

ESSAY

The big bus ride

BY KAY MACDONALD

Special to the Record-Eagle

It might seem that Northern Michigan has so many more things to do than the area we moved from just because we have more time to enjoy them in retirement. But I don't think so.

I believe this is very special country with no end to the entertainment. And much of it is free or very inexpensive.

There are so many lakes and rivers for fishing, swimming, boating. There's kite flying on the white sand, beach volleyball, bonfires beside the water at night with hot dogs and beer.

Every little town has its festival. Asparagus. Trout. Victorian. Dulcimer. Flea Roast. You name it, there's a celebration of it with craft shows, parades, food booths and picnic grounds, flea markets, great people watching.

One of the best days I've spent here cost one dollar (plus lunch). The less expensive fun is, the more I enjoy it. And this turned out to be a very special day.

My old friend Margaret came from southern Michigan to spend a few days. Along with a young friend of mine, we were determined to show Margaret some fun. She's a comical lady, late 70s maybe, round as a beach ball with springy red curls, bright blue eyes and pink cheeks and very red lips, courtesy of Estee Lauder. She always wears a huge floppy straw hat tied under her chin, enormous red sunglasses, and carries a giant flowered beach bag. She walks very slowly on tiny feet and giggles a lot.

That day we took her to Ludington where a red double decker bus was making the 15-mile trip to Pentwater several times a day for a dollar ticket. We got on with a noisy, boisterous crowd and fought our way to the top deck, where we could scream and wave our arms in the sun with the other tourists. It was silly and childish and wonderful fun.

The drive to Pentwater along Lake Michigan has beautiful views of the water and Victorian summer homes and wooded hills. The road winds and turns under overhanging trees that we ducked from in alarm. The driver managed the cumbersome bus with

enough daring and speed to suit the giddy crowd.

Pentwater is a charming village that lies along the Pentwater River, Pentwater Lake and Lake Michigan. The main street is lined with unique shops and the back streets with homes that beg

you to live there — if you could afford to. We walked and gawked all day, seeing charming cottages with pretty gardens and porches full of comfortable chairs. Finally we were worn out and poor Margaret's tiny feet were aching, her round face red despite the silly sun hat.

We sought refuge in a restaurant with a view of the water and went in with the best intentions of getting a late lunch. We may have eaten something. I don't remember for sure. But I do know we thought the great day deserved a celebratory cocktail and so we had two apiece. When we came out the day was darkening and we realized we'd stayed too long at the fair.

The crowds were gone. Our bus, thankfully, was parked across the street, though everyone but us had taken an earlier one back. The driver, this time with his little girl, was waiting for us patiently. We got on, wobbling a bit, and plunked down, this time on the lower level. Margaret took off her crazy hat and her curls flew up and bobbed around. She started to sing, "I'll cry if I wanna, cry if I wanna, yeah, yeah, yeah" in a high quavery voice and the driver looked around in alarm. The little girl stood in the aisle and stared at us. It was a day for hilarity. We all began to sing. Then the driver joined in as he drove out of town.

There were just the five of us on the bus and we were all acting like kids as we sang at the top of our voices, old songs in Margaret's repertoire. The little girl began to whirl and stamp her feet and I thought the red bus must be hopping and swaying and we laughed harder.

Silly. All of it was silly. But for a dollar bus ride (plus the price of a liquid lunch) we had a day we'll all remember.

Kay MacDonald is a freelance writer who lives in Irons.

