



## Sleeping Bear Dunes and the Leelanau Peninsula

ONE OF THE TRULY GREAT two-day rides in Michigan covers the northwestern portion of the state. This stretch has natural wonders that just won't quit—massive sand dunes and Great Lakes bluffs, horizons that include blue water and islands as far as the eye can see, forests, vineyards and orchards, hills and curves, and much more. The route I've laid out takes advantage of the best roads, while avoiding stretches of popular tourist roads that have become just too crowded and thus less desirable for great motorcycling. Though this route does rely on state highways to a significant degree, they are roads that in their own right deserve to be on any list of great biking roads. Much of this trip is through state and national forests, and the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.

Though this trip is only 210 miles, it qualifies as a two-day trip because there is so much to see and do—especially in the Sleeping Bear Dunes and Leelanau County area. You just can't do it all in one day.

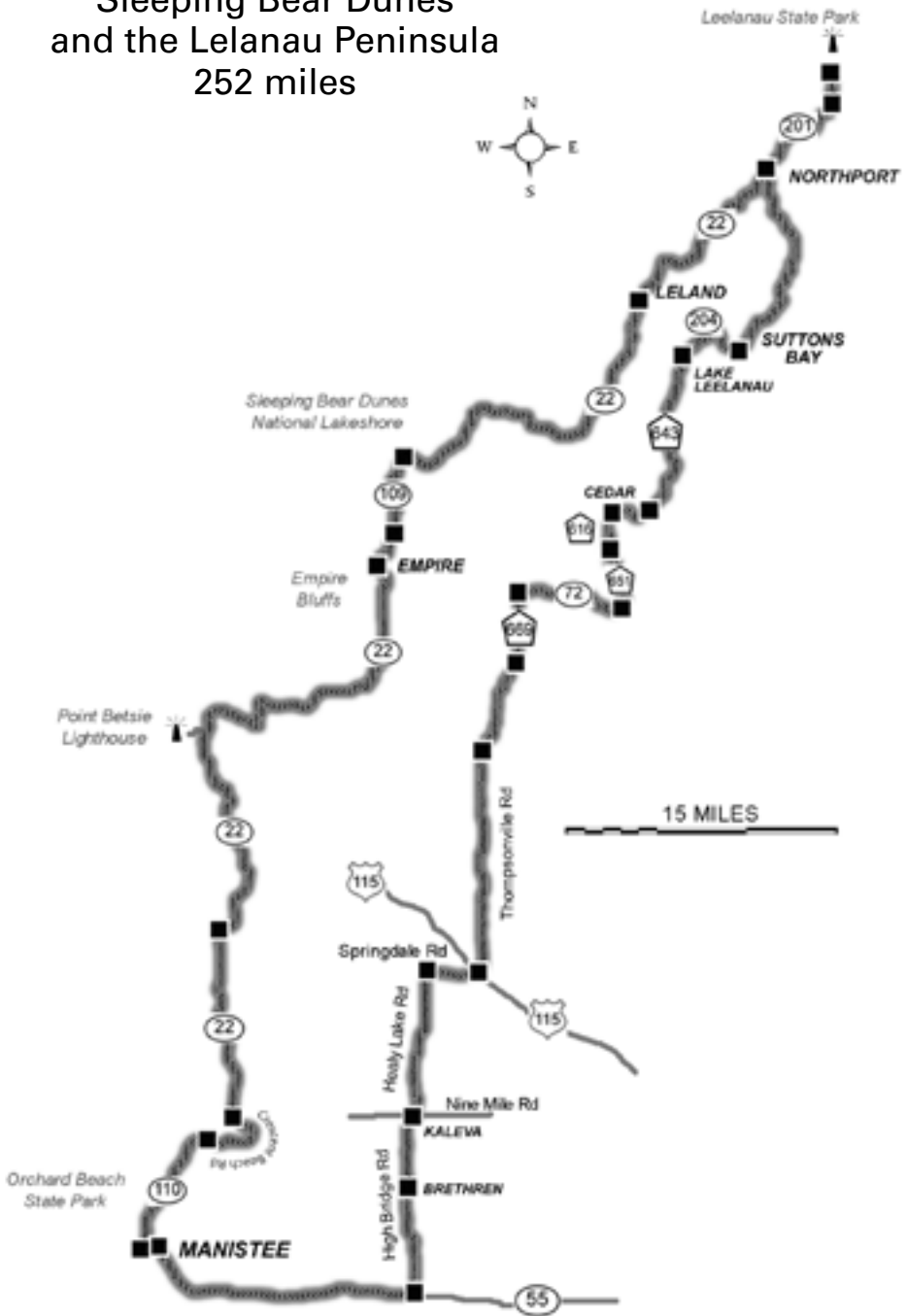
Many guidebooks will recommend a trip along the northwestern coast of Michigan's Lower Peninsula on M22, and rightly so. But the trip can be made even better when one knows when to use M22 and when to avoid it.

