

SAUGATUCK DOUGLAS - MICHIGAN'S WEST COAST PRIDE

Tucked between soaring sand dunes and the glorious Kalamazoo River, Saugatuck-Douglas showers the spoils of resort-life on locals and visitors alike. With its beautiful beaches and eclectic cuisine and nightlife, the area's relaxed atmosphere has charmed gays and lesbians for nearly a century. Whether hosting the club kids or the over 60 crowd, Saugatuck-Douglas proudly offers something for everyone.

Once a thriving lumber town, Saugatuck-Douglas became a popular tourist destination in the early 1800s. By 1870, Chicago and St. Louis natives commonly traveled to the Saugatuck-Douglas lakeshore to escape the summer heat, but the area's true turning point came in 1910, when artists from the Chicago Art Institute established the Summer School of Painting on the Ox-Bow Lagoon. Oxbow encouraged a gay presence in Saugatuck-Douglas and over time, the community flourished as a gay safe haven. In fact, tourists have warmly nicknamed Saugatuck the "Fire Island of the Midwest."

After forging a reputation as a gay-friendly weekend retreat, Saugatuck-Douglas emerged as a pillar of the greater Midwest gay community. Many who once called Saugatuck-Douglas a home away from home became full-time investors in the town's success. As they fell deeper in love with their surroundings, the weekend warriors purchased and renovated homes and businesses. What were once abandoned storefronts and dilapidated cottages gradually became quaint bed and breakfast establishments and storefronts. Saugatuck-Douglas now features more than 30 art galleries and a local calendar loaded with music, art and film festivals. Currently, more than 30 percent of Saugatuck-Douglas' impressive restaurants, hotels and shops are gay owned and/or operated.

The Saugatuck-Douglas dining circuit bridges the gap between top-shelf taste and low-brow attitude. American, French, English and Italian delicacies are available in abundance, as are the prerequisite burgers and ice cream demanded by most travelers. Wander dockside for Mermaid Bar and Grille's (269/857-8208) famous salads and pastas, or discover the casual ambiance of Phil's (269/857-1555). A sophisticated, continental flare shines through Blue Moon Bar and Grille's (269/857-8686) small plates and entrees. Reliable home

cooking is on the order at Kalico Kitchen (269/857-2678), best known as the morning solace of the after-hours set.

Saugatuck-Douglas' clothing, gift and antique shops run the gamut from classic to contemporary. Elephant's Trunk (269/857-4755) boasts rare British Colonial antiques and an art collection born of global exploration. Circa (c.) (269/857-7676) offers antiques, art and accessories spanning the scope of time, and Thomas Greene (269/857-4063) provides the latest in gifts and decorative home accessories. Continue on to Butler Pantry (269/857-4875) for terrific gourmet cookware, specialty foods and household accents. Or, visit the wonderfully aromatic store, The Spice Merchants (269/857-3031) for all things spices!

Tourists also enjoy many options when it comes time to rest their weary heads. Saugatuck-Douglas motels, resorts, cottages, suites and Bed & Breakfast inns are suited to every taste and budget. The Dunes Resort (269/857-1401) is the largest gay and lesbian resort in the Midwest, providing comfortable accommodations and a diverse entertainment complex. Pines Motorlodge (269/857-5211) brings retro flair to a kitschy cottage atmosphere, and visitors banking on a quiet bed and breakfast setting will find The Kirby House (269/857-2904) an elegant respite. A more rustic retreat is found at Campit (269/543-4335), an outdoor resort for gays, lesbians and friends.

For art enthusiasts, the area boasts more than 38 galleries and an ever growing Film Festival every June. The Mason Street Warehouse professional theater company in the Saugatuck Center for the Arts presents "uptown theater in downtown Saugatuck" every June - October.

Although business and tourism thrive year-round in Saugatuck-Douglas, things really heat up between Memorial Day and Labor Day. Swimmers and sunbathers soak up the scene on infamous Oval Beach. MTV once touted Oval Beach as one of the nation's five best beaches, and Conde Nast Traveler rated it one of the world's 25 best shorelines. Water babies preferring a clothing-optional setting will find the privacy of the surrounding dunes conducive to all things au natural.

Saugatuck-Douglas has plenty of physical, outdoor diversions for the young and restless as well. Canoeing, jet-skiing and horseback riding

can be arranged from several locales, and premier hiking awaits at Saugatuck Dunes State Park, Allegan State Park and picturesque Fenn Valley vineyard (269/561-2396).

When travelers tire of the sand in their suit, romantic Lake Michigan is on hand to conjure another stunning sunset each and every night.

For more information:

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Many of the photos below can be clicked to see a larger version suitable for print.







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