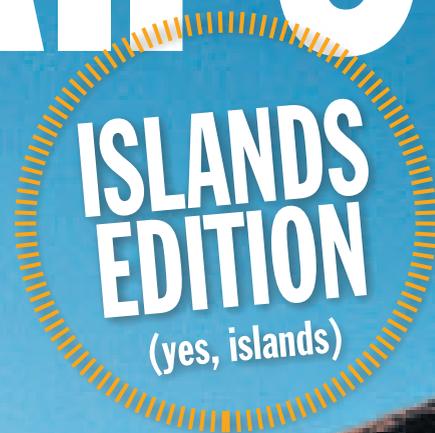


ROAD TRIPS



Let's assume you're reading this at work. Stuck in a cubicle the color of kitty litter. If you were to leave—just leave!—and get in your car *rightnow*, you could be soaking up sand, sun and slushy drinks by nightfall. On an *island*. No, not Mackinac—not that we have anything against tooling around in horse-drawn carriages. These four islands, all within driving distance, are a bit more obscure—from the one that serves beer in beach pails to the one that serves up quirky Canadian-isms (and a whole lot of local wine). Trust us, you won't miss the palm trees.

CLIFF HANGER
Dive from the cliffs
at Big Bay State
Park on Wisconsin's
Madeline Island.

PHOTO: CAMERON WITTING



THE NOT-
SO-LONELY
ISLAND

TARP REFORM
Make some new
friends at Tom's
Burned-Down Cafe.

Sure, you can hike, kayak or tour sea caves, but Madeline Island's star attraction is its Wisconsin-nice locals.
By **Marissa Conrad**

I'm at a divey waterfront bar on an island off the coast of northwoods Wisconsin when a stranger plunks down and introduces himself as August. August is clutching a bottle of Old Style—not his first of the day. He has come to tell me that the big, black dog wandering the patio would like one of my french fries.

The eager mutt, one of many who roam Madeline Island like characters in a *Milo & Otis* movie, gobbles several fries before disappearing; August

moves on to ridiculing a RECALL WALKER sign attached to a nearby dock. (By the time you read this, Wisconsin residents may have voted their governor out of office in a history-making recall election.) For a drunk guy living on a 42-square-mile island with one grocery store, my new friend is surprisingly tuned into state politics.

I soon find out August lives on the mainland, but takes the ferry across Lake Superior often to drink at island haunts. The ride's only 20 minutes, and,

unlike on many small islands, the 302 full-time residents of Madeline seem to welcome visitors. (From Memorial Day to Labor Day, the island's population swells to 1,500.)

"It's more fun over here," says another mainlander, still celebrating her 50th wedding anniversary of several weeks prior, as she shatters a shot glass. This is Friday night, the day before meeting August. So far today, my boyfriend, Jon, his dog, Penny, and I have driven eight hours from Chicago to the port town of Bayfield, taken the **Madeline Island Ferry Line** (*Washington Ave and Front St, 715-747-2051, madferry.com; \$13 round-trip, kids ages 6–11 \$7, cars \$24*) and checked in at the **Inn on Madeline Island** (*641 Main St, 800-822-6315, madisland.com; rooms \$150 and up*), a plush alternative to renting a cabin or camping (info at madelineisland.com). Faint strains of country music and whiffs of a bonfire have led us to **Tom's Burned-Down Cafe** (*234 Middle Rd, 715-747-6100*), an open-air bar with two potbelly stoves burning logs to fight off the mid-May chill.

A local named Bert tells us the bar burned down several times before owner Tom decided not to rebuild any walls, and to serve alcohol out of a tractor trailer backed up to the patio instead. He also says Tom's was voted the second-best beachfront bar in the world, and during peak season hundreds of people line up to get in for live shows. This is before telling us he's proud his 13-year-old can roll a joint, and trying to slip us a large helping of weed. (We decline.) We're later told we shouldn't believe much Bert says. The tractor-trailer part and at least one of the fires, though, are real.

Tom's is part of a tiny main drag that has a few restaurants, one bookstore and a café that serves its iced coffee in clear Solo cups. Grizzled men in paint-stained sweatshirts sit under taped-up flyers sporting photos of Gov. Walker, captioned DOES THIS ASS MAKE MY SIGN LOOK BIG? It seems everyone here loves to talk politics. But mostly, they just love to talk. We're welcomed with shots of a cheap peppermint schnapps called Dr. McGillicuddy's, and we leave with roadies of Jameson and an invite to a 30th birthday party the next night, to be held in a hangar on Madeline's tiny, private airport.

The combination of the whiskey and a California king bed makes for a dreamy night's sleep. The next morning, we take Penny to **Big Bay Town Park** (*2305 Town Park Circle, 715-747-3031, bigbaytownpark.org*), where we walk for a mile along the beach before settling in for a nap on the sand. Penny likes this a lot better than the hiking at nearby **Big Bay State Park** (*2402 Hagen Rd, 715-747-6425, dnr.wi.gov; \$10 per car*), where heavily wooded trails leave her covered in ticks.

Lunch is gut-bomb sandwiches and heavy pours of Santa Margherita sauvignon blanc at the hopping **Beach Club** (*817 Main St, 715-747-3955, madelinebeachclub.com*), where a young woman we met the night before invites us to linger for more drinks, and her boyfriend offers to bring us jars of his mother's homemade jam.

The island's "fancy" restaurant, where it's still perfectly acceptable to wear flip-flops, is called **Cafe Seiche** (*794 Main St, 715-747-2033*), and an early dinner of almond-crusted trout and a vegan plate packed with pesto, brown rice and veggies is our best meal of the weekend. Then we



BRIDGE OVER UNTRIOUBLED WATERS The path to the beach at Big Bay Town Park.

Madeline Island, Wisconsin
Drive time from Chicago 8 hours
(455 miles)
Ferry time from Bayfield, Wisconsin
20 minutes (2.1 miles)

drive to the airport for the party. Dozens of cars are parked haphazardly on the grass, and the hangar is a sea of cheap card tables, homemade desserts and pitchers of sangria. Twentysomethings chat happily with sixtysomethings as a man in the corner strums a guitar.

We meet the island's lone schoolteacher, whose K–5 classroom has just eight students (after fifth grade, kids go to the mainland for school), and reunite with another of our pals from last night, a man with a parrot on his shoulder who has been coming to Madeline since 1960. This year, he's training for Point to La Pointe, a 2.1-mile swim from Bayfield to Madeline on August 4. He turns out to live a block from me in Chicago.

Were the water warmer, we probably would have spent our weekend kayaking, canoeing and taking a motorboat tour of shipwrecks and sea caves—all the typical tourist activities of the island. But this trip was a welcome reminder that people make the place, and I'm going to remember the people of Madeline for years to come. That, and stripping naked in a state park parking lot so my boyfriend could check me for ticks.

PHOTO: CAMERON WITTING

PHOTO: JONATHAN DOLLAS



SHORE THING A drive down Hwy H on Madeline Island leads to this secluded beach.