



Saugatuck

by Victoria Shannon

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A view of the Kalamazoo river and downtown Saugatuck. Photograph by Robert Moore.

Saugatuck and its sister city, Douglas, are small harbor towns in Allegan County, Michigan. Sometimes called the Fire Island (or alternatively, the Provincetown) of the Midwest, Saugatuck is a popular resort destination for glbtq vacationers, especially from Chicago and Detroit.

Located on the shores of Lake Michigan and the Kalamazoo River, Saugatuck offers a view of lovely rolling sand dunes to the west and neatly cultivated farm land to the east. Because of Lake Michigan's buffering effects, the town enjoys cool breezes in the summer and heavy snows in the winter.

In the 1830s, Saugatuck was a lumber town and port, and after the fire of 1871, supplied much of the lumber to rebuild the city of Chicago. When the lumber was exhausted, Saugatuck and Douglas became large fruit farming communities, harvesting, among other fruits, peaches called "Michigan Gold."

In the 1880s, the area became a resort area, attracting visitors from all over the Midwest. In the same decade a group of Chicago artists established the Summer School of Painting on Ox-Bow Lagoon; and, in 1909, a dance hall called the Big Pavilion was built. Artists and architects--including men and women with same-sex sexual interests--flooded the area, and today it is known as the Art Coast of Michigan. Ox-Bow is still affiliated with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and there are more than a dozen art galleries in Saugatuck.

Currently, the area's primary source of revenue is tourism. Only about 1,000 people are permanent residents of Saugatuck, but in the summer the town is awash with tourists from all over the Midwest. Saugatuck and Douglas advertise themselves as gay-friendly villages, and the area has become a popular vacation spot for gay men and lesbians.

Both Saugatuck and Douglas are distinguished by their post-Civil War Greek Revival architecture, as well as later structures in the arts and crafts style. The towns, having resisted the urban sprawl and chain store invasions that have spoiled so many other historic areas, retain their traditional character and quaint charm. At the same time, they offer an abundance of first-class venues and cultural opportunities.

The largest gay resort and entertainment complex in the Midwest, the Dunes Resort, is located right off the Blue Star Highway that runs along the western coast of Michigan only two hours from Chicago.

Carl Jennings and Larry Gammons, who established the Dunes in 1981, originally planned to occupy a bed-and-breakfast space just inside the town of Saugatuck on Lake Street, but when bikers burned the only gay bar in town, the city commissioners decided to "discourage" any more gay establishments.

In response, Jennings and Gammons purchased a motel in the town of Douglas, which they refurbished as Douglas Dunes. It had 22 hotel rooms, a restaurant, a lobby bar, and summer-only outside dancing.

The attack on Saugatuck's gay bar and the town's discouragement of gay establishments in the 1980s may

expose a certain ambivalence that locals feel toward its gay and lesbian visitors. In 1995, Saugatuck's town council unanimously rejected a proposed anti-discrimination ordinance that would have included sexual orientation as a prohibited grounds of discrimination.

The rejection shocked many visitors (and some residents), and underlined that the community is actually quite conservative. (Allegan County voted overwhelmingly in favor of George W. Bush in both 2000 and 2004.) Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in Saugatuck was not prohibited until 2007. The neighboring town of Douglas adopted an anti-discrimination ordinance several years earlier.

In 1999, Douglas Dunes was purchased by Mike Jones, Greg Trzybinski, and Danny Esterline and renamed The Dunes Resort. The establishment now sits on 22 acres with 81 hotel rooms, cottages, a large swimming pool, a huge outdoor/indoor bar complex with four bars, its own restaurant, a cabaret with live entertainment, and a game room.

Resident DJ Mark Vallese and a long list of visiting DJ's provide year-round entertainment at the Dunes Resort. Over the years, entertainers such as Lauren Grey, Eartha Kitt, and Jack Wrangler have appeared on the Dunes' stage. The resort, which is open year-round, holds special events for every segment of the queer community: bears, lesbians, transgender individuals, leathermen (and women), gay men, bisexuals, and even straight people. The resort hosts several themed parties throughout the year, including a Women's Weekend in October.

The Dunes Resort's web site claims that there are over 140 gay-friendly establishments in the area.

Among the attractions of the area are beautiful beaches, a Titanic-era steamship museum called the SS Keewatin to tour, a do-it-yourself Art Barn, and West Michigan's largest Antique Pavilion, as well as smaller art galleries, restaurants, and novelty shops.

The Saugatuck Chain Ferry departs from Wicks Park near the Star of Saugatuck, a large paddle-wheel boat that gives daily tours of the Kalamazoo River and Lake Michigan. Saugatuck Dunes State Park and Allegan State Game Area also attract many visitors.

Rainbow flags and decals adorn many of the area's businesses, and the two towns are welcoming and friendly, perhaps especially now that both towns have anti-discrimination protections in place.

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