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Photo courtesy of City of St. Clair Shores



More Than Meets the Mile

by Kath Usitalo

St. Clair Shores and the nearby community of Mount Clemens offer the best of Lake St. Clair and oh-so much more.

With a tilt of the head and a little imagination, a glance at the map of Lake St. Clair reveals what its ardent fans claim it is: The nautical heart of the Great Lakes. The (sort-of) heart-shaped body of water, located about 6 miles north of Detroit between Michigan and Ontario, Canada, is a vital link in the largest freshwater system on the planet. As French explorer Rene-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de la Salle discovered when he first sailed into the lake on August 12, 1679 — the feast day of Sainte Claire of Assisi — it connects Lake Erie to the south via the Detroit River, and the St. Clair River and Lake Huron to the north. He named the body of water Lac Sainte Claire.

At 26 miles long and 24 miles wide, Lake St. Clair covers 430 square miles, but is tiny compared to the five massive Great Lakes in the chain that stretches from the St. Lawrence Seaway to Lake Superior. And it's shallow, averaging just 10 feet deep with a maximum depth of 21 feet plus a dredged shipping channel for the 3,000 freighter passages it sees each season.

As hardworking as it is, Lake St. Clair's combination of wide-open water and islands, channels, rivers and protected bays along its 160 miles of shoreline makes it a playground for watercraft of all kinds, with more than 150,000 pleasure boats registered in the immediate area on the U.S. side of the lake. Anglers like its perch, walleye, pike, bluegill, muskie and bass: Lake St. Clair produces a third of the Great Lakes' sportfishing catch each year, and in 2013 Bassmasters named it the number one smallmouth bass fishing lake in the world. To experience some unforgettable fishing thrills and excitement, book a charter out of St. Clair Shores with Mr. Muskie Charters.

Still, the body of water some promote as the sixth Great Lake alongside Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan and Superior is a secret waiting to be discovered, says Robert Williamson, commodore of the Nautical Mile Yacht Club (NMYC). NMYC takes its name from the length of Jefferson Avenue between 9 and 10 Mile Roads in the city of St. Clair Shores that, according to Williamson, "is truly a destination." Ticking off a list of Nautical Mile marinas, special events, restaurants, bars and other businesses that cater to boaters, he says, "Once you land here there's plenty to do. This should be a cruiser's delight."

Nautical Mecca

Brad Simmons of the Lake St. Clair Tourism Initiative, the non-profit organization behind the promotional and informational website tourlakestclair.org, notes that the area has "the highest concentration of nautical businesses on Lake St. Clair within a

RESOURCES

Tour Lake St. Clair

<http://www.tourlakestclair.org>

Nautical Mile

<http://www.nauticalmile.org>

Mount Clemens Downtown Development Authority

<http://www.downtownmountclemens.com>

Lake St. Clair Metropark

<http://www.metroparks.com>

Michigan Harbor Reservations

<http://www.midnrreservations.com>

Pure Michigan

<http://www.michigan.org>

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Donna Flaherty, president of the Nautical Mile business organization and owner of Gifts Afloat, points to a packed calendar of special events, from the July 18-20 Venetian Festival to classic car and boat shows, fishing derbies, and chamber music concerts at the lovely Wahby Park as additional reasons to visit the community. Free brochures and the website nauticalmile.org carry details on things to do in the district.

It's all an effort to encourage boaters — especially those traveling between the Great Lakes — to stop and stay a while.

“We want to make this a destination,” says Leslie Leitch, a member of the Nautical Mile Yacht Club board. “People bypass the area because they stay in the shipping channel, but from here you're halfway to Lake Erie, halfway to Lake Huron. You can spend the night here, and the Great Lakes are two to three hours away in either direction.”

He adds that the Nautical Mile makes a good base for exploring the nearby sights along the shoreline, depending on the watercraft; it's a 45-minute or an hour's cruise south to downtown Detroit and north to Lake St. Clair Metro Park.

Bounty of boating access

The municipal Lac Ste. Claire Harbor and Blossom Heath Harbor, as well as seven additional area marinas, offer transient wells along the Nautical Mile. The massive, 800-well Jefferson Beach Marina has 50 full-service slips for visitors with boats up to 100 feet, plus boat sales and service. Jefferson Beach Yacht Sales (JBYS) has been here since 1972. Tin Fish restaurant, with its waterfront deck dining and boat docking, and numerous charter fishing operations also are onsite.

Emerald City Harbor, with more than 500 slips, welcomes transients by reservation and is home to Brownies on the Lake, a popular restaurant and bar that offers boat docking. Colony Marine and Miller Marine also are located on the Nautical Mile.

