

Michigan

By Eric Spitznagel



Like many people who grew up on the Leelanau Peninsula, the “little finger” poking out of the Michigan mitten, I spent my boyhood trips to the shore scouring the sand for Petoskey stones: little round rocks covered in a distinctive interlocking honeycomb pattern. I didn’t realize until well into my mid-20s that Petoskeys aren’t a precious metal — they’re actually small pieces of fossilized coral, dating back to the Devonian Period. And they can be found in only one place: northwestern

Michigan. My friends and I polished our Petoskeys and turned them into jewelry for our mothers and aunts and girlfriends. They wore it all, walking around town hunched-over, their bodies heavy with Petoskeys.

It wasn’t until I moved to Chicago as an adult and started dating non-Michiganders that I realized not everybody is beguiled by Great Lake fossils. My first gift to my future wife, just a month into dating her, was a Petoskey necklace. She

Michiganders know the state gets a bad rap, but we remain deluded by its odd charms.

looked at it as if I’d just handed her a macaroni bracelet. “Are you being serious?” she asked.

I was embarrassed by the rejection, but mostly confused. I’d spent my life believing that Michigan contains everything that a person could reasonably want or need. It has rock jewelry, perfect views of the aurora borealis, Mackinac Island fudge, winning college football teams, no toll roads, 150 lighthouses and endless beachfront property, stretched across a

longer coastline than any state save for Alaska. We're also the only state with hand-based cartography. You can hold up an open palm, point to exactly where you live in Michigan and be immediately understood.

Growing up, I was vaguely aware that a world existed outside our state, but I assumed it was all variations on Canada. It's still disconcerting to me how outsiders, even fellow Midwesterners, feel about my home state: that it's blighted, abandoned, despair-inducing. When I mention that I'm from Michigan, they'll say things like, "Isn't that where they poison kids with drinking water?" Or "I don't know how you survive the winters up there." Or "It's amazing that you let both Michael Moore and Ted Nugent live there."

We know that Michigan has its faults: lake-effect snow, roads that resemble post-World War II Dresden, a hollowed-out auto industry and Detroit, the only U.S. city with an annual holiday dedicated to looting and fires. And yet we're nevertheless blinded enough by the state's many charms to remain sure that Michigan is constantly in clear and present danger of being colonized by enthusiastic outsiders.

Late one night a couple of years ago, I got a panicked call from my mother. She had just learned that the chef Mario Batali, who owns property in Leelanau, invited the U2 guitarist the Edge up to Michigan, and the pair were spotted together at a farmers' market in my hometown, Northport.

"You don't think he'll buy a house here, do you?" she asked, referring to the Edge. "He lives in Hollywood or Ireland or whatever. He wouldn't want to come here, do you think?"

"I have no idea," I told her, sleepily.

"What if he comes back with the rest of his band and they all buy summer homes?" she wondered aloud. "That's the last thing we need."

"I don't think Bono wants to move to Michigan," I assured her.

"Don't be so sure. Nobody thought Tim Allen would move to Michigan, either, and now he's doing tourism commercials."

I don't live in Michigan anymore, but I visit the state every summer, and now that I'm a father, I've begun

Speak like a Michigander:
Yooper: Upper Peninsula resident
Flatlander: Lower Peninsula resident
Pasty: A meat pie
Pop: Soda (see Faygo)
Euchre: A card game similar to Pinochle

introducing my 6-year-old son to Michigan culture. I've taken him to Michigan beaches and taught him how to search for Petoskeys. He found his first one last summer, and we celebrated. I told him why the stone was special, not because it's especially beautiful but because it's unique — those snooty ocean coasters can't claim to have better versions. I told him how he'd grow up and give a Petoskey to the woman (or man) he wants to love forever, and they probably wouldn't get it, but that's O.K., because the fact that outsiders don't get it is part of what makes being

from Michigan so precious and rare.

Someday, I told him, he'll feel like a fool for getting excited about it. But in the blink of an eye he'll be middle-aged, standing in a lake that feels like home, staring at the water and trying to find another dumb rock, and he'll forget how much he wanted to leave this place as a teenager, because now it feels like the only place on earth that matters.

Then I realized that my son was barely paying attention to me, which was fine. He needs to learn these things on his own. ♦