We'll start the tour in Manistee, a port city nestled between Manistee Lake on the east and Lake Michigan to the west. The Manistee River—a well-known western Michigan river famous for fishing and canoeing—connects Manistee Lake to Lake Michigan. While you're in Manistee, go to the northeast corner of Manistee Lake to tour the SS *City of Milwaukee*, a rail and passenger ferry that connected rail lines between Michigan and Wisconsin. The ship is a National Historic Landmark and is the last of the traditional rail car ferries, which operated across Lake Michigan from 1892 to 1981. The ship is open for tours from Memorial Day through September. Touring the engine room is especially interesting.

Upon leaving Manistee we won't take the usual US31 to M22 route. Instead, I recommend taking Lake Shore Road, aka M110, through Orchard Beach State Park and then along the Lake Michigan coast to Portage Lake, where it curves east to meet M22. Lake Shore Road is a curvy scenic road that also offers nice lake views. Following M110 around the south shoreline of Portage Lake takes you ultimately

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Sleeping Bear Dunes  
and the Leelanau Peninsula  
252 miles



**SLEEPING BEAR DUNES/LEELANAU PENINSULA  
 220 MILES**

<b>Miles</b>	<b>Destination</b>	<b>Total</b>
0	Manistee	0
11	Onekama	11
24	Elberta	35
25	Empire	60
5	Pierce Stocking Drive	65
16	Leland	81
15	Northport	96
8	Grand Traverse Lighthouse	104
23	Suttons Bay	127
24	M-72	151
29	Thompsonville	180
14	Kaleva	194
12	M-55	206
14	Manistee	220

onto M22 and then through Onekama. The road then curves north over hills and past forests and orchards, never more than a couple of miles from Lake Michigan. Views of the lake shimmering in the distance are common. The road will take you through Elberta and Frankfort and past the Point Betsie Lighthouse, about four miles north of Frankfort. (This lighthouse has been abandoned by the Coast Guard and is currently in limbo. An organization called The Friends of Point Betsie Lighthouse is trying to save the light from further deterioration). This historic light, in service from 1858 to 1996, can be found at the end of Point Betsie Road.

The shoreline bluffs near Frankfort are a favorite gathering place for hanggliders, and throughout the summer you can watch these colorful gliders soaring high above the beach. Just a few miles beyond Point Betsie, M22 enters the marvelous Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Thank you, Senator Phillip Hart, for fighting to preserve this exceptional piece of landscape for all time!

Two miles south of the Leelanau County line and just west of M22 is a ghost town on Otter Creek whose existence is nearly forgotten. Only a local road retains the name of the village of Aral—named by its founders for the Aral Sea in Russia. As with many north woods lumbering towns, part of Aral’s history involved violence

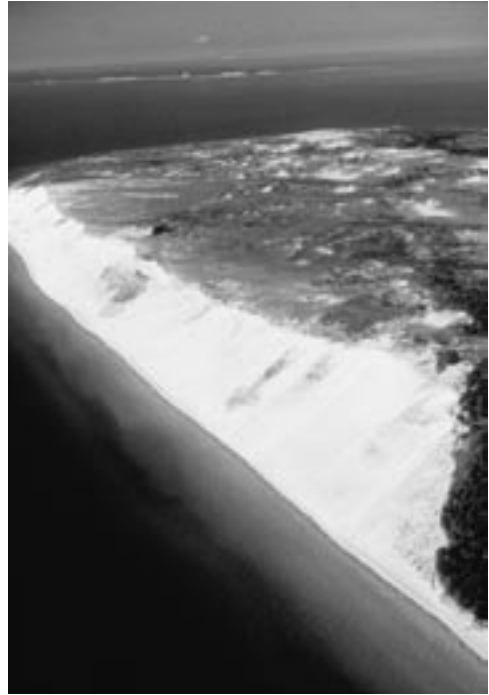
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when a local man killed two deputies trying to arrest him. A confidant was caught and hung from a still-existing pine tree until he agreed to tell local residents where the murderer could be found.<sup>3</sup> Aral also became the home of a religious cult in the early 1900s. The last resident turned out the lights for the final time in 1922.

Route M22 continues its sinuous way north to the town of Empire. Just south of Empire are signs pointing to the Empire Bluffs. This is a short walking trail that leads to breathtaking views of wooded dunes and unsurpassed vistas of Lake Michigan. It's a highly recommended stop and a great place to stretch your legs. At the junction of M72 and M22 in Empire is the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore headquarters. You will be glad that you stopped in to learn about the history and geology of the area and to pick up information.

Native Americans created the story of the sleeping bear long ago. As the story goes, a forest fire in Wisconsin caused a mother bear and two cubs to swim across Lake Michigan to safety. The mother made it but the two cubs drowned becoming North and South Manitou Islands, which can be seen in the distance. The mother waited on the beach and is now in the form of the sleeping bear dune itself.

