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## Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin, gaining popularity

Reasonable prices make it an attractive getaway

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Special to the Tribune

August 16, 2009

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ELKHART LAKE, Wis. -- "Ring the bell and salute," came the battle cry from the bar.

Ding! The old ship bell behind Siebkens' Stop-Inn Tavern bar sounded the alarm. The last person to give a military salute has to buy a shot of Jagermeister.

It's a Sunday night, and the bar is half full. A bride still in her wedding dress entertains the room, dancing with her husband and the wedding party. They live in Chicago; the bride said a wedding like this would cost more than \$1 million in the city, compared with \$40,000 here.

With such prices, many are taking advantage. Just 150 miles from Chicago, about an hour north of Milwaukee and slightly west of Sheboygan, Elkhart Lake is an easy escape. Most learn of it through word of mouth. The tiny village, with slightly more than 1,000 residents, is quickly becoming known for a quaintness rivaling [Lake Geneva's](#).

Celebrities such as [Ashley Judd](#), [Tom Cruise](#) and [Michael Jordan](#) have been seen here, attracted by Road America, the longest natural 4-mile road course in the country. On race weekends, the town is flooded with thousands of visitors who park their Porsches, Ferraris or Suzuki Superbikes on the street. Sports-car, open-wheel and motorcycle racers take over the handful of local bars.

But many people come here for the lake. It is clean and deep, the third deepest in the state at 119 feet, says James Vennie, water-resource specialist with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. In some parts you can see 20 feet to the sandy bottom.

As a child I spent every summer here. My grandmother's lake house, now my parents' property, has been in the family for more than 50 years. To me, summer never begins until the cottage is opened Memorial Day weekend, after the water is turned on in the non-winterized house, its shutters removed, and the heavy wooden pier given its sea legs.

Motorboats aren't allowed (except for those who are fishing) on Sundays. Instead, sailboats race on the lake, tacking in and out, as kayakers and rowers enjoy the spring-fed waters that drew Chicagoans here by train more than 100 years ago.

Back then, German and Jewish businessmen would send their families up for several weeks of vacation, taking the train to visit them on the weekends. Singles looking for romance would meet at big-band performances after the Friday night train rolled in. Chicago millionaire brewer Matheus Gottfried built a mansion, known as "Villa Gottfried" and long gone, that cost a whopping \$25,000 back in 1891. A few years later he added a horse racetrack (also gone) and gave \$15,000 to build the village's first power plant.

During Prohibition the village became more risqué, becoming home to an overflow of alcohol and slot machines. In the early 1950s, Elkhart Lake was filled with street racing until it became illegal, prompting the Chicago region of the Sports Car Club of America to establish Road America in 1955.

These days, Elkhart is a mix of families and couples, racers and wedding parties. The high-end Osthoff Resort opened in 1995, named after the famous resort that existed here in the late 1880s through the mid-1950s. It has slowly revitalized the area, creating a love-hate relationship between the locals, who relish the quiet lifestyle, and summer visitors, who help the local economy survive.

Just a few blocks away, the Victorian Village Resort offers visitors campy sing-and-dance shows, reminiscent of "Dirty Dancing" but without the lessons. But that could change soon; Victorian Village is up

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Locals are philosophical about the situation. "You either grow or die," said resident Cathy Stayer. "I'd rather do the first."

The Osthoff effect has created a boom of sorts in this tiny village. Hot spots like the Lake Street Cafe, known for its kitschy decor, homemade meals and large wine selection, and the Brown Baer, a "townie bar," have opened in the last 10 years, helped by the Osthoff.

On one particular night, a local bluegrass and Irish band called Beef Tea packed 150 people into the Baer, where you can hear live music and swing on suspended chairs.

Danika Williamson, 30, who is from the neighboring village of Cedar Grove and is 8 1/2 months pregnant, belted out "The Traveling Song," by The Avett Brothers.

"Well I guess if my daddy hadn't brought me up down a long dirt road in a pickup truck I'd feel alright, 'neath the city lights, couldn't leave the city lights it just ain't right," she crooned.

Cue the banjo. The floor spins. People shake and twirl. A contingent of twenty- and thirtysomethings hoots and hollers.

"Well, Madison, Milwaukee," Williamson said to the crowd. "Let's go."

"Well, Chicago, **Mundelein** and Kenosha," she continued, as the crowd shouted back. "Let's go."

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THIS ARTICLE IS WONDERFUL, MY WIFE MOTHER HAS A HOME ON ELKHART LAKE, BOUGHT IN 1962. MANY GREAT SUMMERS SPENT AT THIS GREAT COTTAGE.....MEMORY'S THAT MY KIDS WILL NEVER FORGET AND ARE NOW TAKING THEIR FAMILY TO WISCONSIN TO EXPERIENCE THAT GREAT LITTLE VILLAGE & SEBKINS, LAKESTREET, BROWN BEAR, ELKHART INN, VICTORIA RESORT, ROAD AMERICA, CAMP BROUSIUS, ETC., ETC. ETC..... THANK YOU FOR BRINGING BACK GOOD THOUGHTS OF BEING IN ELKHART LAKE, WI. CANDY SUDERMAN - SHETLER ~ BOB SHETLER  
*bobshet (08/22/2009, 8:38 AM)*

It would be nice to be able to take a train to Elkhart Lake again, just like in the old days. Use some of the Obama money to stimulate the area's economy.  
*PeterN (08/17/2009, 9:06 PM)*



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