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Michigan *by* Motorcar

See the state that made the automobile from inside of one

By Matt Alderton

TO AMERICANS ON THE East and West coasts, Michigan is often considered flyover country — a mitten-shaped mass waving from below as they shuttle from one side of the country to the other. To truly appreciate Michigan, however, one must see it from the ground. And that means trading wings for wheels.

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*“You can take the highway from point A to point B,
and you’ll eventually have a great time wherever you’re going.”*

— DAVE LORENZ, vice president of Travel Michigan



TANYA MOUTZALIAS/THE ANN ARBOR NEWS-MLIVE.COM DETROIT VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS; GETTY IMAGES

Michigan is beautiful, certainly. But there’s another reason to drive through it instead of fly over it: When you do, you experience something of America’s soul, suggests Dave Lorenz, vice president of Travel Michigan.

“A lot of our guests want to explore the real America, and this is where you find it,” he says. “Every community has a story to tell, and when you hear that story it can sometimes be a life-changing experience for you as a traveler.”

Michigan’s story is especially compelling. The birthplace of Henry Ford, it’s where the captain of American industry built his first “horseless carriage” in 1896, and where he subsequently established the Ford Motor Co. and mass-produced the Model T — changing transportation and manufacturing forever.

“Michigan is the historic car capital of the world,” says Patty O’Donnell, North Region transportation planner at the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT).

Clearly, Michigan was made for driving ... ideally, in a 1966 Ford Mustang; although, any vehicle will do. What matters more than what you drive is where, according to Lorenz. “You can take the highway from point A to point B, and you’ll eventually have a great time wherever you’re going,” he says. “But what have you missed along the way?”

In his famous poem *The Road Not*



CARLOS OSORIO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Taken, the late American poet and University of Michigan Fellow in Letters Robert Frost boasts of the road less traveled. To help travelers discover the road less traveled, Lorenz’s office partnered with MDOT to create the Pure Michigan Byways program, established in 1993 to designate Michigan roadways as heritage routes for the purpose of preserving their historic, cultural and recreational value. The 23 byways that constitute the program are a literal and figural map for the perfect Michigan road trip. Here are a few favorites that are best measured in memories, not miles:

WOODWARD AVENUE

What once was a Native American trail from Detroit to Pontiac became the carotid artery of the American auto industry in 1909 when a mile-long section between Six Mile and Seven Mile roads became the nation’s first-ever concrete-paved roadway. A sign and plaque mark the spot, which you can visit while retracing the route of post-World War II drivers whose favorite pastime was cruising up and down Woodward Avenue in hot rods and muscle cars.

“Along Woodward, you’re going to pass a lot of significant automotive as well

as arts and cultural sites that Detroiters take great pride in,” says Bob Sadler, communications manager for Detroit’s MotorCities National Heritage Area. “It quite literally is the spine of Detroit and always has been.”

Woodward Avenue, or M-1, spans approximately 20 miles and can be driven in less than an hour with no stops. But stops are a must. In Midtown, see the Detroit Historical Museum and the Detroit Institute of Arts. The former’s *America’s Motor City* exhibit tells the city’s automotive story while the latter houses Diego Rivera’s famous *Detroit Industry Murals* depicting local autoworkers. Farther north are the Ford Piquette Avenue Plant, where the first Model T was built, and the Ford Highland Park Plant, birthplace of the moving assembly line. Although the latter is closed, the former offers guided tours year-round.

For a historic sleep, stay at The Inn on Ferry Street, a boutique hotel comprising several restored Victorian-era homes. And if you’re hungry, make a pit stop at Vinsetta Garage, a kitschy eatery located in what it claims is the oldest garage east of the Mississippi River.

US-12 HERITAGE TRAIL

The US-12 Heritage Trail traverses southern Michigan from downtown Detroit to New Buffalo, transecting eight counties across more than 200 miles.

“US-12 is one of the state’s oldest highways,” according to Kris Martin, associate planner at the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, who says the route began as a Native American trail, was used by slaves traveling the Underground Railroad and eventually became a railway corridor. Today, it meanders through small towns and big cities with both historical and recreational highlights.

Heading west from Detroit, a good first stop is Dearborn, home to automotive attractions like the Automotive Hall of Fame; Fair Lane, Henry and Clara Ford’s historic estate; and The Henry Ford complex, comprising the Ford Rouge Factory Tour, Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation.

