

# Departures

## Fishtown Rediscovered

Leland, Michigan **BY GENE AND KATIE HAMILTON**

**T**here was a time when commercial fishing was the lifeblood of coastal communities all across the Great Lakes. Very few reminders of this bygone era can be found today, but among them is the harbor town of Leland.

Situated on the Leelanau Peninsula in northwestern Michigan, this charming little port was one of our favorites back in the days when we were Great Lakes cruisers. But our last visit there had been in the early 1970s, and we had no idea what to expect when we made plans to revisiting this bucolic place last summer. Had it aged gracefully we wondered, or had it seen the worst of development and gentrification?



**Situated at the Leland Dam spillway, Rick's Café and the adjoining restaurant called The Cove offer regional delights including the Chubby Bloody Mary, which features a single smoked fish as a swizzle stick.**

As we approached the town, we were first struck by the contrast between the white stone breakwater enclosing the harbor and the sparkling blue green depths of northern Lake Michigan, which surrounds it. The harbor sits just off the Manitou Islands, near the mouth of the Leland River, and the site was long occupied by the Ottawa people, who took advantage of ledges that served as a natural fish ladder.

European settlers arrived in the early 1800s and established their own fishing traditions. A ramshackle collection of cottages sprang up along the river, earning the neighborhood the moniker "Fishtown." As commercial fisheries all around the Great Lakes declined in the mid-20th century, Leland's fleet was one of the last holdouts.

Meanwhile, the weather-worn, cedar-shingled shacks of Fishtown attracted a new type of settler. Artists and vacationers discovered the rustic charms of the waterfront, and what could have been lost in the name of progress was instead preserved and restored. Today, Fishtown is officially designated both a state and national historic site.

We were relieved to see that our recollections of Leland were accurate and that things hadn't changed in our long absence. In its ongoing evolution, the old resort town had aged gracefully, thanks to its residents' care and obvious concern for retaining a villagelike atmosphere.

In earlier days, vacationers came for the summer, arriving in June and departing in August. Today, Leland and the surrounding Leelanau Peninsula have become a popular place for empty nesters, who settle in for a longer season — or even reside year-round.



**Lovely Christmas Tree Corners Beach, near the harbor's southern breakwater, welcomes swimmers, sunbathers and picnickers alike.**

### A Cruiser's Delight

Leland has always been on the short list of destinations for cruisers on Lake Michigan. The secure harbor boasts a first-class marina with a full range of amenities, and within a few blocks of the docks, you'll find all of the necessities, as well as a wide assortment of pleasant diversions.

Provisioning is easy at Leland Mercantile on Main Street; nearby art galleries and specialty shops appeal to even the most sophisticated shoppers; and restaurants have kept satisfied diners coming back for years. But the prime draw for boaters and nonboaters alike is Leland's pearly white sand beach, which stretches for miles.

After we tied up our Grand Banks 36, we celebrated our arrival just steps from the boat, at the café overlooking the spillway that separates the inland Lake Leelanau and the Leland River. Thanks to fish sandwiches and a local brew called Sleeping Bear Michigan Light, we were fortified to go into town.



MARILYN GROSZKO (3)



**Flanked by rustic fishing shacks, the Leland River below the spillway provides berths for decked-over commercial netters and for pleasurecraft of all types.**

Ice-cream and candy shops are part of the landscape in Leland, as are small galleries that offer specialties like one-of-a-kind jewelry by Becky Thatcher and Tampico. We saw handcrafted rag rugs, quilt work, lodge folk art and Native American black-ash baskets.

Wine aficionados know this area for its vineyards, whose success is made possible by rolling hills that keep vines high and therefore safe from low-settling frosts.

From the town docks, the Mishe-Mokwa ferry makes daily runs for wilderness campers going to North and South Manitou Islands, just off the

coast. And down the shore a bit is the vast coastal playground of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.

While tourism appears to be the mainstay of the local economy, Leland continues to be an active fishing port. A thriving fleet of charter boats based in Fishtown caters to anglers in search of salmon, steelhead, brown trout, walleye, bass and lake trout.

The waterfront is also home to one of the Great Lakes region's few remaining commercial-fishing operations. Most recently, the port's two remaining commercial "tugs" were placed into a foundation operated by the Fishtown Preservation Society, with the goal of ensuring the continued operation of the fishery.

On our second day in town, we went to the Early Bird diner for a tasty breakfast and as we left the place, it was already filling up with tourists and campers. We spent a lazy morning walking on the beach, then took time to provision the boat and do laundry.

We later enjoyed a visit to the Leland Historic Museum, just beyond Main Street on the river, to learn more about the rich Native American history and maritime heritage of the area.

That evening, we had a fresh-from-the-lake dinner of smoked chub and whitefish, then grabbed a blanket, packed a basket with Michigan wine and cheese, and went to the beach to watch the setting sun. We raised our little plastic wine glasses to toast Leland for living up to our memories — and then some.

## RESOURCES

**NOAA Charts #14902, #14912**

**Leland, Michigan Chamber of Commerce**  
231-256-0079, [www.lelandmi.com](http://www.lelandmi.com)

**Leland Township Marina**  
231-256-9132 (231-256-7546 off season)  
[lelandharbor@chartermi.net](mailto:lelandharbor@chartermi.net)

**Richardsons' Lake Michigan Chartbook and Cruise Guide**  
800/873-4057, [www.richardsoncharts.com](http://www.richardsoncharts.com)