About two miles north of Empire the road forks, with M22 heading east-erly and M109 going straight north. I recommend taking M109 (Dune Highway) for a delightful trip through the Lakeshore and to access Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive—a seven-mile long narrow, one-way, paved motorized trail through the dunes. It doesn't have a straight stretch anywhere, and while you can't go fast, the tight curves and hills plus tremendous scenery make for a very pleasant ride. You can also park at several locations for short walks to view the dunes and lake. When you can begin to absorb the true scope of the sand dunes in this area and realize



*Aerial view of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore near Empire. (Photo courtesy of Traverse City Convention and Visitors Bureau)*

<sup>3</sup>*Ghost Towns of Michigan*, Larry Wakefield, ©1994, Northmont Publishing, Inc.

## 22 MOTORCYCLING ACROSS MICHIGAN

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*Lake Michigan beach near Empire. (Photo courtesy of Travel Michigan)*

that they exist up and down the east side of Lake Michigan, you begin to appreciate the fact that Michigan contains more freshwater sand dunes than anywhere else in the world.

Heading north on M109 to its northern terminus, turn right and head back to M22 and continue your shoreline journey up the west side of the beautiful Leelanau Peninsula. The Village of Leland is a great spot to stop and walk around. This old commercial fishing base has become touristy, but it's still a pleasant small town with interesting things to see and a nice ambience. It is also a good place for fresh fish meals.

The Leelanau Historical Museum in Leland is an excellent place to learn about the history of this unique area. There was a significant Native American presence on the peninsula when settlers first arrived. Two large Indian cemeteries are known to exist, though they were almost lost to time through lack of attention. One is on the Lake Michigan bluffs north of Leland at a place once called Onominee, and the other is on the east side of the peninsula near the village of Omena. The museum is supporting a project whereby these and other cemeteries are being researched and names preserved.

Continue north on scenic M22 to the town of Northport. In Northport take route 629 north to the Leelanau State Park and Lighthouse Point. The Grand Traverse Light at the tip of the peninsula is definitely worth a stop to see how the families of light keepers lived. Head south from the Point and Northport to Suttons Bay via M22. South of Suttons Bay M22 becomes congested and can be frustrating if you get caught behind slow vehicles. I recommend a better route. In Suttons Bay you'll see M204 heading west. Take this road about five miles west to the small town of Lake Leelanau, located at the north tip of this long and scenic lake of the same name. Route 643 follows the west shore south—this is the road you want. It takes you down the center of the peninsula, with less traffic and much

nicer scenery than the southeast coast of Leelanau Peninsula, which is suffering from the creeping cancer of urban sprawl.

Stay on Route 643 as it winds southwest until it ends near the small town of Cedar where you pick up Route 651 that takes you south all the way to M72. Take M72 west about six miles until it makes a ninety-degree turn to the north. At this point there is a road heading straight south—CR669/Maple City Road. Take 669 south and follow it about 40 miles until it hits M55. County Road 669 changes names as it wanders south and a little southwest, becoming Thompsonville Road, Springdale Road, Healy Lake Road, and finally, High Bridge Road/Maple City Road joins US31 westbound for a quarter-mile jog before heading south on Thompsonville Road. Just south of its intersection with M115 Thompsonville Road makes a turn to the west on Springdale Road, and goes west three miles before turning south again as Healy Lake Road. When Healy Lake Road enters Kaleva you need to jog to the west a half-mile on Nine Mile Road, the main east-west road through town, and continue south again on High Bridge Road. Before leaving Kaleva, however, stop at the famous Bottle House, a house built many decades ago out of 60,000 glass bottles obtained from a local bottling factory. The building now houses the Kaleva Historical Museum, and is located at 14551 Wuoksi Street. Kaleva is an interesting small town with a very strong Finnish ethnic background. The name is derived from The Kalevala, the national epic poem of Finland.<sup>4</sup>

Continuing south on High Bridge Road takes you to the crossroads village of Brethren, and then over the famous Manistee River just north of M55. High Bridge Road derived its name from an 80-foot high wooden railroad bridge that once crossed the river near this point. It has since been replaced with a steel bridge. The Manistee was a famous lumbering waterway from about middle 1840 to 1920, huge rafts of logs were floated down the river, and dozens of sawmills once lined its banks. The Manistee River is fed by many springs and is less prone to freezing over in the winter than other rivers. As a result, logging could be done year-round. All that lumbering activity, forest fires, and streamside development badly damaged the river, and in the early part of the 1900s, it was only a sad shadow of its former majestic state. Largely restored, today it is a highly-prized recreational river, used by fly fishermen, canoeists, and others for outdoor recreation. Being located in the Huron-Manistee National Forest and classified as a Wild and Scenic River by the federal government, the Manistee now enjoys protection from excess development and degradation. Once you reach M55, head west about fifteen miles—a very nice riding road through this stretch—back to the city of Manistee. The final couple hours of this trip are through beautiful forested and hilly countryside, making for a truly enjoyable and relaxing ride.

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<sup>4</sup> *The History of Kaleva*, by Esther Haksluoto Puustinen, May 1997.