

# Travel

PARKS

## Sand and steel mills



Scaling the sand on the 3 Dune Challenge inside Indiana Dunes State Park. Photos by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

**Exploring:** America's newest national park is sandwiched between symbols of the country's industrial might

Susan Glaser [sglaser@plaind.com](mailto:sglaser@plaind.com)

PORTER, INDIANA — From high atop Mount Baldy, I look right and see a power plant. To my left, a massive U.S. Steel plant rises above the sand. And across Lake Michigan, I can just make out the skyline of Chicago.

I'm surrounded by the nation's newest national park — 15,000 acres of natural wonder sandwiched between symbols of this country's industrial might. It's an odd juxtaposition, but one that strikes me as uniquely American.

Nearly everything that defines our country is within eyeshot: Gorgeous natural lands, industrial grit, urban sprawl. Indiana Dunes National Park, the nation's 61st national park, was established by Congress early this year, a renaming of Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, which was created in 1966 along the southern shore of Lake Michigan.

The same piece of legislation that created the lakeshore in the 1960s also created the Port of Indiana, guaranteeing an industrial presence in the region for decades to come.

The struggle between nature and industry on this property, however, goes back much further, to the early 1900s when a national park on this land was first proposed.

Industry won that battle — U.S. Steel's still-operating Gary Works plant opened in 1908, and was for years the largest steel-making factory in the world.

But fast forward more than 100 years, and nature is staging a comeback.

Today there are more than 50 miles of hiking trails within the national park, 15 miles of undeveloped lakefront, 1400 kinds of plants, 350 species of birds.

And the power plant, now operated by Northern Indiana Public Service Co., will be shut down in the next decade, perhaps opening additional land to protection.

The story here is not unlike the tale of Northeast Ohio's Cuyahoga Valley National Park, another urban park that, over decades, has sought to reclaim nature from an industrial past.

SEE DUNES, K2

**Accommodations:** Staying overnight in a train car near Indiana Dunes National Park

Susan Glaser [sglaser@plaind.com](mailto:sglaser@plaind.com)

CHESTERTON, INDIANA — The complimentary ear plugs next to the bed are a clue: This might not be the quietest night you'll spend away from home.

Quiet, however, isn't what most folks are after when they check into Riley's Railhouse Bed & Breakfast, located just a few miles south of Indiana Dunes National Park.

They're usually coming for the trains — lots and lots of trains — which pass by the train station-turned-inn an average of 86 times a day, says Richard Riley, who runs Riley's Railhouse with his wife, Annmarie.

The inn is located just a few dozen feet from Norfolk Southern Railway's busy Chicago Line.

The couple opened the inn in 2010, after three years of renovating the former New York Central Railroad freight station, built in 1914 and closed in 1958. Among the guestrooms here: two in the station and two more in a converted boxcar behind the brick building.

In addition, Riley has two train cars he is converting into guestrooms — one, which Riley describes as a honeymoon suite, should be ready this fall; and the other, a 100-year-old caboose, which will take longer to restore.

All are (or will be) outfitted with plenty of creature comforts: queen beds, full plumbing, air conditioning, televisions — even heated floors in the bathroom for cold-weather visitors.

"Most rail fans would sleep on a bed of nails and be happy," said Riley, a rail fan himself, who does much of the restoration work. "We try to make it comfortable for their long-suffering spouses."

He added, "We can't add rooms fast enough. We get busier every year."

Among the reasons why: Chesterton, where three rail lines converge, is considered one of the 10 busiest and best spots for train-watching in the country, according to Riley.

SEE RAILCAR, K2



The southern shoreline of Lake Michigan, at Indiana Dunes National Park. Lake Michigan is experiencing record high water levels in 2019, causing some beach erosion. Notice U.S. Steel's Gary Works plant in the background.



This century-old caboose is being converted into an overnight room at Riley's Railhouse, a bed and breakfast in Chesterton.

### EUROPE

#### Falling in love with rail passes

In 2019, Europe's rail passes underwent some sweeping changes that have made them an affordable option again, and much less confusing to buy — and made me nostalgic for their glory days. **K3**

### TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

#### Flight compensation

A reader wonders if he deserves compensation for a flight from Barcelona to Banjul, Gambia, on Vueling Airlines that was initially delayed, then delayed further, and then delayed again and finally canceled. **K3**

### RENO, NEVADA

#### City is upping its game

The "Biggest Little City in the World" is upping its efforts to diversify beyond gambling and a reputation as the world's divorce capital with a growing hub for artists and outdoor enthusiasts. **K4**



Watching the sunset on the southern shore of Lake Michigan within Indiana Dunes National Park. Check out the Chicago skyline in the distance. Photos by Susan Glaser, *The Plain Dealer*



Top, To prevent damage to the dunes, wooden stairs are used on some of the dunes inside Indiana Dunes State Park. Above, Signs encourage visitors to stay on the trails through the park.

