

The Little Traverse Wheelway hugs Lake Michigan for most of its 26 miles, offering expansive views of the lake and stunning fall foliage along the shore and in the towns it passes.



By Kate Bassett
Photos By Andy Wakeman



Tip of the Mitten:

Michigan's Little Traverse Wheelway

Even with my back turned, I know the sun is setting. Pink, purple and red hues spill into the sky, replacing the blue that drained only moments ago. I pull my bike to the side of the Little Traverse Wheelway, a 26-mile corridor, mostly rail-trail, that hugs the shoreline of Lake Michigan. The sun slips into a horizon of water. Crickets, in scrub grass leading to a rocky shore, are tuning up for the night. Somewhere in the tunnel of trees ahead, an owl hoots twice. The breeze carries lush lake smells. My husband, too, drops both feet from pedals to ground. Even our three children, still buzzing with the freedom of their own two wheels, pause without thinking. We hold our breath. The last sliver of orange gives way to warm dusk.



TRAVEL FACTS

To learn more about the Little Traverse Wheelway, visit the Top of Michigan Trails Council at www.trailscouncil.org. For a breakdown of each trail section, go to Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's online trail-finder website, www.traillink.com.

GETTING THERE: There are two airports within two hours of the Little Traverse Wheelway. Traverse City's Cherry Capital Airport, an hour south of the Wheelway's Charlevoix starting point, is the easiest (and less expensive) option. Traveling north on U.S. 31 will take you directly to Charlevoix and, beyond that, Bay Harbor and Petoskey. Pellston Airport, located 20 miles north of the Petoskey starting point, has the benefit of small size, which means short security lines and little chance of losing your luggage. Turn left out of the airport parking lot onto U.S. 31 and you will reach downtown Petoskey less than a half hour later. Both airports offer car rentals and have services to drive you to and from area hotels.

There are three official trailheads along the Little Traverse Wheelway and nine places to park and ride. Be aware that along the trail there are no mile markers, although work is being done to purchase wayfinding signs. The following are popular spots to hop on the trail:

- Little Traverse Township Park, located at the corner of Pleasantview Road and M-119, just east of Harbor Springs. This entry point avoids the road shoulder leading from Harbor Springs and affords riders the opportunity to head to the sandy beaches of Petoskey State Park, which connects to the trail.
- Bayfront Park in downtown Petoskey has plentiful parking, restrooms, playground equipment and access to the historic Gaslight District via a pedestrian tunnel under U.S. 131.
- East Park, between Charlevoix and Bay Harbor, makes a good starting point when heading toward the trail end in Charlevoix. Plans for a path directly linking the Wheelway with the nearby village of Bay Harbor are under way.
- Adams Rest Area, located along U.S. 31, follows the Lake Michigan shoreline and allows folks to park and pick whether they will head south to Charlevoix or north toward Bay Harbor.

BIKE RENTALS: Several stellar bike shops are located along the Wheelway, making it easy to rent a bike and get rolling.

If starting in Harbor Springs, head to Touring Gear Bike Shop, located in the heart of (still without a stoplight) downtown (www.touringgearbicycles.com; 231.526.7152).

In the same grocery store as the Fettis-McCue Overlook, High Gear Sports offers the convenience of parking and is only seconds away from the trail (www.highgearsports.com; 231.347.6118).

Just west of downtown Petoskey, also within blocks of the trail, is Latitude 45 Bike Shop. Owned by a young family, it's a great spot to gear up for any type of ride, offering a variety of rentals including tandem cruisers (www.latitude45.com; 231.348.5342).

All three shops have a range of bikes, plus children's bikes and trailers for wee ones. There are half-day, daily and weekly rental options.



This experience is part of why the path-way beneath my feet has been a favorite of travelers and locals for hundreds of years. "This," I say out loud to my children, "is why we live where we do."