Harbor 9 Marina can accommodate transient boats and is the scene of a summertime concert series and special events hosted by the Nautical Mile Yacht Club, whose headquarters are on premises at Captain Jack's Lakefront Bar & Grill. That two-story building was a boathouse in the 1920s and during Prohibition received illegal hooch from Canada, just across the lake. The casual restaurant makes the most of the rum-running theme built around an elaborate tale of the legendary (and fictional) liquor importer, Captain Jack.

In season a free water taxi ferries folks between lakeside hangouts. Visitors also can enjoy special events like the Pirate Island Festival (August 2) and free live music on Saturdays in June.

Mike's Marine Supply, a short stroll from the waterfront, is a one-stop-shop for all your boating needs.

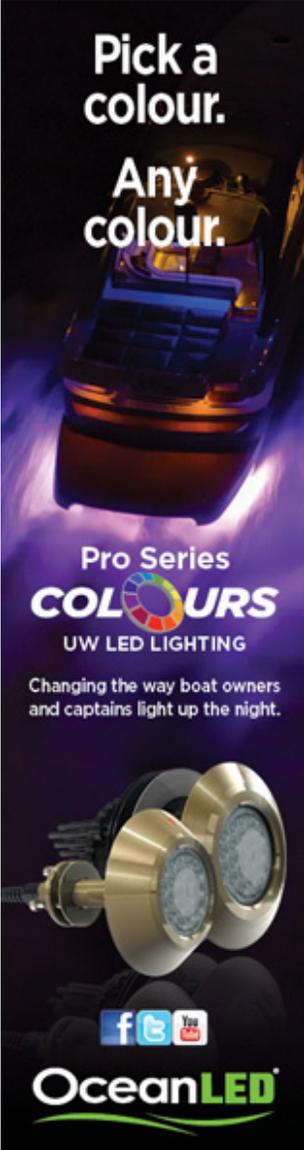
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Heading north from the Nautical Mile is Lake St. Clair Metropark, a sprawling recreation area with a marina and wells that can handle boats up to 40 feet. The park has a swimming pool and beach, bike path, playground, par-3 golf course, nature center, and restored coastal marsh area that's a habitat for native birds, reptiles and amphibians.

Just beyond the Metropark the Clinton River joins Lake St. Clair. Near the river's mouth is Poor Man's Beach, a lovely sandy anchorage that is often host to AquaPalooza, the largest on-water concert held on Lake St. Clair and most likely in the entire region. Site sponsors include Colony Marine, Belle Maer Harbor and MacRay Harbor.

The river's winding path leads inland to the city of Mount Clemens, just a short, 9-mile cruise. According to Gerry Santoro, program manager, Land and Water Resources, Macomb County, "The Clinton River, also known as 'Boat Town,' offers a real maritime feel and escape from the urban setting. There are many, many business along the river."

Mount Clemens was established in 1818 by Christian Clemens. This riverfront community is one of the oldest cities in Michigan.

For nearly a century, Mount Clemens was known throughout the world as a health spa, with its numerous mineral springs and bathhouses. The last of the mineral baths closed in 1974, but the Bath City Bistro pays tribute to that aspect of the city's history while serving food, beverages and feather bowling, a Belgian sport played on an indoor alley.

Beginning in 1880 and for two decades after World War I, there were 10 major rose growers in the area, giving Mount Clemens the distinction of being "The Rose Capital of the United States."

Mount Clemens also became home to the Hacker Boat Company in 1920, when its founder, John Hacker, moved the company's home base from Detroit. Hacker is widely considered the father of the modern American runabout. The company rebounded from the Depression with its popular "Utility" Hacker-Craft runabouts, and in 1935 the 17-foot Utility could be purchased for \$975. The company relocated to northern New York in the 1970s and continues to produce hand-built mahogany classics.

This historic downtown, with its brick-paved streets, offers an abundance of entertainment options. You will find dining, nightlife, outdoor cafés, shops and boutiques, as well as waterfront parks and boardwalks.

The city plays host to many events and festivals, including a riverfront concert series that runs throughout the summer. Visitors and residents alike also enjoy Mount Clemens' Anton Art Center, farmer's market, classic car show (June 7), art fair (June 7-8) and Independence Day Celebration (June 27).

Most attractions are within walking distance of the municipal marina, including this year's outdoor exhibition of a dozen reproductions of masterpieces from the Detroit Institute of Arts' "Inside/Out" program, running August through October. Check for details at downtownmountclemens.com.

Clinton River Cruises leave Mount Clemens and tour the Clinton River and Anchor Bay area of Lake St. Clair. Just south of Anchor Bay are two of Michigan's finest marinas: Belle Maer Harbor and MacRay Harbor.

Beyond Anchor Bay, well, as Simmons says, "One of the wonderful things about

Lake St. Clair is that everything is close. The ports are much closer to each other and easier to get to than you'll find elsewhere on the Great Lakes."

And that's something boaters on Lake St. Clair can take to heart.

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