

# Blazing Trails

BY DEBORAH WYATT FELLOWS

**Raising kids in the country meant I gave up one key component of my childhood: Concrete.** No sidewalks. No paved driveways. Our little ones grew up gamely navigating their tricycles and Cozy Coups through rutted dirt punctuated with stones or, worse, through spring mud. They learned to ride two-wheelers that had mountain bike tires and our version of “letting them go” was not to watch them glide seamlessly into the horizon but rather to watch them bump and waver down the dirt road, their spindly arms braced in an attempt to control the handle bars. Our kids didn’t label it “the bumpy road,” for nothing, a label that endures to this day. Under the heading of “you don’t miss what you don’t know,” our kids spent hours flying down the bumpy road with all the abandon other kids find bike riding on pavement.

When our older two reached an age where they could ride on their own and the younger two were fine in bike seats, we began a lifetime of biking excursions. (Read: In search of pavement.) We quickly learned that riding on our paved county road with little ones was not a good option if we hoped to preserve a good parent/child relationship. The constant, and often frantic, calls to “Get Over!” every time a car approached not only made us look and sound like Captain Bligh, but could very well have made them terrified of road biking for life.

Thus, we discovered bike trails. They are often paved. They are absolutely safe from traffic. And they are simply beautiful. The first recreational trail we ever rode was the Betsie Valley Trail. While the trail is 22 miles long, extending from Frankfort all the way to Thompsonville, we started out riding the 6-mile paved portion from downtown Frankfort to Mollineaux Road and back again. This portion of the Bestie Valley Trail winds through wetlands, along the river, through hardwood forests and ends on the banks of Crystal Lake. We’d take a picnic, take a swim, get ice cream back in Frankfort and often ran into fun surprises such as an outdoor performance of “Caesar,” where actors clad in black suits and armed with guns delighted our kids. As they got older, we’d extend the ride down an unpaved portion of the trail to Beulah where we’d eat at the Cherry Hut, rewarding ourselves with cherry pie.

The Betsie Valley Trail opened the door to a lifetime of wonderful bike trail excursions. We have ridden the trail from Charlevoix to Harbor Springs, with U.S. 31 on one side for much of the trip and the water on the other. This trail provides a really unique way to access the towns along the way, including Petoskey and Bay Harbor. It’s very easy to ride even a portion of the trail from one great town to another, stopping to eat or shop or just poke about. The last time we rode this trail we finished in Harbor Springs and had our last meal at the 112-year-old, about-to-close Juilleret’s.



We have ridden nearly every portion of the Traverse Area Recreational Trail (TART) that runs from Suttons Bay to Acme. When the kids were little we’d ride the Traverse City to Acme portion, stopping along the way at places like Don’s Drive-In or to play a round of adventure golf. And we’ve started many times at Cherry Bend and ridden into Traverse City for breakfast, festival events or fireworks.

As the kids got older, our bike excursions became longer, faster and even more spectacular on bike trails and road biking. Several years ago we added single tracks to our list, taking passels of teenage kids mostly to the VASA single track and listening to them whoop as they attempted to navigate the skinny trail that has all the ups and downs and dips of a thrill ride.

This summer, The Sleeping Bear Heritage Trail opened a four-mile paved section from Glen Arbor to the Dune Climb in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. We rode it twice in the first days it was open. A lovely, winding path snakes through hardwood forest by Alligator Hill, passes through D.H. Day campground, Glen Haven and eventually the dune ecosystem that leads to the Dune Climb. This portion is a short ride but the trail will eventually run 27-miles from Good Harbor Beach to Manning Road south of Empire.

On both Sleeping Bear trail rides, we encountered people pushing wheelchairs. One multi-generational family walked the path from Glen Haven to the Dune Climb with the matriarch in a wheelchair and young kids darting about her. And on both days, we saw what we presumed was a dad pushing his disabled son through the wooded portion of the trail, sun filtering through early summer leaves. That filtered light, the sound of the breeze rustling the leaves, the smells of summer fully emerging in the woods are all things I’m very familiar with having been given the gift of hiking and skiing in the woods my whole life. But I had to wonder if that dad and his son had ever shared, or even known, the splendor that surrounded them those summer



## Up in Michigan

### Editor's Note

days on a trail winding through a once "hidden" landscape.

