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We Dig These Dunes

Summer might be over, but it's still beach time in northern Indiana.

BY JILL JARACZ

Summer doesn't have to end when the sun sets on Labor Day. September is a great time to hit the beach and enjoy the last warm days of the year — without the crowds. Lake Michigan offers some of the country's finest dune areas, including Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and Indiana Dunes State Park. Between the two protected areas, beachgoers can enjoy 15 miles of beach nestled between Gary and Michigan City, Ind.



Above: A lakeshore view. *Indiana Dunes Tourism*

Below: A sample of the Valley restaurant's locally sourced menu. *Trent Albert*



Preservationists fought for decades to protect the area, succeeding with the development of the state park in 1925. In 1966, Congress created the national lakeshore along with the Port of Indiana. The two parks today have more than 15,000 acres of protected lands covering a variety of habitats, including marshes, prairies, bogs, and beaches.

All about the lake

Naturally, the beaches and lakefront are the main attractions. Walking along the sands or enjoying a picnic lunch from nearby Bartlett's Gourmet Grill & Tavern can provide hours of relaxation. In early fall, Lake Michigan's waters are still warm and ideal for kayaking and fishing. Anglers can fish for Chinook and coho salmon, as well as Skamania strain steelhead fish.

While the lake is the star of the area, both parks have many hidden jewels worth exploring. Between the two, there are more than 70 miles of hiking trails of varying terrain and difficulty. The dunes themselves are popular hikes.

In the state park, a 1.5-mile loop scales Mount Tom (192 feet), Mount Holden (184 feet), and Mount Jackson (176 feet). Note that the area's most famous dune, Mount Baldy, a standalone dune with an elevation of 126 feet, has restricted access and is off-limits to the public at this time of year due to potential holes in the slope.

The geography also makes the area a birder's paradise, with more than 350 species living or migrating through the park. The large expanse of water and open parkland makes it a prime stopover for migrating birds, particularly in the fall, when they fly south for the winter. Hawks and raptors skirt the coast, and peregrine falcons fly through in October.

Perhaps the most spectacular sight is the annual sandhill crane migration, when approximately 10,000 fly through Jasper-Pulaski Fish & Wildlife Area on their way to Florida. The migration starts in October, with peak flocks arriving in November. An observation tower gives viewers a prime spot from which to see the birds in action.

The national lakeshore has more than nature. It features two sites on the National Register of Historic Places. Bailly Homestead preserves the history of an 1822 fur-trading post. Near Beverly Shores, the Century of Progress Homes are relics from the 1933 Chicago World's Fair designed to showcase



BEFORE YOU GO

Valpo has three big fall festivals each year. On Sept. 10, the town pays homage to its most famous citizen, Orville Redenbacher, at Popcorn Fest, complete with food booths, live music, and a popcorn parade. Valpo Brewfest on Sept. 24 showcases 200 different craft beers. Fall Harvest Fest is two days of spookiness on Oct. 14 and 15.

For more information about visiting Indiana Dunes and Valparaiso, contact [Indiana Dunes Tourism](#) at (800) 283-8687.

To visit Valpo and the national lakeshore, first stop by your nearest [AAA service office](#) for maps, reservations, a [TripTik®](#) travel planner, and [TourBook®](#) guides.

new innovations in housing. After the fair, they were moved to this area for preservation but fell into disrepair. In recent years, renter occupants have been renovating the homes to their former glory. Normally the homes are only available through a self-guided driving tour, but for two days, Oct. 15 and 16, there's a fee-based (\$25) guided tour through all of the homes. Tickets go on sale Sept. 12 and sell out quickly.

After sunset, the night lights up with views of the skies one can't see in other parts of the region. The national lakeshore hosts a guided stargazing event on the first Saturday of the month at Kemil Beach parking lot, the darkest site in the park.

After a day at the beach, nearby Valparaiso is the place to get a fantastic dinner. Located about a half hour south of the lakeshore, this Norman Rockwell-esque town of 32,000 has been transforming into a modern foodie paradise.

Eat Up

Downtown Valpo, as the locals call it, won't leave you hungry. Dinner options include European-inspired cuisine at Bon Femme Café, serving steaks, chops, and specialty quiches. For ultra-local fare, check out Valley, a farm-to-table restaurant featuring local food and craft cocktails. For more casual fare, Stacks Bar & Grill serves gourmet burgers in a library-themed setting. Figure Eight Brewing is one of several microbreweries in the region, with 12 beers on tap and a menu of inventive small and large plates.

If you can save room for dessert, make a tough decision at Designer Desserts' specialty cupcake counters or head to Valpo Velvet, a popular ice cream parlor that's been family-run for 69 years.

Check Out the Scene

Evenings in Valpo offer a variety of entertainment options. Memorial Opera House dates back to 1893 and presents musicals and cabarets, including Into the Woods this fall. Front Porch Music has a weekly open stage and other touring acts.

Valpo offers plenty of daytime fun, too. Explore the area's history at the Porter County Museum, housed in the former sheriff's residence and county jail. Brauer Museum of Art on Valparaiso University's campus showcases works by Frederic E. Church, Georgia O'Keeffe, and other masters.

South of town, Taltree Arboretum & Gardens has several gardens to explore, including a fantastic and inventive railway garden depicting American steam engine history through 3,000 feet of track and more than 500 varieties of plants and miniature conifers.

Where to Stay

Dunewood Campground at the national lakeshore is open through October. Valparaiso has a variety of chain hotels, plus The Inn at Aberdeen, a popular bed and (three-course) breakfast. Pikk's Inn in the heart of downtown, located above a popular tavern of the same name, has just two guest rooms, and the rate includes a gift card to Pikk's Tavern.

Whether you're looking for a beachfront escape or a fine dining and cultural experience, the dunes and Valparaiso can be a perfect getaway.

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