

Door County vs. Leelanau: Which Midwest peninsula is tops? (Hint: Depends on the category.)



Wisconsin's Door County and Michigan's Leelanau County have comparable charms, and both are popular spots for a Midwestern getaway.

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Door County, Wis., and Leelanau County, Mich., wave at each other from across the northern reach of Lake Michigan. They compete for the second-city-like title of the “Cape Cod of the Midwest.”

But which one wins?

As much as they have in common — both are long and thin (unlike the hook-shaped real Cape Cod); both stretch into the cold, fresh water of Lake Michigan; both are fertile territory for cherry cultivation; both are studded with picturesque small towns — the two peninsulas are distinctly different.

It's not difficult to design a weeklong itinerary that takes in both peninsulas so you can decide for

yourself which takes the cape crown. Though the destinations are separated by the 925-foot-deep lake, you can craft a U-shaped route that links the two peninsulas by the lumbering [S.S. Badger](#) car ferry.

The no-frills Badger shuttles between Manitowoc, Wis., and Ludington, Mich. From Manitowoc, the tip of the Door is a little over 100 miles north. From Ludington, the tip of Leelanau is roughly the same. You can start at either point, or in the middle, swinging up one peninsula and then the other.

The only real danger of managing back-to-back weekends is an overload of wine, cheese, cherries and cute. Let the face-off begin!

Overall quaintness

Pinky swear, it's a tie!

On the sunrise side of Leelanau, [Suttons Bay](#) offers everything a tiny town should, from a refurbished vintage movie theater to shops stocked with locally made clothes. ([Haystacks](#) skirts and tops are sewn in Michigan.)

Egg Harbor, Wis., offers nearly a mirror image of tiny shops, galleries and ice cream stands. [Wisconsin Cheese Masters](#) claims to make and sell the best cheese in America. As happy as Michigan cows are, they can't rise to that standard.

Gastronomic claim to fame

Door takes the point. A fish boil is an event way beyond a meal, while a cherry is but an ingredient — though one that shows up on every Leelanau menu in every form.

Go for the blazing drama of the version at [White Gull Inn](#), on the west side of Door County, in [Fish Creek](#). Whitefish is never more dramatic than its fiery finish, before the salty fish and potatoes are served with lemon, butter and fresh sides. To be sure, whitefish gets its due in Leelanau and environs, in the form of the smoked whitefish dip served at many restaurants and available for takeout at local delis and grocery stores.

Still, Leelanau works the cherry angle endlessly. The fruit is everywhere — in salads, desserts, on ice cream, in granola, in salsa and other unexpected places. Local cherry brands abound; hunt for [Cherry Republic](#), headquartered in [Glen Arbor](#) and widely distributed across northern Michigan, infusing cherries into everything from salsa to almond butter.

Punctuation islands

Door has [Washington Island](#), the dot on its "i."

Leelanau has the [Manitou Islands](#), north and south, a pair of apostrophes decorating the horizon west of Leland and Glen Arbor.

The three punctuation islands have one main characteristic in common: The fun is in getting there by ferry, not so much in being there. Mosquitos abound on all three and the facilities are rudimentary. Go for lunch and bring bug spray.

The [ferry for Washington Island](#) leaves from Northport, which offers little in the way of recreation or snacks. (Another island — Rock Island — is the coda to Washington: you can only get there by taking a ferry from Washington. And once you get there, you're on your own, as there's not so much as a store.)

The [ferry to Manitou](#) departs from [Fishtown](#), the aromatic working wharf that is part of [Leland](#). Leland and Fishtown offer a small but pleasant array of cafes, ice cream counters, diners and shops, which make for a much more pleasant departure and arrival than the functional-minus-fun Northport.

Dramatic dunes

It's no contest: point to Michigan, based on [Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore](#), the mother of all dunes.

Both peninsulas offer several gently sloping natural beaches for walking and children's play. In Door, [Whitefish Dunes State Park](#), on the eastern shore, is lovely for what it is, but what it isn't is dramatic.

Drama is all there is at Sleeping Bear Dunes. Start at the ranger station in the grandly named hamlet of [Empire](#). The park is large and fragmented, so it's smart to get your bearings. Stroll through the natural history exhibit that explains how the lake and dunes came to be.

If your family includes small children, Empire's own municipal beach is an overlooked gem: just big enough for playing, not overwhelming like the giant dunes, and sporting two new playgrounds.

Continue north to [Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive](#), named not after holey hosiery but after the foresighted resident who assembled the land to protect it from developers. It's an 8-mile, one-way loop with numerous overlooks and trailheads. But if it's the famous dune climb you're after, you'll find it a few miles further north. Visitors are expected to stay on the paths and save their sliding for the official climbing dune.

Lighthouses and lookouts

It's a tie!

In [Glen Haven](#), Mich., the maritime museum offers a low-key stroll around a huge glass lighthouse light

and a small array of small boats. [Grand Traverse Lighthouse](#) overlooks the northernmost tip of Leelanau Peninsula, though it'll cost you \$5 each to climb to the top.

[Eagle Bluff Lighthouse](#), in Door County, is located between Fish Creek and Ephraim and offers short tours that reflect lighthouse life a century ago.

Luxe launchpads

Fortify yourself for exploration with a night or two at luxe resorts at the base of each peninsula. Both resorts offer accommodations, dining, spa treatments and lots of golf.

Sunrise side: [The American Club](#) in Kohler, Wis., is the ultimate luxury spa. It's an endless showcase for high-end bathroom fixtures, tile and furniture, much of it manufactured right there in Kohler. Stay in the Carriage House, which also houses the spa, and you can spend your whole visit in your bathrobe. The adjacent Woodlake complex offers several restaurants, plus shops and accommodations at a lower price than the historic American Club. Kohler is a half-hour south of Manitowoc, where the car ferry docks. From there, take I-43 north to Green Bay and connect to Route 57 to start the Door County loop. Kohler is a great place to get oriented, but it's too far south to serve as base camp for a few days in Door County.

Sunset side: [Arcadia Bluffs](#) in tiny Arcadia, Mich., perches on top of an enormous range of bluffs overlooking Lake Michigan. A second lodge opened in April to complement the main lodge. Have dinner while the sun sets over the lake and, on most nights, a local bagpiper plays on the manicured golf greens. The club is on M-22, the famed scenic drive that winds north through Leelanau. Head a couple of miles north on M-22 for breakfast at [Birch & Maple](#) in Frankfort, where your short rib hash comes with side of sparkling bay view. Arcadia Bluffs can serve as your base camp for a few days exploring Leelanau County.

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