

Relaxing in Harbor Country

By JAMES PRICHARD

The Associated Press

The hectic pace of modern life slows to a leisurely crawl in southwestern Michigan's Harbor Country, where travelers can relax and unwind for a few hours — or while away an entire summer.

Visit wine shops and sample locally produced reds and whites. Eat at elegant restaurants and kitschy diners. Wander antique shops, art galleries, farmers markets, gift shops and fine apparel stores. Explore sand dunes, lounge on beaches, then retire to family friendly cottages or romantic bed-and-breakfasts.

"I think part of what people want is something they can't get just anywhere. They want a unique experience, something special," says Ann Dahm, director of the Harbor Country Chamber of Commerce in New Buffalo.

The chamber has trademarked the Harbor Country name, which refers to a small, triangular cluster of eight resort communities just north of the Indiana border and near Lake Michigan. They include Grand Beach, Harbert, Lakeside, Michiana, New Buffalo, Sawyer, Three Oaks and Union Pier.

All but Three Oaks, which is seven miles east of New Buffalo, straddle the historic Red Arrow Highway that winds along the southwestern Michigan coastline. Among the biggest tourist destinations are the Four Winds Casino Resort near New Buffalo and Warren Dunes State Park near Sawyer, but visitors may simply prefer to see where the highway takes them.

While the region's notorious winters can include lake-effect snow squalls that make car travel nearly impossible, the weather in Michigan's Lower Peninsula by mid-spring can be very pleasant, although a light jacket might come in handy some evenings. Summertime conditions generally can be summed up in one word: ideal.

For decades, Harbor Country leaders have resisted urban sprawl and development, resulting in a 1950s look to the region and giving it a somewhat rural but cultured feel. It offers downtown retailers instead of strip malls, charming inns instead of cookie-cutter hotels and locally owned eateries instead of fast-food franchises.

Roger Voegelé, owner of the Harbert Antique Mall, says he rents stalls to dealers from as far as Kalamazoo, South Bend, and even Chicago, which is about a 90-minute drive from Harbert. Although the mall is open year-round, it's busiest in summer.

Voegelé, a transplanted Chicagoan, also owns Elephant Walk Cottages in nearby Union Pier. Named after the 1954 Elizabeth Taylor movie, Elephant Walk sleeps 37 people in five cottages and a large main house. He bought it in 2001.



Heidi and Charlie Maroney stand outside Redamak's, a popular restaurant in New Buffalo, Mich., where they both work. His grandparents, Jim and Angie Maroney, bought the business in 1975.

"Quirky names are popular in resort areas," he says. "People remember them. I decided to call it Elephant Walk because I collect elephants."

Sculptures, paintings and nicknacks depicting the animals are everywhere. Two glass-topped tables in the main house use fake tusks for legs. "Elephant Walk" movie posters hang on several walls.

The cottages are closed Jan. 1 through April 1, while mid-June to mid-August is Voegelé's busiest time of the year.

He usually rents out the entire property at one time, often to wedding parties, family reunions and other groups. Those who want the renovated, four-bedroom main house must also rent at least two of the cottages.

"This way, they cook their own meals and they have a family-like atmosphere," he says. "It's not like staying at the Hilton or all these places on the interstate, where they're just in a motel room."

While Elephant Walk is targeted at groups, the White Rabbit Inn Bed & Breakfast in Lakeside is aimed strictly at couples, offering eight stylishly appointed double rooms and cabins.

Several units come with fireplaces and hot tubs. Breakfast is served in the lodge but guests don't always partake, says A.J. Boggio, who has co-owned the motor court-style inn with his wife, Jan, since 1994.

"We're kind of like a getaway for couples, a romantic retreat," says Boggio, a former TV news videographer who moved to the area from Springfield, Ill. "It's not set up for families. It's more for parents who want to get away from the kids or people who are celebrating an anniversary or a honeymoon."

The couple live on the premises, so the B&B is open year-round, closed only on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Summers are busiest, and guests usually stay anywhere from one to four nights.

The Round Barn Winery,



George Siefert, manager of The Round Barn Winery store in Union Pier, Mich., pours samples for customers Dennis and Janet Castle, a couple from Pierceton, Ind.

If you go

Harbor Country: Southwestern Michigan resort communities north of Indiana border near Lake Michigan: Grand Beach, Harbert, Lakeside, Michiana, New Buffalo, Sawyer, Three Oaks and Union Pier; www.harborcountry.org or 269-469-5409.

Warren Dunes State Park: 12032 Red Arrow Highway, Sawyer.

Harbert Antique Mall: 13887 Red Arrow Highway, Harbert.

Round Barn Winery: 10983 Hills Road, Baroda; www.roundbarnwinery.com or 800-716-9463. Tasting room 9185 Union Pier Road, Union Pier.

Elephant Walk Cottage: 9679 Greenwood, Union Pier; www.elephantwalkcottages.com or 269-469-0977. Weekly rates range from \$975 for one-bedroom cottage to \$2,750 for a four-bedroom cottage. Group rentals preferred.

White Rabbit Inn Bed and Breakfast: 14634 Red Arrow Highway, Lakeside; www.whiterabbitinn.com or 800-967-2224. Rates \$95-\$200 a night.

Redamak's restaurant: 616 E. Buffalo St., New Buffalo; www.redamaks.com or 269-469-4522. Burgers, \$4.50. Dinner entrees, \$6.25-\$9.75. No credit cards.

based in Baroda, has a tasting room/retail outlet in Union Pier. The company's liquor license allows it to sell wine in bottles but not by the glass.

For a customer to sample the wine, he must purchase, for \$5, an empty glass emblazoned with the Round Barn logo. Then store manager George Siefert will let him use his new glass to try sever-

al varieties.

Chris Moersch, Round Barn's general manager, says the Union Pier location is open all year and is busiest from Memorial Day through late October.

"We get a pretty good cross section of people from all over the place, but the majority — probably 65 percent — are from Northwest Indiana,

the Chicagoland area," he says.

For hamburger lovers, a trip to Harbor Country wouldn't be complete without stopping off for a bite at Redamak's, a New Buffalo roadside diner known for its delicious burgers for more than 60 years. (Warning, credit card enthusiasts: Plastic is not accepted for payment.)

Jim and Angie Maroney bought the restaurant from original owner Gladys Redamak in 1975. Their son, Chuck, is the general manager of the 400-seat restaurant, a business that he describes as "a family affair." His son, Charlie, is "a jack-of-all-trades" at Redamak's and Charlie's wife, Heidi, started hosting and tending bar there this year.

Chuck Maroney says Redamak's uses five-and-one-third-ounce hamburger patties. The beef is cut and ground right at the restaurant three to five days each week, depending on the time of year.

"We've been here going on 34 years," he says. "I don't know if we'll be here for another 34, but it's a labor of love."

AP PHOTOS/JAMES PRICHARD

TEST YOUR IQ

For what dish is Redamak's in New Buffalo famous?