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OUT ON THE LEDGE

Getting a Handle on Door County

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05 FEB 2018: Shouldn't you be out on a ledge? In normal circumstances this question could be interpreted as confrontational, but in Door County, Wisconsin, it's an energizing suggestion for outdoor activities, exploration, food, wine, fun and camaraderie.



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‘The Ledge’ is a section of the Niagara Escarpment in Wisconsin! An escarpment is, simply put, a long row of cliffs that separate two areas of different elevation. Probably the most familiar example is at Niagara Falls where the Niagara River tumbles over the escarpment. But the geological formation continues west to include Ontario’s Bruce Peninsula and Manitoulin Island before it gradually curves southward toward Wisconsin. And here in Door County, about one hour west of Green Bay, it’s called ‘The Ledge’ by locals in Fish Creek (pronounced Fish ‘Crick’) population 997, Ephraim (‘Eee-fram’) population 201, Egg Harbour, population 203, and Sturgeon Bay (population 9000+).

The micro-climate created by ‘The Ledge’ pits Door County’s tart cherries against the top US producers (Wisconsin is #5) and sometimes it’s hard to stem the flow of Cherry lovers to county stores, where cherry-based and cherry-infused products range from Cherry donuts to Cherry Pesto Sauce, and from Cherry Caramel Topping to Drunken Cherry Wine Brownie Mix. The Orchard

Country Winery and Market hosts the Winter Cherry Festival on the first weekend of February where contestants salivate over the possibility of winning the Cherry Pit Spit contest. The Ladies spit record is 38 feet, 3 inches; the Men's record is 48 feet, 1 inch.

But for those who prefer to ingest, a visit to one of the wineries, such as Door Peninsula, unveils a variety of Cherry, as well as other fruit wines (Blackberry, Plum, Strawberry, Cranberry, Mango, and more). And this extends into the Distillery where Cherry Moonshine, Vodka, Brandy and Bitters can be sampled.

Many travellers associate Wisconsin with cheese, after all, it's known as America's Dairyland. Katie Harding, the owner of Wisconsin Cheese Masters, very unofficially refers to her store as the Disneyland of Cheese, claiming to have the largest collection of Wisconsin artisanal cheeses in the world. We sampled a few delicacies including the 21-year-old cheddar that sells for \$189.00 US per pound and the Billy Blue Cheese that was simply creamy and delicious. For those with a nose for cheeses, the Annual Stinkfest takes place on the 3rd Saturday in September, where Limburger, Aged Brick and Gorgonzola 'reek' pleasurable havoc on taste buds.

The attraction of Door County is reflected by many locals who grew up in the area and stayed, or returned after a few years absence because they simply loved the area and the ambiance; this despite the fact that Door County's name derives from 'Death's Door'. Five hundred years ago two First Nation's groups were at war. One day, the Winnebago, who lived on the tip of the peninsula set out to attack the Pottawatomie on Washington

Island. They had to cross the strait that joins Green Bay to Lake Michigan, and when a storm arose and intensified, one third of the Winnebago lost their lives. French settlers in the area, upon hearing the disastrous news, began to refer to the strait of water as Portes des Morts, or Death's Door, and the name stuck.

With 18-inch thick ice on Lake Michigan, our time on the water was a bit more tranquil. John Malvitz picked us up in his ATV and we headed over to Larsen's Reef where his son, JJ, had already organized about 30 clients in ice fishing tents and huts. JJ and his staff explained the ice fishing routine: First you attach a 'Swedish Pimple' – the lure that Whitefish seem to find attractive. Then you dangle the fishing pole over one of the pre-cut ice holes and allow the lure to sink 80 feet to the bottom of the lake. And then in a teasing manner, you "jig" the line upward, pause and release, so that the lure jumps up and down on the bottom of the lake.

Only two in our group caught Whitefish, but we still found this winter 'silent sport' to be relaxing and enjoyable. JJ explained that the sport has grown in popularity, especially amongst women, and now even special ice-fishing clothing is available for both men and women, offering comfort, fashion and warmth.

Lake Michigan Whitefish is a staple on many menus but a truly unique presentation is the Fish Boil, an event that's been offered at The White Gull Inn since 1956. Traditionally it was a way to feed a large number of people at one time at church events and festivals. Pat McMurtry at the Inn explained the process as he stoked the fire, boiled the water in a large pot, and added the potatoes.

After 30 minutes, he fixed a second container over the pot and poured in chunks of whitefish. The hot, fresh food was served in the restaurant with butter sauce, sweet coleslaw and homemade breads. So good.

The next morning was our time to go out on the ledge. At Cave Point County Park, the mist from Lake Michigan's wild waves freezes on the trees, creating icy winter sculptures. Nearby at Whitefish Dunes State Park, the sand dunes were covered in snow but close by, we witnessed the drama of the thick ice-filled, rolling and crashing waves pounding the shoreline. Jon Jarosh, the PR Director for the County noted "People are always amazed at how much Big Water is around us. Because they can't see the other side of Lake Michigan, they refer to this as the ocean".

Enjoying a different type of sensory perception, we visited Kurtz Coral to ride horses in the snowy fields and tranquil forest, enduring both cold winds and slapping evergreen branches. The staff emphasized 'human-equine' relationship building through the use of the hands (patting the horse), the voice (calling out the horse's name), the feet (showing the horse who's in charge), and a smile (feeding the horse some treats). My mare, Pokey, took the treats but declined any further interaction and therefore, I just mellowed out and nearly fell asleep during the ride.

At Peninsula State Park relationship building continued by connecting snowshoers, cross-country skiers and hikers with the energy of the forest. And as fitting finale to our day on the ledge, we headed to Sunset Point, where we walked out on the frozen lake to experience a brilliant sunset, reflected in the sky, on the ice, in

the snow and now, in our memories.

Door County, Wisconsin is a four season travel destination with lots of special interest attractions including art galleries, pottery, beaches, music performances, birding, nature, lighthouse tours, history, golf, shopping, comfy lodgings and foodie opportunities galore. And of course there are the many villages in the county, close enough to get to know, but far enough away from each other to have their own personalities.

It's one of those destinations where you lament, "I wish I'd known about this place before". Pose the question to your clients, "shouldn't you be out on a ledge"? And then show them the door to this great county in Wisconsin.



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.