Like all places embedded in nature, you bring life with you on Northern Michigan bike trails. That includes joyful occasions as well as times of struggle, it includes challenging yourself or finding an enduring sense of peace. One Saturday this past summer, we took our much-loved Foxy to the vet and put her to sleep. She had battled cancer valiantly for such a long time, never being anything but her enthusiastic self, right up to her, albeit feeble, tail-wagging entrance into the vet's office. We buried her by our first dog, Sara, in the backyard and bumbled through a beautiful summer day in a state of such grief.

Around 5:30, our teenage kids all off at work or with friends, Neal and I decided to ride a just-paved section of the Leelanau Trail, which now makes for a paved trail from Suttons Bay to Acme. We didn't ride fast. We didn't talk all that much. We just let life be, surrounded by the magic light of an early summer evening, the orchards and farm fields glowing along the trail, the canopies of trees embracing and sheltering us. More than once I pictured Foxy, as fast as the wind, racing alongside her four little charges on their bikes as they navigated the ruts in the bumpy road, turning their faces occasionally to the sky as if they were flying.

Foxy is gone, our second son leaves for college this fall. Life moves forward. But the experience of a life shared outside, of finding joy and peace in the landscape endures. And for us, and so many people in many different circumstances, that has included and will include time spent in the safe, spectacular world provided Northern Michigan recreational trails. I have no doubt that our new Corgi puppy, Toby, will, one day, shepherd grandchildren down the "bumpy" road, just as I don't doubt that my family will share our own multi-generational moments relishing in sunlit landscapes as we travel recreational trails together. Truly, joy, peace and safety await us all. Just step on.

*Deborah Wyatt Fellows*

Deborah Wyatt Fellows, Editor in Chief. DEBWF@TRAVERSEMAGAZINE.COM



ABC's Good Morning America named Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore the "Most Beautiful Place in America." It surrounds The Homestead.

Together, they beckon you to a relaxing getaway with towering dunes, sandy beaches, spa services, championship golf, gourmet meals and gracious accommodations.

Just For Two package from \$159/night including a pass to the National Lakeshore. Call today! 231.334.5000



**The Homestead**  
America's Premier Resort

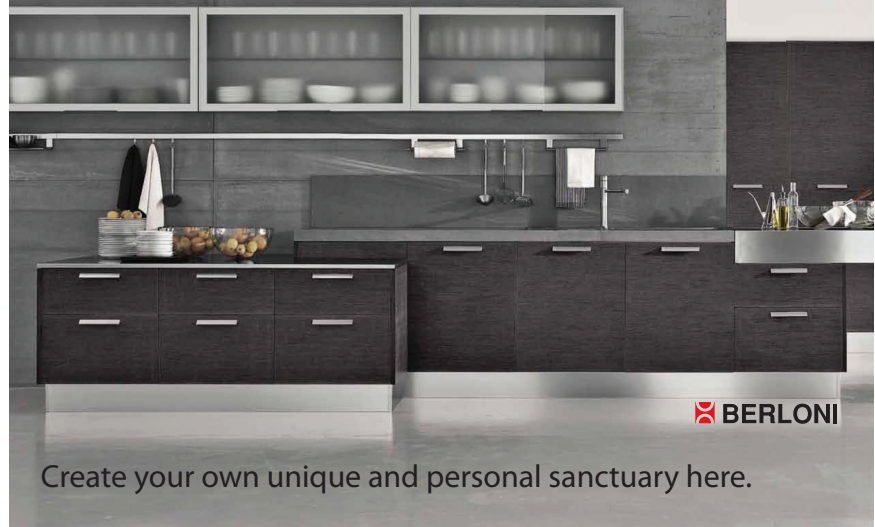


Glen Arbor, MI 49636

thehomesteadresort.com

231.334.5000

Don't come for a "shopping experience"..  
...Come for a "life experience".



Create your own unique and personal sanctuary here.

**bay** CABINETS + DESIGN STUDIO

541 W. Front St. Traverse City, MI 49684 p: 231.946.6882 baycabinetry.com