Farther west is Inkster — birthplace of Geraldine Doyle, whose likeness appears on World War II-era posters as “Rosie the Riveter” — followed by Ypsilanti, where notable sites include the Huron River Water Trail for kayaking, Arbor Brewing Company for craft beer and the Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum for still more automotive history.

Continuing west, other worthwhile stops include the Southern Michigan

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Railroad Society railway museum in Clinton; W.J. Hayes State Park in Onsted; the Michigan International Speedway in Brooklyn; the Capri Drive-In Theater in Coldwater; Pears Mill in Buchanan; Journeyman Distillery in Three Oaks and New Buffalo Beach in New Buffalo, on the shores of Lake Michigan.

“There are faster ways to get where you’re going, but this is a really great way to soak up the sites without having to deal with interstate traffic,” Martin says. “You’re going to see everything from forests and farms to rivers and lakes.”

WEST MICHIGAN PIKE

The West Michigan Pike connects New Buffalo in the south to Ludington in the north.

“The West Michigan Pike is a spur of the Dixie Highway, one of the first paved north-south highways in the United States,” says Bob Lukens, community development director at Visit Muskegon in Muskegon County. “It originally was a tourist road built to bring people from Chicago to Michigan’s west coast so they could escape the hot city in the summertime.”

The Pike is still an ideal escape route. Spanning numerous roads instead of a single highway, it connects West Michigan beach towns while hugging 184 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline. To the south is St. Joseph, home to the Silver Beach Carousel and an ideal home base from which to explore wineries along the Lake Michigan Shore Wine Trail.

North are South Haven, with a self-guided Harbor Walk that traverses the city’s historic Maritime District, including the Michigan Maritime Museum; Saugatuck and Douglas, sister communities known for their prolific art galleries; and Holland, renowned for De Zwaan — the only authentic, working Dutch windmill in the U.S. — as well as more than 6 million tulips.

The Pike’s northernmost communities include Grand Haven, home to a 2.5-mile boardwalk and the Grand Haven Musical Fountain, a synchronized water and light show that takes place nightly during the summer; Muskegon, where you can tour Victorian-era homes at the Hackley & Hume Historic Site or ride rollercoasters at the 250-acre Michigan’s Adventure amusement park; and Hart, where Silver Lake Sand Dunes encompasses 2,000 acres of dunes.

“Almost all of these communities have historic lighthouses,” Lukens says. “And, of course, beaches. We’re known for our beautiful, sandy beaches.”

Keep the motor running

So you’ve already driven M-1, US-12 and the West Michigan Pike. Step on it to one of these other three Pure Michigan Byway routes:

M-22

M-22 traces the Leelanau Peninsula — the “little finger” on Michigan’s mitten — from Manistee County to Traverse City. “‘Going Round the Horn’ was the nickname for the original scenic loop ... which is now M-22,” explains Patty O’Donnell, North Region transportation planner at the Michigan Department of Transportation, who says the orchard- and vineyard-rich area is known for its fruit stands, wineries and cideries. Don’t miss driving through quaint Arcadia and stopping by the Arcadia Overlook.



Arcadia Overlook

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION



Mackinac Bridge

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US-2 TOP OF THE LAKE SCENIC BYWAY

US-2 is a bridge into Michigan’s Upper Peninsula — literally, because it commences at the foot of the world-famous Mackinac Bridge. The road follows Lake Michigan’s remote northern shore for 92 miles from St. Ignace to Thompson, west of Manistique. Don’t miss the historic Heath M. Robinson Memorial Cut River Bridge between Brevort and Epoufette, which towers over a deep gorge into which visitors can descend a 231-step staircase.



Tunnel of Trees

MOLLY BAKER VELING/HARBOR SPRINGS AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

TUNNEL OF TREES

North of M-22 is the Tunnel of Trees, which follows Lake Michigan’s coast for 20 miles from Harbor Springs to Cross Village. “The trees arch over the road, reaching for the sun,” says Molly Baker Veling, associate director of the Harbor Springs Area Chamber of Commerce. “There are breaks in the trees, and views of Lake Michigan are stunning.” Don’t miss Pond Hill Farm in Harbor Springs, a working farm with its own winery, brewery, café, market and greenhouses.