

# Marinas Ride Wave of Business From Luxury Boaters This Summer

By Ryan Schlehuder

While the high cost of fuel has forced many non-luxury boaters to plan fewer and shorter trips this summer, the high traffic of bigger boats has kept reservations on the upswing this year for many area marinas. A group of about 20 boaters in the St. Ignace area is among those that have felt the pinch of high costs, like most smaller boaters, reported member George Yshinski. His group usually enjoys at least four long trips a year.

For non-luxury boaters, this summer has proven to be too costly for cruising the Great Lakes, at least on a regular basis, said Mr. Yshinski, owner of the 33-foot *Straits Lady*.

"We always take most of July and go toward the North Channel, and make about four big trips a summer," said Mr. Yshinski, whose group includes four other local boats, "but this year we're only doing two trips, and we're making them shorter. This weekend is our last trip for the summer."

"It all relates to the gas costs," he added.

Marinas in the Eastern Upper Peninsula and northern



**Mackinac Island East Bluff cottages stand watch over sailboats that filled the Island marina during the Chicago to Mackinac Yacht Race in mid-July.**

Lower Peninsula have seen fewer boats the size of Mr. Yshinski's so-called "middle-class" boats, although harbor masters are reporting business from boats 40-feet or longer has been good.

"From what I've seen, attendance and fuel sales are up," said Jim Hooker, of the Parks and Recreation Division of Michigan's Department of Natural Resources (DNR), who oversees operations at DeTour State Harbor. "Fuel prices have not really had an impact, at least not for the larger boats. It's been a pretty good year for us."

Jeff Davenport, the harbor master at St. Ignace, says this is the best summer he has seen in his eight years in the marina.

"We've been full this year more times than any year I've been here," he said.

As many as 10 sailboats from the Chicago-to-Mackinac

Island yacht race moored at the St. Ignace marina this year, said Marina Director Eugene Elmer. He expects just as many, if not more, to return next year for the 100th annual race.

Clark Township Marina in Hessel, with 24 slips, reports a 20% decrease in business this summer.

"Boaters aren't moving up through the channels as much," said Katie Carpenter, Clark Township treasurer, speaking of traffic through the Les Cheneaux Islands.

Next year, the marina will enjoy business from the Les Cheneaux Yacht Club's Ensign class regional race in July, she said. The marina, she said, also enjoys a boost from the community's Les Cheneaux Antique Wooden Boat Show, which always fills the marina during the boat show weekend, and helps accommodate the many visiting boats moored out in Hessel Bay that weekend.

Many marinas won't tally hard figures until the end of the season, which runs from May to October, however, harbor masters can generally gauge how the season is going by how busy they are daily.

For most, if not all area marinas, the beginning of the season was slow, but business picked up in July.

This year, marinas are seeing more reservations, but boaters are staying fewer nights, said Harold Herta, DNR Parks and Recreation Resource

Management chief.

"Last year was a really bad year for boating," he said. "Reservations are up more than 5% this year, but, to put it in perspective, this year we are still down 6.6% from 2005."

Figures across the Eastern Upper Peninsula and northern Lower Peninsula vary widely. For example, St. Ignace Public Marina reports a 16% increase in business, as of July 31, from last year, while Garfield Township Marina in Naubinway has had almost no business at all, owing to low water levels.

The Mackinaw City Marina is down 5% and Cheboygan's municipal and county marinas are down 5% and 10%, respectively.

Mackinac Island Marina, Sault Ste. Marie's George Kemp Marina, and privately owned Fort Drummond Marina on Drummond Island all report good business similar to St. Ignace and DeTour.

Between May 15 and Thursday, August 16, Mackinac Island, which has 76 slips, recorded 4,347 night-stays by boaters, up 44 night-stays from last year at this time, according to Cheryl Greaney of the DNR Park and Recreation Division.

Kemp Marina in the Sault is also up, having 444 night-stays during May 15 and to August 16, up from 347 last year. Kemp Marina has 58 slips, with 25 of those reserved for seasonal boaters.

St. Ignace is one of the top-rated marinas in the state, owing to an expansion project that increased capacity from 22 slips to 136 slips in 2005, and enjoys the advantage of the busy traffic and popular draw of the Straits of Mackinac.

"I'm seeing a lot of repeat boaters in the marina this year," said Mr. Yshinski, a frequent boater there.

Mr. Hooker and new DeTour State Harbor Master Ward Rauch say the combination of frequent visits from big boats and the attraction of groups to the marina have made a difference this year.

The marina has booked a few groups for the summer and hosted the boat *Prevailing Winds*, used by the Tall Pine Boy Scout Council, twice this summer. A YMCA group visited the marina and boats from the two Mackinac Island yacht races have also visited DeTour State Harbor this year.

Operation of the DeTour State Harbor was turned over to the DNR once again this year after having been leased to a private operator for the past nine years. Mr. Hooker believes business is up about 5% from last year, however, past records are limited, owing to change of hands in the operation.

"We've increased our seasonal slips from eight to 13, and they are all filled. We now have a waiting list," said Mr. Hooker. "From what I've heard from the community, I've been told business is up. People in town say it's busier than last year."

"Over the past number of years, though," he added, "DeTour has not been filling up, although we've seen a lot of boats 38 feet or larger this summer."

A foot-and-a-half drop in the water level has made as much of an impact on business as fuel prices have for the 14-slip Garfield Township Marina at Naubinway, said Harbor Master Larry Wyse.

"This year is worse than normal," he said. "The big boats can't launch there. There is very little traffic. The slips are open, but they're empty."

He expects the marina will be dredged this fall.

Dave Paquet, harbor master for Mackinaw City's 104-slip municipal marina, believes, over time, marinas and boaters will eventually have to accept today's costs of recreational boating.

"Everyone knew fuel prices were going to be high," he said, "but if you want to boat, you're going to boat."



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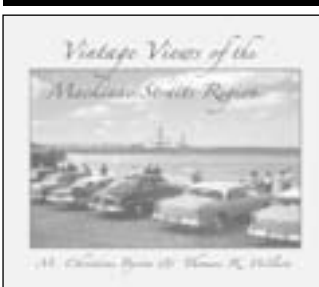
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