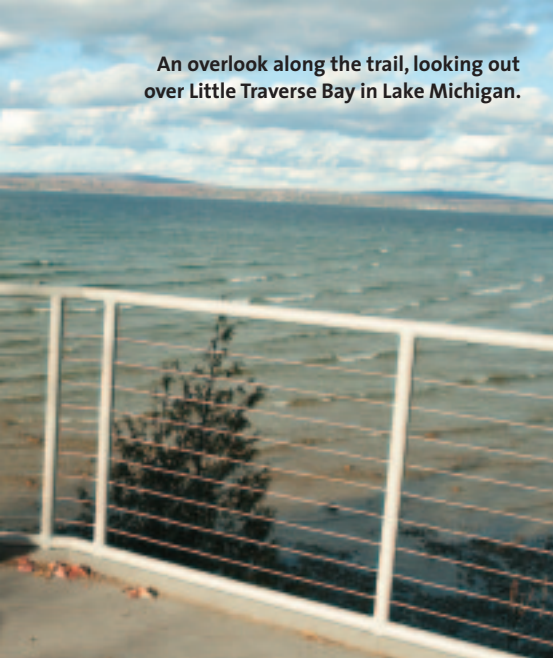
The Little Traverse Wheelway stretches from Harbor Springs to Charlevoix, summer resort towns along the "tip of the mitten" in Michigan. It's a paved trail so rich with woodlands and shores, cliff sides and historical neighborhoods, that it embodies life "Up North" and is woven into this area's sense of place. Long before the towns along the path—Harbor Springs, Petoskey, Bay Harbor and Charlevoix—ever existed, Odawa Indians used the route. The sheltered lowlands and sweeping bluff trails have remained favorite passageways throughout the centuries.

Still Rolling

We talked about this history when we set out for our nine-mile (out and back) family ride, leaving our car parked near the Fettis-McCue Overlook—a little more than halfway to downtown Petoskey from the beginning of the trail in Harbor Springs. Though we live where the trail begins, we park and ride from here because a section of the Wheelway just east of Harbor Springs is road shoulder. While plans are in the works to complete an off-road portion here, the fast traffic currently makes it less than ideal for children.

Fettis-McCue, by contrast, provides an easy entry to the trail, with parking alongside a grocery store shopping complex just off U.S. Highway 131. The local

An overlook along the trail, looking out over Little Traverse Bay in Lake Michigan.



trail council's plans to add bathrooms will make it even better (because as anyone who rides with small children knows, the minute you unload the bike rack, buckle helmets and pull up kickstands, someone will need a potty).

There's a large mural across the back of the store here that depicts how the trail has been used over the years. One part of the painting shows a bikeway—a forward-thinking venture in the late 1800s—with its wood-planked path. That wheelway, as it was known, was set down in the years prior to the 1892 completion of the Harbor Springs Railway, a passenger train that once shuttled folks back and forth between the two small resort towns; it was a rare trail-before-rail conversion. The image of a man riding a “boneshaker” bicycle always catches my children's attention. They also recognize the bright red arch above the cyclist that reads, “No Teaming,” a reference to the horse carriage ban on the old path, much like the trail signs of today prohibiting motorized vehicles. A replica of the arch now stands in the original trail location near Petoskey's Bayfront Park, a popular rest stop thanks to an enormous waterfront playground.

Planning and Pedaling

The connection to Petoskey's waterfront is fitting, because the original goal of modern Wheelway planners in 1973 was to get young people from downtown to the Petoskey State Park and its public beach. The park's lone entrance is on state

highway M-119 (now part of the 26-mile trail). Max Putters, a retired Emmet County planner, remembers dreaming up a trail system with members of the now-defunct Little Traverse Travelers cycling club and Little Traverse Bay Kiwanis. This was before trails were common community amenities, but the vision was so strong it carried them forward to the first sections opening in 1989. In the 1990s, the Top of Michigan Trails Council was formed and, over the next 20 years, the Little Traverse Wheelway was built, piece by piece.

When struggles with logistics or properties threatened to dash the dream of a true non-motorized community connector, Putters said it only took looking at small children riding their bikes to remember why the effort was worth it. “We wanted to give families a safe way to explore all that our area's shoreline has to offer and, all this time later, that's exactly what people use the Wheelway to do,” he says. “It amazes me how many different opportunities there are along the trail.”

Putters, who has dedicated more than four decades to this trail system, admits he first fought to keep the railroads up and

running. “I didn't want the last railway service to disappear because with it went the possibility of public transportation connecting communities in Emmet County,” he says. He's referring to the Michigan Northern Railway, a branch of the Grand Rapids & Indiana line, which held on the longest by a “flag-out,” undercutting competing freight company prices by 5 percent. Some of the railway transported steel rods from the Upper Peninsula to Texas through 1986, though, in reality, passenger service had long since disappeared.

“I actually went to Lansing (the state capital) to try and save our railroad,” chuckles Putters. “It was a double-edged sword when it went bankrupt, because then the railroad right-of-way became available for purchase.” At the time, Emmet County opted not to buy the right-of-way, but the city of Petoskey, in the midst of renovating the town's old Midway into Bayfront Park, built a one-mile paved trail through the railroad grade.

