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THE OTHER MACKINAC ISLAND

UNLIKE ITS NEIGHBOR IN THE STRAITS, UNDEVELOPED BOIS BLANC LURES VISITORS WITH NATURAL PURSUITS

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BOIS BLANC ISLAND, Mich. -- The other island in the Straits of Mackinac has long been known as a hideaway for people seeking refuge from civilization -- and sometimes its laws.

In years past, the story goes, notorious criminals hid in the dense woods. During the War of 1812, an entire U.S. naval force took shelter there. Today, families from Michigan and elsewhere escape to the undeveloped island, seeking out its rich forests, rocky shores, inland lakes and slower pace of life.

It's still a good place to hide.

"It's pretty desolate," says Tim Cowher of Northville. "But that's the way we like it."

Cowher, a Bloomfield Township firefighter, has been vacationing on the island for 22 years. Last month, he was traveling to Bois Blanc with his wife, Colleen, and their three sons. His oldest boy, 12-year-old Patrick, agreed with the characterization.

"There isn't even a McDonald's," he said.

A sure sign of wilderness.

Any visit to Bois Blanc (pronounced "bob-lo" or even "boyz blank") Island begins with a ferry ride, but that's where similarities to the more sophisticated and popular Mackinac Island end. "It's the total opposite of Mackinac," says Curt Plaunt. For nearly three-quarters of a century his family has owned and operated Plaunt Transportation in Cheboygan, one of two ferry companies that serve the island.

"People come over and they either love it or we never see them again."

So if high tea on the porch of the Grand Hotel is your idea of a northern Michigan island adventure, then Bois Blanc (population 71 in 2000) definitely won't be your cup of tea.

The 24,000-acre island in the Straits of Mackinac -- it's many times larger than nearby Mackinac Island -- is not known for its shopping, fine dining or golf. Bois Blanc offers one small restaurant (which doubles as a store, tavern and real estate office) and there isn't a golf course in sight. Not even Putt-Putt. There isn't much nightlife, either, unless you count the kind that tips over your garbage can after dark.

But that's exactly how the people who live and vacation on Bois Blanc like it. They come to walk miles of forest trails, camp on the shores of Lake Huron, canoe peaceful inland lakes and photograph bald eagles in flight.

Most of all, they come to get away from city life.

In summer, the boats to Bois Blanc depart Cheboygan as many as five times a day. Unlike Mackinac, cars are not only welcome on Bois Blanc, you'll probably need one. Rental bikes and horse-drawn taxis are notably absent. Bring your car -- or at least a bike -- unless you plan to be met at the dock.

The Kristen D, a 95-foot car ferry based in Cheboygan, makes the 5-mile voyage to Bois Blanc Island in about 40 minutes. The first few minutes are spent chugging up an industrial portion of the Cheboygan River, past loading cranes, fuel tanks and the massive Coast Guard icebreaker Mackinaw, which is based in Cheboygan.

Once on the open water of Lake Huron, Bois Blanc Island is usually visible to the north. But visibility was low on the wet afternoon when I visited. Cheboygan quickly disappeared behind us as the ferry motored into an eerie fog.

With loud horn blasts, the captain signaled our location to other ships and plowed through the dark waves. For most of the crossing, a cormorant -- a large water bird -- flew in and out of the fog off the port side. It was still with us when we cornered the rocky breakwater just before the dock at Bois Blanc.

Once there, the fog didn't help me in getting my bearings on the island's gravel roads, many of which are nothing more than two-track trails with few road signs. As a Bois Blanc newbie, you'll want to stop by Hawk's Landing -- the only restaurant -- located on Bob-Lo Drive, just west of the township dock. Get a cup of coffee, a piece of pie and much-needed directions. When I stopped for lunch, proprietors Sheila and Jeff Godbold were happy to give me a photocopied island map and point me toward public campsites on the north shore.

The food at Hawk's Landing is simple and satisfying. As I ate and listened to the conversations around me, it became clear that everyone in the restaurant knew each other. I shouldn't have been surprised; it may be bigger than Mackinac, but it's still a small island.

With this in mind, you'll want to take note of the bumper sticker on the wall: "Slow Down -- This Ain't the Mainland." This could be the island's motto. Remember it. Throw

yourself into the island experience, wave to passers-by, make friends with the people you meet. You're likely to see them three or four times before you leave.

My only disappointment with Hawk's Landing came when I found I couldn't buy firewood there (or anywhere on the island). It meant I'd have to forage for my camp fuel. Normally this wouldn't be a problem, but I doubted I'd find dry wood under the day's fog and drizzle. I spent my first night on the island without a campfire.

Most people who visit Bois Blanc either have cottages on the island or know someone who does. But with primitive campsites, rental cabins and a bed and breakfast, there is plenty of room for adventurous travelers. Island residents say hunting season is the only time of year it's difficult to find a vacancy.

