

# Snowshoe Michigan's Sleeping Bear Dunes and Grand Traverse Area

By Hazel Freeman

**A** little over two-thirds of the way up the Lake

Michigan side of the mitten state's Lower Peninsula, you'll find the beautiful Grand Traverse area and the stunning Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Owned and operated by the U.S. National Park Service, Sleeping Bear Dunes is 71,000 acres of glacial moraine and natural areas that include: towering sand dunes, 35 miles of pristine Lake Michigan shoreline, scenic bluffs with dramatic



views, isolated off shore islands, shipwrecks, crystal clear lakes and streams, and acres of woodland serenity.

With about 50 miles of marked trails available in the National Lakeshore for snowshoeing, hiking, and Nordic skiing, Sleeping Bear has much to offer in the way of winter recreation. The warmer months are the most popular to explore, swim, fish, kayak, climb the dunes, and just immerse yourself in its beauty, but the winter landscape is definitely worth experiencing. Though not as vast, and dramatic as the towering mountains of the West, this areas drama comes from its relationship to the powerful



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Great Lakes, and its many inland lakes, rivers, and streams. For a Midwest winter recreation getaway this is a great destination.

In addition to miles and miles of snowshoe and Nordic ski trails around the Grand Traverse area you'll find Alpine skiing, snowmobiling, and snow tubing. When you're ready to come in out of the cold there are winery tours and tasting, decadent chocolate shops, pampering spas, late night casinos, and plenty of

outstanding eateries and unique shopping opportunities. For those who like the idea of fewer people and better bargains, the winter months and the shoulder seasons, are when you can find the best deals.

### **Snowshoe With the Sleeping Bear**

Sleeping Bear Dunes is one of two National Lakeshores Michigan lays claim to; the other is our first national lakeshore, Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore on the south shore of Lake Superior, in the Upper Peninsula. Pictured Rocks, with entrances at Munising



and Grand Marais is an equally stunning landscape with its mineral-stained sandstone

cliffs that rise dramatically from the frigid waters of Lake Superior. This National Lakeshore Park also encompasses some 70,000 acres and 42 miles of Lake Superior shoreline.

Located about 26 miles from Traverse City, you can begin your exploration of Sleeping Bear Dunes at the Philip A. Hart Visitor Center located on M-72 just east of the intersection with M-22 in Empire, MI. Here you'll find plenty of information about the park including displays about the natural and human history of the area. Park Rangers and volunteers are available to answer questions and you can pick up park passes, brochures, and hiking maps here. The visitor center is open year round except for major holidays.

A landscape created by ice, wind and water, Sleeping Bear Dunes is a lesson in the forces of nature. Ancient glaciers once spread across the area and carved out the Great Lakes. When the glaciers retreated, almost 12,000 years ago, they left towering 460-foot bluffs that overlook the brilliant blue waters of Lake Michigan. Ever changing, the sand dunes, at the mercy of wind and water, continue to shift and re-sculpt themselves. The dunes move about 2 feet per year to the East due to the prevailing westerly winds



blowing the sand. The Sleeping Bear Point Life-Saving Station had to be moved in 1930 to prevent it from being covered in sand.

The park's 13 trails range from 1.5 miles to 14.7 miles in length, and vary in difficulty level. Most, but not all, trails are recommended during the winter months. It's best to get a map at the visitor center and ask about trail conditions. For safety reasons some of the steeper, snow-covered dune trails that could avalanche, are not recommended. The sand by itself can be unstable; with added snow it can increase the instability. On

Saturdays during January, February and into March if conditions permit, snowshoers can go on a guided hike with a National Park Ranger. Hikes begin at 1 p.m. at the visitor center. The park also provides free snowshoe hikes during the week for school field trips and other organized



groups. Snowshoes are provided free but call ahead if you need to reserve them.

A short drive from the visitor center is the Empire Bluff Trail, a 1.5-mile trail through a hilly maple-beech forest. Sawmills once cleared the forests for the building of towns, and the fueling of wood-burning ships that sailed the Great Lakes. With the land devoid of trees, farming and fruit orchards became a way of life in the area. Though this area of Michigan is still known for its apple and cherry orchards, many farms in the park were eventually abandoned. Remnants of farm machinery and old apple trees can still be seen along the trail which has returned to forest.

