

Michigan Backpacking - Secret Locations

Contributed by Steve Gillman
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If you're going to be in Michigan backpacking, try these virtually unknown places.
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In Michigan, backpacking usually consists of hiking the trails of the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, or the Porcupine Mountains State Park, or The Sleeping Bear Dunes National Park. All of these are well worth doing, by the way. But what if you want to really get away from the crowds? Here are three places to try where you'll likely be backpacking alone.

Backpacking Isolated Islands

{bot_wrgoogle}You'll need a canoe for this first destination. Off the Garden Peninsula in Michigan's Upper Peninsula (take Highway 2 to 183), there are several islands that are uninhabited. The first, Little Summer Island, is just a mile or so offshore from the tiny community of Fairport. We paid \$10 to leave our car parked behind the barn of a fisherman who lived there.

Summer Island and Poverty Island are next in the chain. These are wooded islands, with some old foundations of houses remaining from long ago, as well as a lighthouse still standing on one. They are primarily part of the Lake Superior State Forest (despite the fact that they are in Lake Michigan). There aren't really any trails for backpacking, but hiking the shore and exploring the interior of Summer Island could fill a day.

From Poverty Island, you have to cross a shipping channel to get to Saint Martin Island. This one is privately owned, but the caretaker told us that camping there was no problem, and he even left the lighthouse open for us to explore, with our promise to lock it up when we were done. When he took a boat home to Wisconsin (less than 10 miles south), we were the only ones on the island. There are trails here, and there may be a few rental cabins by the time you read this.

The Manistee River Trail

There is a little-known trail along the Manistee River in Northern Michigan that is never crowded. Part of it is the North Country Trail, a long trail from New York to North Dakota that may never be completed. I haven't hiked it in four years or so, but when we used to hike here or float homemade rafts down the river, we never had company.

The part that I am referring to runs through the Manistee National Forest from Highway 131, North of Cadillac, to Highway 37 near Mesick. The trail follows the river on the north side. There is one road (and a bridge) that you'll pass the first day, downstream from 131. After that there are no more houses or cabins for a long stretch. The terrain is rolling maple and beech woods, with some big sandy bluffs overlooking the river.

Drummond Island

A few years back, a friend and I took the ferry to Drummond Island, with the canoe on the roof of the car. We found a string of lakes on the map and put the canoe in the first one. After paddling a ways, we had to haul the canoe over a beaver dam. Then we were in the big open areas, where the seemingly floating islands of plant life made navigating interesting.

We meant to camp somewhere on the shore of one of the lakes, but maps don't show everything. The shoreline was all marshy areas, full of cattails, reeds, and chest-deep muck. We realized at some point that it was not actually possible to get to shore. We could see dry land in the distance, but we couldn't paddle through the thick brush, nor walk well enough in the thick muck to get out and pull the canoe in.

By the end of the day, we were back where we started. We drove to an isolated part of the island (easy to do, since it all seems fairly isolated), and parked the car right in the road to set up a tent next to it. Not a single car passed before we left at 11 the next morning. If you want isolated backpacking - or paddling or even parking - this is one part of Michigan

you'll want to check out.

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