

**W**e're standing on top of Mount Tom. At 192 feet, it is the tallest of three sand dunes at Indiana Dunes State Park, part of a 1.5-mile

trail climbing to 552 feet, which make up the park's 3 Dune Challenge. My husband and I looked out at the seemingly endless watery expanse before us, marveling at Lake Michigan's ocean-like appearance, which could

easily fool the uninitiated if it weren't for the Chicago skyline, hazy in the distance, just 35 miles away.

Although I've been in love with sandy beaches as long as I can remember, this was my first trip to my home state's northern coastline and the Indiana Dunes area. Along the southern shore of Lake Michigan, there are

15 miles of sandy beach to explore, so before entering the park we stopped by the visitor center in Porter. The friendly destination concierge who greeted us suggested we watch a short video to learn the history of the parks and the sand dunes.

We learned the dunes were formed by glacial action at the end of the ice age over thousands of years and are among the world's largest accumulation

of dunes around a body of fresh water. While the Indiana Dunes State Park was opened in 1926, President John F. Kennedy supported legislation that led to the creation of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore—the national park that surrounds the state park—in 1966. Several million guests now enjoy more than 15,000 acres of Indiana Dunes territory each year.

After completing the 3 Dune Challenge, the next afternoon we drove to West Beach, a part of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore near Portage, to climb the Dunes

Succession Trail. It includes a boardwalk and a series of 250 wooden stairs, leading to vantage points ideal for capturing timeless images of the dunes and views of Lake Michigan and the Chicago skyline.

**Beyond the Beach** We began our second day in Dunes Country in the art-centric town of Chesterton. Locals and visitors congregate downtown on Saturdays from the beginning of May through the end of October to attend its European Market. Up to 80 vendors from Indiana, Illinois and Michigan, including artists, merchants and local farmers, sell an eclectic

collection of products and fresh produce. Musical entertainment adds to the ambience. We also stopped by the tasting rooms of Running Vines and Butler wineries to sample a selection of Indiana wines before enjoying lunch at Ivy's Bohemia House.

The small beach community of Beverly Shores, known for its Century of Progress Homes, was our next stop. Originally constructed for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, they were later brought to the dunes by barge. Boasting new-fangled technologies such as air-conditioning and dishwashers, the homes are property of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and leased to private individuals. If you'd like a look inside, plan to visit during the annual homes tour, Oct. 21–22.

By Debra  
Dunning Brouillette

# Beaches and Beyond

Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and State Park showcases the beauty of Lake Michigan's shoreline.

## Planning Your Trip

For more information on the Indiana Dunes, visit [indianadunes.com](http://indianadunes.com). For trip-planning assistance, contact your local AAA Travel agent or visit [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).

Orchids, including the grass pink orchid (left), are native to the Indiana Dunes area. The beach at Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore is accessible via a wooden boardwalk (top right). Visitors tour the Florida Tropical House (bottom right).



PETER GRUBE



DEBBRA DUNNING BROUILLETTE



EDWIN ALCOX

**Birds and Blossoms** Scoters, jaegers and kittiwakes. If you've heard of them, you're most likely a serious birder. They are three of the rare bird species regularly sighted here of the more than 350 birds that either live or migrate through the area, thanks to the immensity of Lake Michigan's waters. Novice birders can borrow a free backpack, packed with two sets of binoculars, a birding basics book and a bird ID book by calling (800) 283-8687, or inquire at the visitor center.

Besides rare birds, the area boasts more natural species of orchids than in Hawaii. Ranger-led hikes may help you spot one or more of the 30-plus species that have been identified.

**Food, Festivals and Family Fun** The area's culinary offerings are plentiful, ranging from pizza, burgers and hometown cafes to fine-dining establishments featuring Chinese, Greek, Japanese, Spanish, French and other international fusion cuisines. Not-to-be-missed dinner recommendations from our weekend include Lucrezia Café in Chesterton and Meditrina Market Café in Valparaiso.

Check the calendar of events on the Indiana Dunes website to find out about festivals such as the annual Popcorn Festival held the Saturday after Labor Day in downtown Valparaiso. It honors the late Orville Redenbacher, who launched his first gourmet popcorn product from a farm nearby in 1971.

Before heading home, stop by Taltree Arboretum outside Valparaiso to walk through the gardens and its nationally recognized model railway garden that tells the story of America's steam engine history.

**Where to Stay** Accommodation options in Indiana Dunes country are abundant, including campgrounds and RV facilities, small independent motels, recognizable hotel chains and bed-and-breakfasts.

We chose Songbird Prairie Bed and Breakfast, a federal-style home in a wooded setting six miles from downtown Valparaiso, as our base of exploration. After settling into our suite, one of five named for songbirds—robin, cardinal, bluebird, warbler and purplefinch—we relaxed with a couples massage in the spa. Bountiful three-course breakfasts are served in the sunroom, where birds flock to the feeders placed strategically outside the windows. **H&A**

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