*We are featuring the following article, which first appeared in the March/April 2019 issue of Cowgirl Magazine, because we think our readers would appreciate the content. The story is being shared here with permission, with availability of photos and text to media for reprint included.*

**Showcasing the DNR: A little ride back – peeking at our past**

*A weekend ride in one of Michigan’s special places: Mackinac Island*

**By JONI GLEASON**

Many of us who love horses and are passionate about the western lifestyle have wished, at one time or another, we could go back to the days when we relied on horses for everything: our transportation, to plow our fields, to haul our goods.

There is “Someplace Special” where that’s possible: Mackinac Island.

Located between Michigan’s Upper and Lower peninsulas in Lake Huron, Mackinac Island is small; only 8 miles around and about 11 miles from the mainland.

Motor vehicles were banned from the island in 1898 to preserve the charm and protect the safety of its residents and visitors. It remains that way today. People get around on foot, on a bike, or with a horse, and use horses to accomplish all the island’s needs.

Mackinac island is home to over 600 horses in the summer when tourism is at its peak. They then travel back to the mainland for the winter by ferry.

Visitors can bring their own horses to the island too, for the day or arrange boarding at the Mackinac Island Community Equestrian Center, to enjoy riding the over 90 miles of wooded trails in Mackinac Island State Park.

I had an incredible opportunity to join Tom Seay for a filming of his popular TV show “Best of America by Horseback” last fall. I brought my own quarter horse, Scout, and Percheron mare, Majesty, along for the three-day adventure.

Loading both Scout and Majesty over the ramp and into the cargo area of the ferry, was a snap. It was the first time they had been on a boat, but they managed to find their “sea legs” on the swaying deck accompanied by the unusual and constant roar of the engines, but they handled it well.

After about 20 minutes we arrived!

A friend who was also on the island for this special ride, met us at the dock along with her mule, near the edge of a very active downtown area.

This is the part where the time machine magically beamed me back to a bygone era; busy main street traffic consisted of horses – lots of horses and horse drawn vehicles of many different sizes and types: big, long fancy carriages that hold lots of people, smaller taxi’s for just a few, and drays and wagons hauling goods. Some were stopped to load and unload people, some trotted by us.

There were bikes too – lots of bikes parked alongside the main street shopping and restaurant area, and some whizzed by.

Except for gentle creaking and clanking of the pulling equipment, and the cadence of horse hooves, it was pretty quiet for a major thoroughfare area compared to what we’re normally used to.

I could actually hear people talking to each other, and to their horses with gentle commands to “whoa” or “get up.”

I had one eye, and both hands, on Scout and Majesty who seemed to be in awe like me, and one eye on everything else.

I wanted to know about the people who did this every day. I wanted to know how they really make this town work this way. My eyes were seeing it, my ears were hearing it, my heart was definitely feeling it.

So much to take in, but like everyone else in this bustling little 1800’s-style town, we had things to do and somewhere to go!

We walked our horses past the downtown area, but once we were a block up, I mounted Scout and ponied Majesty, who carried the bigger pack with our basic needs for the weekend.

We rode on smaller, windy streets for almost 2 miles to the Mackinac Island Community Equestrian Center. We encountered bike riders and walkers along the way and an occasional carriage would pass, and every time we all exchanged a friendly smile, head nod or hello.

People were happy here. Horses were happy here.

After Scout and Majesty were settled in their stalls, we met Tom Seay and his crew and attended a brief orientation about what to expect for the weekend, and then we were free to wander around the island for the evening.

Of course, I headed out by horseback along with a few others to explore.

We rode to one of the islands unique spots, Sugar Loaf, which is an immense 75-foot-high limestone rock in the middle of the forest, made by erosion. But I heard a different tale about how Sugar Loaf was created from the locals: a man’s face is clearly visible –etched right in the front of the rock – so early settlers and Native Americans believed a spirit was transformed to rock forever as punishment by a god because he fell in love with a mortal woman he came to visit.

The next morning, we all gathered at the barn for coffee and muffins, saddled our horses, and headed out in three medium sized groups along with Tom and his co-host Kristen Biscoe.

