



Mike Terrell: You're on island time

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The Emerald Isle was calling me this past week.

It had been 13 years since I last set foot on Beaver Island, but with the Michigan Outdoor Writers hosting their annual summer meeting on the island, it was a good reason to return.

My previous three times visiting the island I had taken the ferry, which is a two-and-a-half hour trip one way. This time I chose to fly Island Airways out of Charlevoix, which takes about 15 minutes -- and I was able to take my mountain bike.

As I did the last time on the island I rented an old mini-van from Beaver Island Marina to transport myself and the bike to the southern end of the island. Beaver is a fairly large island with over 100 miles of mostly dirt roads and trails. An eight-mile strip of pavement runs south out of the village of St. James, located on the northeastern tip of the island.

I like to stay in the village and drive down to Fox Lake, park and ride the southern half of the island from there. It's a 21.5 mile ride, which takes you along the southern shore and the Beaver Head lighthouse. A climb up the lighthouse, which is open to the public, yields an impressive view -- on a clear day -- of many of the smaller islands that form an archipelago around Beaver.

If you rode your mountain bike down from St. James and toured the south end of the island the distance would be close to 40 miles, which was more than I wanted to attempt. The ride up the west side of the island back to Fox Lake climbs up along a heavily forested bluff in a series of stair steps. Much of the interior of the island is encased in bogs and swamps, and the mosquitoes through the woods were ferocious; as I think a number of the writers who chose fishing the inland lakes as an activity also discovered.

Another ride that I enjoy taking right from the village is down around Donegal Bay and back. It's around a 12 mile ride and actually has a two-mile section of trail rather than just dirt roads.

Head south on the paved King's Highway -- a reference to the Mormon influence during the 1850s and their leader James Strang who declared himself a king -- for a couple of miles. Turn right on Barney's Lake Road, which is the intersection with the island's only gas station, and head over to Sloptown Road. Along the way you pass beautiful Barney's Lake.

Take a right on Sloptown Road and you pass some old homesteads with wooden fence lines and century-old wooden cabins. The lane is partially lined by beautiful old oak trees. A plaque at one of the homes tells of its history and owner, a man named Protar. His tomb is just up the road, and also marks the entrance to the two-mile Kuebler Trail, which runs along the backside of Barney's Lake and over to Donegal Bay. Mostly forested except for some small dunes along the lake, the trail offers a nice mountain bike experience. It even has a small tunnel you ride through. The mosquitoes tried to ambush me there.

Donegal Bay is a beautiful Cape Cod-like bay with white sand beaches and cottages tucked into dunes. You come out of the trail at McCauley's Point, a state-owned piece of land with panoramic views of the bay and High

Island, located about four miles off shore. It's a nice place to hike down along the shoreline through the low dunes. Piping plover have nested here in the past, but currently aren't using the area.

Mt. Pisgah, a towering blown sand dune that rises 150 feet above the bay, is the highest point on the island and located along Donegal Bay Road on the way back to the village. It's a good hike up the dune, but the view from the top of the bay and island's off the coast is worth it. As you look inland all you can see are the tops of trees stretching as far as the eye can see. It's a great place to watch the sunset.

On Saturday I took a hike, along with other outdoor writers, with Beaver Island Eco-Tour leader Eric Myers. He and his wife Carrie organize hikes exploring the island's unique and natural habitats. One of the hikes was along McCauley's Point where I learned about the plovers. We also took a hike down to Little Sand Bay along an extensive trail and boardwalk system. It traverses a variety of wetlands and streams before coming out on a beautiful deserted sand beach. Along the way we spotted a couple of knotted trillium, which is rare on the mainland.

We had fresh whitefish dinners at both the Shamrock -- a legendary island pub -- and the Beaver Island Lodge, where the dinning room is a wall of windows looking out over Lake Michigan and distant small islands. Sunset dinners don't get much better. I stayed at the Harbor View Motel, which overlooks the St. James harbor and is central to everything in the village.

You're only a few miles out in the middle of the lake, 32 from Charlevoix and 18 from Good Hart, but, it seems much more remote. Locals refer to the mainland as the United States, which seems appropriate since Strang started the movement 150-some years ago. It wouldn't take much for me to become an islander.

It was nice getting back to Beaver Island. I had forgotten what a relaxed, easygoing way of life the islanders enjoy. Nobody ever seems in a rush. What doesn't get done today can wait until tomorrow. My cell phone didn't work on the island, which was just as well. I was on island time.

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Photos



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