## Dunes: Hiking options aplenty inside the park

FROM K1

Indiana Dunes has numerous ecological features that Cuyahoga Valley doesn't — miles of gorgeous Lake Michigan shoreline and giant mounds of sand that are fun to explore.

Formed thousands of years ago from the debris of melting glaciers, the dunes here are solid sand, unlike the perch dunes of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore in northern Michigan, with sand blown atop a rocky base.

"It has been a sand factory here for 10,000 years," said Rafi Wilkinson, a National Park Service ranger at Indiana Dunes. "Everywhere you go, sand is under us." But I didn't take his word for it — I set out to see for myself.

### EXPLORING THE DUNES

After stopping at the park visitors center to pick up maps, my husband and I headed to the West Beach area for our first hike, along the West Beach Trail and the adjoining Dune Succession Trail, together about 2 miles across a mostly sandy path.

A word about hiking in the sand: It's difficult, slow and a terrific workout for your legs.

This hike is a great introduction to the biodiversity of the area. We were amazed to see prickly pear cacti — cactus in Indiana — growing here.

The section of the trail farthest from the lakefront is largely flat, due to the mining of sand in this region a century ago. Sand was shipped via railroad to nearby glass factories, another industry that played a role in the ecological degradation of the area.

From the flat sand, we traveled up and down through mature grandfather dunes, covered in oak and hickory forest. The trail demonstrates how plant communities develop and become more complex over time, a scientific process called succession that was pioneered here more than a century ago.

When trail's northern section merged with the lakeshore, I shed my tennis shoes for a terrific antidote to overheated feet.

This is the only life-guarded stretch of sand within the national park (and the only section of the national park with an admission fee, \$6 per car). Life guards closed the area for swimming shortly after we arrived because of large waves and rip tides.

### STATE PARK CAME FIRST

For our second hike, we headed into Indiana Dunes State Park, a 2,200-acre park that is completely surrounded by the national park. A century ago, when the federal government was debating whether to turn the land into a national park, Indiana took action and created the state park in 1925.

The highest dunes in the area are here — including a three-dune triumvirate of Mount Jackson (176 feet), Mount Holden (184 feet) and Mount Tom (192 feet). The

### If you go: Indiana Dunes National Park

**Where:** The park stretches across three counties, just north of the Indiana Turnpike, an easy 4.5-hour drive from Cleveland. Take the Ohio and Indiana turnpikes west to exit 31 (Indiana 49) and head north. The visitor center is at 1215 Indiana 49.

**When:** The park is open year round. Visitor center hours are 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. through Labor Day, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Labor Day through Memorial Day. The park service sponsors numerous special events and activities every week, including tours of Mount Baldy. For a schedule: [nps.gov/indu/planyourvisit/calendar.htm](http://nps.gov/indu/planyourvisit/calendar.htm)

**Where to stay:** Both the national park and Indiana Dunes State Park have campgrounds for tent and RV camping. Information: [nps.gov/indu/planyourvisit/campgrounds.htm](http://nps.gov/indu/planyourvisit/campgrounds.htm) and [tinyurl.com/dunescamping](http://tinyurl.com/dunescamping). Other options include Riley's Railhouse in Chesterton (see related story) and At Home in the Woods, a bed and breakfast with a national park theme, about 8 miles south of the park (see [athomeinthewoodsbb.com](http://athomeinthewoodsbb.com)).

**Where to eat:** Chesterton has the most dining options, including Octave Grill, for outstanding gourmet burgers (105 S. Calumet Road, [octavegrill.com](http://octavegrill.com)); Dog Days Ice Cream Parlor, for a terrific post-hike treat (123 S. Calumet Road, [dogdaysicecream.com](http://dogdaysicecream.com)) and the Port Drive-In, a long-time local favorite (419 N. Calumet Road, [theportdrivein.net](http://theportdrivein.net)).

**Information:** [indianadunes.com](http://indianadunes.com), [nps.gov/indu](http://nps.gov/indu)

three comprise what's known as the 3 Dune Challenge, a 1.5-mile loop trail that takes you to the top of each and will leave you panting by the end.