Tom and his crew were so very personable and down to earth. I felt I was with my best riding buddies as we navigated the trail system and took in the sights of this beautifully wooded forest with views of the spectacular Lake Huron visible every so often.

We talked about our horses and how fortunate we are to share our lives with them and other like-minded people on adventures like this, and to be here riding in such an incredible place.

The second day we rode to the Northwest part of the island along a charming residential road close to the edge of Lake Huron. The road weaved up along a grassy bluff making for a stunning view of the majestic lake.

The scene could have been plucked straight from a fairytale book, illustrated with darling cottages on our right, complete with colorful bunches of flowers here and there, and decorative fences and rocks all perfectly placed to accent the story.

If you’ve never seen the Great Lakes, they appear more like the ocean than a lake, and they can get just as rough when the weather gets nasty. The weekend had been cool and a little rainy at times, so we could see some white caps on the water’s surface.

We rode to a park called British Landing where we were able to take the horses out on the beach. A few of the horses in our group were leery to go close to the choppy waves hitting the shore, and their hooves sank a little in the deep sugar sand. Yet, it was a thrill to ride on the beach and let the horses take a drink of the crystal-clear water.

Monday morning came way too soon – we all packed up our gear and horses and made our way back to town to board that ferry bound for the mainland – back to our motor-filled world we know too well.

Yet, I was so grateful for the opportunity to spend some time in this one and only place in our whole country that operates solely with horsepower! I met some fascinating people too, who are passionate about Mackinac Island and work so hard every day to sustain this lifestyle they love.

Michigan’s Upper Peninsula has had a slogan for over 60 years: “Someplace Special” and Mackinac Island truly lives up to it.

In addition to equestrian trails and campgrounds managed by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the horseback-riding opportunities highlighted in this story are available at Mackinac Island, which is managed by Mackinac State Historic Parks – an agency within the DNR responsible for a family of living history museums and parks located in the Straits of Mackinac area.

To learn about the DNR’s riding opportunities, visit [Michigan.gov/Equestrian](http://www.Michigan.gov/Equestrian). Find out more about Mackinac Island at [MackinacParks.com](http://www.MackinacParks.com).

**Editor’s note:** Joni Gleason lives and works in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. She and her husband, Phil, own a little horse business in Ishpeming where they offer community school classes, summer camps for adults and kids, wagon and sleigh rides and camping – with or without horses. Joni is also certified in the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association model of equine assisted psychotherapy and holds regular sessions with substance abuse youth. You can find her on Facebook at Heritage Hills Horses.

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**/Note to editors:** Contact: [John Pepin](mailto:pepinj@michigan.gov), Showcasing the DNR series editor, at 906-226-1352. Accompanying photos are available below for download and media use. Suggested captions follow. Credit: Michigan Department of Natural Resources, unless otherwise noted.

[**Group:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/05/file_attachments/1225071/Group.jpg) A group of horseback riders enjoy a day at Mackinac Island State Park. (Photo courtesy of Kate Dupre)

[**Horseback:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/05/file_attachments/1225072/Horseback.jpg) Mackinac Island provides great opportunities for horseback riding. (Photo courtesy of Kate Dupre)

[**Horses:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/05/file_attachments/1225073/Horses.jpg)Jena Cook and Lynsey Cook talk at the corral at Mackinac Island State Park. (Photo courtesy of Kate Dupre)

[**Riders:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/05/file_attachments/1225075/Riders.jpg) The author, Joni Gleason and Debbra Brown on their horses on Mackinac Island. (Photo courtesy of Kate Dupre)

[**Sugarloaf:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/05/file_attachments/1225074/Sugarloaf.jpg) Jenny Cook rides her horse past the Sugarloaf formation on Mackinac Island. (Photo courtesy of Kate Dupre)

[**Trail:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/05/file_attachments/1225077/Trail.jpg) Horseback riders hit the trail at Mackinac Island State Park. (Photo courtesy of Kate Dupre)

[**Woods:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/05/file_attachments/1225079/Woods.jpg) A group of riders enjoy an outing in the woods on Mackinac Island. (Photo courtesy of Kate Dupre)**/**