About two-thirds of the way along the trail a scenic overlook gives hikers the first glimpse of Sleeping Bear Bluffs in the distance. Stop here and enjoy the view but don't turn around and go back because the best is yet to come. The last one-third of the trail is a bit hillier but leads to a 400-foot bluff overlooking Lake Michigan. Although the trail goes a bit further its recommended to stop



where the safety fence begins along the bluff. Here the view in the distance is breathtaking. Once you see the turquoise blue water of Lake Michigan you'll understand why this area is referred to as the "Caribbean of the North". South Manitou Island can be seen just off shore from Sleeping Bear Point.

Other popular trails include the Old Indian Trail and the Platte Plains Trail. Old Indian Trail is just that, a trail that follows what were once Indian trails between encampments located near favorite fishing areas. Here you can gain access to the



lakeshore and low beach dunes. The longest of the trails, at 14.7 miles, is the Platte Plains Trail. This trail is laid out in a series of loops so you can hike a length you're comfortable with. The Lasso Loop includes several Lake Michigan lookouts and the White Pine Backcountry Campground.

## **Snowshoe The Grand Traverse Area**

With its beautiful, “water, water, everywhere,” location, the Grand Traverse area is one of the Midwest’s best-kept secrets. With its growing contingent of award-winning wineries, unique culinary locovore establishments, chocolate shops, tasty microbrews, talented artists, eclectic shopping experience, and top-notch outdoor recreation, this area has much to offer. With miles and miles of trails tucked in, and around the area, there are plenty of opportunities to snowshoe a variety of terrain and scenic beauty, with every day different.

### **Grand Traverse**

#### **Commons Natural Area –**

Several hundred acres of woodlands, meadows, and natural areas were once the grounds of the Traverse City State Hospital, and the Northern Michigan Asylum. Inmates once housed in the institution would garden and walk the grounds to exercise their minds and bodies. Rather than being demolished, the magnificent, century-old Victorian-Italianate



architecture of the buildings are currently the subject of the largest, historic preservation and adaptive reuse redevelopment in the country. The Village at Grand Traverse Commons is being transformed into a thriving mixed-use area for shops, businesses, residences, and outdoor enjoyment.

Six different trailheads allow easy access to the grounds 300 acres. Some trails give splendid views of Traverse City and Grand Traverse Bay. There are free-guided hikes held on Wednesday evenings.



**Timber Ridge RV Resort and Campground –**

Timber Ridge has 5km of groomed snowshoe trails that are even lighted at night. The first Saturday in March Timber Ridge hosts an annual Suds & Snow – Snowshoes meet Microbrews, event. The charity event includes food, fun and games out on the trail system, with a tasting event featuring several of Michigan’s finest microbreweries. Suds & Snow runs from 2 to 6:30 p.m. and a free shuttle service runs between the trailhead and most of the local hotels. There is a fee for this event and a small fee for trail use at other times.

**Grand Traverse County Natural Education**

**Reserve** – This 420-acre tract of prime wildlife habitat has about 7 miles of improved trails that run along the Boardman River. Here you’ll find bridges, boardwalks, and scenic overlooks. If you

have a need for speed you can take a snowmobile ride through the beautiful Boardman River Valley. Snowmobiles are available from Blue Sky Rentals in Traverse City.

**Old Mission Peninsula** – The narrow Old Mission Peninsula stretches some 18 miles up the middle of Grand Traverse Bay. At the very tip, the Old Mission Lighthouse is perched above a rocky shoal. A 513-acre park encompasses the area with 7.5 miles of trails that meander through the park. Trails can be accessed from several points with the most scenic being the trailhead at the lighthouse. Several fine wineries are located on the peninsula so save time for some wine tasting along the way.



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**Shanty Creek Resort** – For a mix of winter recreation Shanty Creek offers Alpine and Nordic skiing, snowshoeing, and tubing. Shanty Creek’s Schuss Mountain, with its 49 downhill runs, seven chair lifts, and three terrain parks has something for every skill level. The resort maintains 21 kilometers of trails for Nordic skiing and snowshoeing. If you stay at the Lodge At Cedar River Village you have ski-in/ski-out access to the slopes and the trails.

This is just a sampling of the recreational snowshoeing possibilities the Grand Traverse area has to offer. This scenic Midwest location beckons those who want to indulge in some quiet time in the beauty of the winter landscape amid the Great Lakes.

For more information:

Philip A. Hart Visitor Center - Phone: 231-326-5134 ext. 328

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