Using directions and the map from Hawk's Landing, I found my way to the public campsites on the north shore. I'd heard that the island was largely undeveloped and covered with dense woods and swamp, but I didn't truly understand this until I drove north on Bible Road, down a one-lane tunnel of pine and birch. The road was so narrow and the trees so thick, I had to reverse for almost a quarter-mile to find a place to pull off when another car approached.

At the north end of Bible Road, I found the campsites. Even on a holiday weekend, I was able to secure a prime spot nestled in a stand of pine trees on the shore of Lake Huron. A few other public campsites are located near two of the island's peaceful and undeveloped inland lakes, Lake Thompson and Twin Lakes. (The latter was called Duncan Lake on my Hawk's Landing map.) Some of the sites are big enough for a small RV or camping trailer, but it should be noted that all Bois Blanc Island campsites are primitive. No electrical hookups. No water taps. No toilets. For those who like roughing it, they're perfect.

As I set up camp, taking in the sound of waves and the forest's million shades of green, I met my neighbor from the nearest campsite a few hundred yards away.

"Isn't this beautiful?" He approached from the beach and motioned to the landscape around us. "And the best part, it's all free!"

The campsites are located on state forest property -- most of the island is state land -- and it's absolutely free to camp in designated areas. Just pick up a Michigan Department of Natural Resources camp registration card for "dispersed camping" at any DNR office or at www.michigan.gov/dnr.

If you enjoy hiking, biking, canoeing, boating and fishing, there is no shortage of activities. The island's narrow forest trails are popular with ATV and motorcycle riders. In winter, Bois Blanc is a haven for snowmobiles. A 4-wheel-drive vehicle would be handy, but I did OK with my front-wheel-drive Pontiac Vibe.

IF YOU VISIT the island, here are a few ways to pass lazy days:

* Hike to the lighthouse: History buffs will enjoy viewing the Bois Blanc Island Lighthouse, built in 1867 on the northern tip of island. The best way to see it is by boat or by hiking up the rocky shoreline. It was decommissioned in 1924 and is currently a private residence. There is no access by car.

* Historic tour: Stop by the historical society museum (on Bob-Lo Drive west of Hawk's Landing) for a self-guided tour map. See the U.S. Coast Guard chapel, the remains of the island's old hotel and abandoned lumber camps and railroads. At historic marker No. 19, I enjoyed exploring the ruins of log cabins allegedly used as a hideout by the notorious bank robber John Dillinger and his gang.

There's more history as well. According to a historical society marker, an alleged murderer, Henry English, hid on Bois Blanc in 1880 before being apprehended by private Pinkerton agents. (He was later acquitted.) And during the War of 1812, U.S. Navy Capt. Arthur Sinclair's fleet took shelter on the island while waiting to attack the British at Fort Mackinac.

* Fish: The island's lakes, especially Lake Thompson, Twin Lakes and Lake Mary, are good for perch fishing and peaceful canoeing. Bring your own canoe or rowboat; you won't find any for rent. Spend the afternoon on one of the lakes and you'll likely see nothing but trees and deer along the shoreline, making you realize you are someplace special.

* Visit Pointe aux Pins: "The Pines" is the closest thing to a town on Bois Blanc. Here you'll find historic Victorian homes, including one built by the Hoover vacuum cleaner family; a post office; two churches and a school. Last year the school had just one student.

* Search for wildlife: Pull on your boots and go looking for creatures that bring the woods to life. I spotted two bald eagles soaring over the rocky shoreline just west of Lighthouse Point. Later that day, I had a 10-minute staring contest with an absolutely huge whitetail deer. The deer won.

* Go boating: If you have a boat and trailer, you can bring them over on the ferry for an additional fee. A boat launch and a few temporary slips are available at the township dock on Lake Huron. If you are an experienced Great Lakes sailor, motor around the island and check out the lighthouse. If inland lakes are more your speed, boat ramps are available at Lake Thompson and Duncan Lake.

But by far the most popular activity on Bois Blanc is simply sitting back and enjoying the slow rhythm of island life. Just ask Tim Cowher.

"It's nice to get away from the city. Last time we came up, the kids spent the whole time out in the woods building a fort," Cowher said. "They were out there hammering. They even made a tile floor out of rocks. That's better than them sitting in front of the TV or playing video games."

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THIS ELECTRONIC VERSION MAY DIFFER SLIGHTLY FROM THE PRINTED ARTICLE.

Caption:

TOP:Fog cover the woods on Bois Blanc Island, 24,000-acre island in the Straits of Mackinac.

ABOVE: Elle White of Kalkaska plays on the beach with new friends from The Colony, Texans: Jordan Zatorski and her dad, Troy.

LEFT: The Bois Blanc Island Lighthouse, built in 1867 on the northern tip of island, is best seen by boat or by hiking up the rocky shoreline.

The view of the Straits of Mackinac from the island's Insel Haus Bed and Breakfast.Photos GREG SCHWAGER, SUSAN HOPKINS and SHELBY NEWHOUSE

Memo:

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