“When that happened, things really started to pick up steam,” says Putters. The path soon linked with the pink sidewalks of Bay View, a century-plus-old summer community east of Petoskey.

Inline skaters enjoy the “Resort Bluffs” section of the trail between East Park in Bay Harbor and Magnus Park in Petoskey; opened in October 2008, this stretch of the Wheelway cuts across the steep bluffs along Little Traverse Bay.



Petoskey is situated on the southeast corner of Little Traverse Bay, a nook in the much greater Lake Michigan.



While the path deviates from the original railroad grade in this section, riders can take in rows of Victorian homes. And, when riding west like we are, the return of the rail grade signals a perfect dinner spot, only about 100 feet away.

Food and Fun

While my husband and I easily can pedal all the way to Cava, our favorite swanky restaurant in Bay Harbor, riding with kids requires plenty of breaks (and occasional bribes). Tonight is no exception. The Bob-In Again is a 1950s-inspired greasy spoon/homemade frozen custard joint with rows of bike racks and an order-outside option, making it a hands-down favorite for families on the trail.

Following our frozen “fuel” stop, we move quickly through the busyness of

Bayfront Park. Although there’s lots to see and do on this two-mile stretch of trail—everything from Sunset Park’s waterfall to the Little Traverse History Museum—we only pause to watch a crowd erupt in cheers at the trailside baseball diamond. Home runs here often equal balls in Lake Michigan.

Heading away from Petoskey, it’s hard not to stray off course at the Bear River, located just outside the entrance to Bayfront Park. It’s a place where folks congregate to fish, and now bike, walk and whitewater kayak, thanks to a major investment by the city’s Parks and Recreation Department.

But tonight our kids have “rock hopping” in mind, so we pedal on through Magnus Park, a city-owned campground and recreational vehicle spot, to the



2.4-mile segment of trail leading to East Park near Bay Harbor. This section took almost as long to secure as the village of Bay Harbor took to build—about 10 years. Emmet County, the Top of Michigan Trails Council, Bay Harbor Development Corporation and individual community members worked tirelessly to secure easements and purchase properties imperative to the trail.

“That’s what amazes me most about this trail system,” says Emily Meyerson, northern Lower Peninsula railways coordinator for the Top of Michigan Trails Council. Tracing a finger along a map of the trail’s 10 sections, she lists names of countless individuals and municipalities that brought the segments into existence. “It has been such a community effort. Many of the same people that started talking about the trail in 1973 are still meeting every month, talking about how to make it better.”

As we wind through woods toward Bay Harbor coming into East Park, I break into a grin. The Wheelway’s view opens up on a 50-foot cliff top to a panorama of blue waters. It’s as far as our troop of little legs is willing to travel, and that’s OK, because the picnic tables, benches, clean public restrooms and steps to the boulder-laden shore make it a great rest stop and turnaround point. We time it so we can ride the 4.2 miles back by sunset, allowing our children the chance to leap from

Petoskey's Bayfront Park stretches for two miles of lakefront.

stone to stone, examine hunks of driftwood and find an occasional rusted railroad spike.

Had we continued riding, we would have followed the Wheelway along the old railroad grade as far as Bay Shore, a former lumber town that's little more than a gas station and church today. From there, the corridor moves inland, where too many property owners took possession of the right-of-way for the trail to follow it. Instead, the path sticks to the shoreline, which may be better for both scenic beauty and the benefit of several roadside parks. Almost a mile of the trail leading to Charlevoix is boardwalk. While close to U.S. 31, the dense vegetation and thickets of pine beside the path still treat folks to the hammering of pileated woodpeckers and the cawing of crows.

Back at the Fettis-McCue Overlook, the last little bike is now snug on our rack. Our youngest two children, changed



Magnus Park, right along the trail in Petoskey; bottom left, overlooking the Bay Harbor development and the Bay Harbor Hotel on Little Traverse Bay.

into pajamas for the ride home, are quiet and probably sleeping. My husband and I lean against the car for a moment. Dusk is giving way to twilight. The first star appears overhead. Somewhere down the path, I hear the whiz of wheels turning, and for a moment I imagine the ghostly sounds of quietly padding feet,

boneshaker bicycles and a train, whistling goodnight in the distance.

Kate Bassett writes from Harbor Springs, Mich., where she and her family spend many summer nights riding—and pit-stopping for swims, ice cream and sunsets—along the Little Traverse Wheelway.

