

Life on vacation

A weekly look at the second-home market

Benzie County, Mich.

Beachfront beauty in the Midwest

By Larry Olmsted
Special for USA TODAY

With vast sandy beaches, pristine lakes, quaint villages, some of the nation's best golf, big-time skiing and snowmobiling, northwest Michigan has long been one of the Midwest's best-kept secrets — except for Midwesterners themselves and a few others.

"We have so much to offer in such a concentrated region," says Suzy Voltz, president of Century 21 Sleeping Bear Realty. "Families from southern Michigan who have been coming to their lakefront cottages on weekends for generations, folks from Florida who spend the whole summer playing golf at Crystal Mountain resort. The towns, resorts and lakes are all so different, but all so close."

Because the east side of Lake Michigan has a granite-based geology, its beaches are sandy, unlike the crushed-seashell beaches on much of the Great Lakes.

This has put towns like Frankfort on the tourism map. Frankfort, which comes alive in summer, sits just south of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, a 35-mile expanse of sand dunes. The coastal resort town is also home to Crystal Downs, a classic Alister MacKenzie-designed private golf course that is the consensus best in the Midwest.

But public golf here is also good. Arcadia Bluffs, on the shore of Lake Michigan, is considered one of the best public and British Isles-style links courses in the nation. Then there is the immensely popular 36-hole Crystal Mountain.

Crystal Mountain began as a community ski resort in 1956. Today, it is a four-season resort with a ski area, two golf courses, water park, retail and dining village, tennis, fitness center, spa, sculpture garden with nature trails, and more than 30 miles of cross-country skiing and mountain-biking trails. Second-home options include town houses, single-family houses, cottages and fractional ownership.

Frankfort and Crystal Mountain, 16 miles apart, are both in Benzie County. Nearby are picturesque towns such as Elberta and Beulah. The county has more than 60 miles of Great Lakes coastline, 57 other lakes, and the Betsie and Platte Rivers, popular with anglers, canoeists and kayakers, as well as a 22-mile bikeway and more than 135 miles of snowmobile trails.



Best for

Year-round weekend escapes

Claim to fame

Great golf courses

Don't miss

The Dune Climb in Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, a unique trek up a huge sand dune, then running (or rolling) down.

Getting there

Airport in Traverse City, Mich., is less than half an hour away.

Tourism information

800-882-5801; visitbenzie.com



By Scott Gest

Tranquility on the shores of Lake Michigan: The waterfront streets of Frankfort teem with galleries, boutiques and fine dining. Nearby beaches are sandy, which is unusual for the Great Lakes.

A look at three Benzie County neighborhoods

- ▶ **Crystal Mountain.** The region's major full-service resort is family-owned and offers skiing, golf, biking, hiking, children's activities as well as restaurants, shops and a spa. The four main neighborhoods are at the base of the ski resort, the top of the mountain, in the woods and around the golf lodge. All neighborhoods have detached houses, and some include alternatives such as condos and fractional ownership units. Most condo owners put their units in the rental pool to generate income. Lots start at about \$76,000 and homes about \$220,000.
- ▶ **Frankfort.** The county's largest lakefront town of 1,500 offers a festive, summer-resort atmosphere. Most houses have water views and are a short walk to the beach and to shops and restaurants. "You can still find something on a side street for \$150,000," real estate agent Suzy Voltz says. "Those homes go up to about \$500,000. Then there are a few right on the lake itself, and they go for \$600,000 to \$800,000."
- ▶ **Crystal Lake/Beulah.** Just a mile inland from Lake Michigan, the deep, clear glacial lake with a sandy bottom offers one of the most desirable second-home locales. Cottages and houses with private lake frontage fetch \$500,000 to \$1 million; less expensive houses are set on the surrounding steep hills, offering water views and shore access. The small town of Beulah sits at the eastern end of the lake.



By Suzy Voltz, Century 21 Sleeping Bear Realty

On the market: Cottage-style house on Lake Michigan's Betsie Bay in Frankfort has 100 feet of private shoreline.

Midrange price: \$429,000

- ▶ **Bedrooms:** 2
- ▶ **Bathrooms:** 2
- ▶ **Size:** 1,085 square feet
- ▶ **Features:** Recently renovated bathrooms, new kitchen appliances, new furnace and new roof. Fireplace, deck and dock.



By Gene Turner, Crystal Mountain

On the market: Crystal Mountain resort town house is at the top of the ski resort's main lift.

Midrange/low price: \$399,900

- ▶ **Bedrooms:** 3
- ▶ **Bathrooms:** 3
- ▶ **Size:** 2,195 square feet
- ▶ **Features:** Fully furnished. Master bedroom suite with double whirlpool, gas fireplace on main level, lower-level game room, private deck, shared pool and picnic pavilion in front yard. Views over Betsie River Valley. Can be placed in the resort's rental pool. Sale includes family ski membership.