the fairways are never watered. Once again Wawashkimo gets a tick for its authenticity; after all, it is the oldest continuously played

golf course in The State of Michigan.

Another interesting morsel from here is Frank Dufina, the first “Native American” golf professional, who began his career at Wawashkimo in the 1890’s when the club was newly opened. He was 14 years old then and rose to become the club’s professional, not giving up that post until he reached the grand old age of 84. I guess he liked it too!

BIKE TOUR

We were back in the saddle and off on a round-island tour. With a two-wheeled steed, Mackinac Island is easy and exciting to explore. Rather than join the peddling throngs on the island’s main circular route, we decided to go off-road and cross country. There are trails all across the interior of the island that are fun and offer great prospects from on high. They ultimately connect with the more popular tourist spots such as Arch Rock or Fort Mackinac.

FORT MACKINAC

Fort Mackinac was established by the British during the American Revolution. The British captured the fort in the very first battle of the conflict -- a little unfairly I thought. The Americans at that point had not yet heard that war had been declared. All is fair in love and war so they say and today, this is the oldest building in all of Michigan.

STONE CAIRNS

Along Lake Huron’s shoreline, there are hundreds of precariously balanced Stone Cairns adding an artistic touch to the scenery and giving visitors the chance to make their mark. I think they build these little monuments because they don’t want to leave. Mackinac is such a unique place in this hectic, car-polluted world, we can all identify with its more natural rhythms.

Our time on Mackinac Island was drawing to a close and it was with reluctance we caught one of the last ferries that evening back to the mainland. Mackinac Island is so relaxing, you could easily spend a week enjoying its walk, bike rides and golf. And imagining the world as it once was! ☺



WHERE TO GOLF & STAY

David and Ewan Whyte stayed at The Grand Hotel, www.thegrandhotel.com where you can golf and arrange bicycle hire. They sailed to Mackinac Island with Shepley’s Ferries www.sheplersferry.com and played golf at Wawashkimo Golf Club www.wawashkimo.com. For further information contact www.mackinacisland.org