Visitors who conquer the challenge can reward themselves with a 3-Dunes T-shirt at the visitor center, or pick up a free sticker.

There's a lovely beach at this park, too, also guarded; admission to the state park is \$12.

### Other areas to explore:

- Cowles Bog Trail, a 4.5-mile rugged hike, where University of Chicago scientist Henry Cowles did some of his seminal research in plant ecology and succession back in the late 1800s.
- Chellberg Farm and Bailly Homestead, including the residence of early Swedish immigrants, plus a working farm with cows, goats, chickens and pigs.

- Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk, new in 2008, a brownfield reclamation site on land formerly polluted by U.S. Steel. It's a terrific spot to see the sun set.

And don't miss the five Century of Progress Homes, located along Lakefront Drive in the eastern section of the park. Though built nearly a century ago for the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago, these houses are still look like they belong in the future.

Developer Robert Bartlett brought them to Indiana by barge after the fair to be part of Beverly Shores, a resort community he was developing along the lakefront. The National Park Service owns them now, but has turned over their upkeep to Indiana Landmarks, which signed several long-term leases with occupants who live in and care for the properties.

They're open to the public once a year, in late September. Tickets to this year's event are already sold out, but the houses are easily admired from the street.

The futuristic dodecagon (12 sided) House of Tomorrow has proved difficult to find a caretaker for, perhaps because of the estimated \$3 million price tag for its restoration. If you're interested: [indianlandmarks.org/about/house-of-tomorrow/house-of-tomorrow-preliminary-rfp-intro/](http://indianlandmarks.org/about/house-of-tomorrow/house-of-tomorrow-preliminary-rfp-intro/).

### EXPLORING MOUNT BALDY

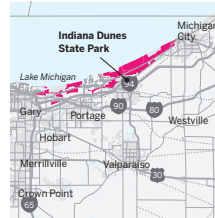
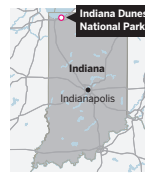
Perhaps the park's most famous landmark is located just east of the Century of Progress Homes: a 125-foot high dune called Mount Baldy, named for its sandy façade, largely devoid of vegetation.

The dune was open to public climbers until 2013, when a freak accident occurred: a 6-year-old boy, climbing the dune with his family, disappeared into the sand without warning. He survived, but it took rescue crews three and a half hours to get him out.

Scientists were initially baffled by the incident, but ultimately concluded that

### Indiana Dunes National Park

Indiana Dunes National Park runs for nearly 25 miles along the southern shore of Lake Michigan and contains about 15,000 acres. Indiana Dunes State Park is within the boundaries of the national park.



Chris Boehke, *Advance Local*

oak trees buried by the dune had created previously undetected cavities inside. After the accident, the dune was closed to the public. It has since reopened to visitors, but only on ranger-escorted tours and open houses.

This dune, more than most, is rapidly evolving, moving inland at a rate of 5 to 10 feet a year, pushed south by wind and storms, as well as breakwalls and other human factors. In a few years, the parking lot will likely be buried, predicted ranger Wilkinson.

"My favorite vantage point in the whole park is up here," said Wilkinson, who escorted me to the top.

To the east, just beyond the park limits: the NIPSCO power plant, scheduled to close in 2028. To the west: the Port of Indiana, U.S. Steel and Arcelor Mittal plants.

The manmade intrusions made me even more grateful for what adjoined them. An endless expanse of Lake Michigan, deep blue and inviting, stretched before me, surrounded mounds and mounds of glorious sand, ready to explore.

## Railcar: All aboard for rest

FROM K1

In addition, the town itself is worth a visit, an hour from Chicago, close to Indiana Dunes National Park, with numerous restaurants and shops, and a weekly European Market set up downtown every Saturday, May through October.

Despite its many charms, Chesterton, population 13,500, isn't the primary draw for guests to Riley's Railhouse. They come for the trains. As for the noise? Riley, a retired lawyer, said he barely notices it anymore. "What noise?"

The breakfast table, left, at Riley's Railhouse. Susan Glaser, *The Plain Dealer*



### If you go

**Riley's Railhouse Bed and Breakfast**  
**Where:** 123 N. Fourth St., Chesterton, Indiana, about 300 miles from Cleveland.

**How much:** The inn has four overnight rooms, two in the former train station and two in a boxcar behind the station. Rates start at \$140 per night and include a full breakfast.

**Information:** [rileysrailhouse.com](http://rileysrailhouse.com), 219-395-9999