

**November 16, 2007**

HAVENS | INDIANA DUNES

## An Exclusive Beachfront, Far From the Coast

By **EUGENE L. MEYER**

THE [Indiana](#) Dunes, just 40 miles southeast of [Chicago](#), rise to great heights along the Lake Michigan shore, looking like a swatch of [Cape Cod](#) sneaked into the Midwest. A legacy of the ice age, the Dunes lure second-home owners to quiet communities strung along the beachfront. Its promoters call the region Indiana's Crescent Coast, Casual Coast, Duneland, Dune Country, even the Lake Michigan Riviera. But the Dunes need no hype.

The shifting dunes, with their tenuous grasses and scrub brush, are complemented by wetlands and woodlands, encompassing the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and Indiana Dunes State Park. The settlements in between are largely exclusive enclaves with their own beach access and parking that's off limits to the general public.

That makes the 37 miles of [beaches](#) and dunes mainly a private preserve for residents, some of whom commute by car or rail to city jobs, or escape to this unexpected haven by the shore for weekends year round.

Kurt Winkle, 50, a professor of urban planning, and his partner, Ken Martin, 49, marketing director for a food company, live in downtown Chicago but spend weekends at their [Ogden](#) Dunes home, a French chalet-style house built in 1934. They bought it in 1999 for \$125,000. The house is on [Ski](#) Hill Road, where there was once an actual ski jump.

Sandy Vardal, 51, who lives in the Chicago suburb of Joliet, is a self-described weekend warrior. With her sister, she owns a second home in Sheridan Beach, a working-class community where houses nestle tightly together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. "You're on top of your neighbors," she said. "You know them because you can't help it."

She identifies her location by a bus stop number (Stop 5). Though the buses ceased running long ago, the markers remain as signposts in several of the beach towns.

Then there are the dunes and the beach itself, wedged between the steel mills of Gary to the west and the power-plant stacks of [Michigan](#) City to the east. You can look past them to stunning sunsets and the

looming Chicago skyline. The tallest dune, Mount Baldy, is 126 feet high. It is known to shift location with the winds, and with moisture, quartz crystals, pressure and friction, the dunes are said to sometimes sing.

This once-pristine setting almost vanished under pressure from heavy industry. But conservationists in the 1960s, led by Paul H. Douglas, a former [United States](#) senator from [Illinois](#), mobilized, fought and won.

As a result, Congress created the National Lakeshore in 1966, now more than 15,000 acres, supplementing the 2,182-acre state park established in 1925.

## The Scene

Second-home owners in Duneland spend a lot of time entertaining each other. One recent evening, Mr. Winkle and Mr. Martin were host to another couple considering a second home in the Indiana Dunes, and to their neighbors Don Bergh and Anne Weaver. Mr. Bergh, Ms. Weaver and their family live on the North Side of Chicago, but spend weekends in Ogden Dunes.

Typically, Mr. Bergh said, he takes the train out from the city Thursdays, works from Ogden Dunes on Fridays, then returns to Chicago after the weekend. It's a 10-minute walk from the Ogden Dunes train station to his second home, and another 10-minute walk to the beach. Mr. Bergh, a graphic designer, said he and his wife discovered the area 10 years ago while [hiking](#); they bought their house, built in 1935, four years ago for just over \$325,000.

Mr. Winkle and Mr. Martin also began their second-home search in Michigan "We ran into five different people we knew," Mr. Winkle said. "It was like being in Chicago. This is different."

The theme of their dinner party was "duos." Each couple brought two different dishes using similar ingredients but in different recipes. For those who prefer to eat out, nearby Chesterton and Michigan City offer restaurants, shops and other commercial attractions.

Four miles from the lakeshore, Chesterton has that Rockwellian look of Midwestern innocence. But behind the facade are an increasing number of designer-clothing shops and antiques stores, complemented by a couple of pleasant Italian restaurants. Friday nights in Centennial Park, there are band concerts and outdoor movies. On Saturdays from the end of May and into the fall, some 70 vendors set up stalls by the park for what's billed as Chesterton's European Market.

Michigan City, farther east, is more working class. Its floating Blue Chip Casino Hotel and Lighthouse Place Premium Outlets are big draws. Both are open on Sundays, which turns the old city center into a ghost town. And if there was any doubt that the Indiana Dunes belong to Chicago, consider that its clocks are in synch with the Second City. Both are on Central Time, while most of Indiana is not.

Indiana Dunes communities are in Lake, LaPorte, and Porter counties, and it's easy to think the beach towns just blend together. But each one is distinctive, from Miller Beach, with its smaller, older homes on the west, to Michiana Shores, abutting the state line, on the east. Beverly Shores has five houses now under restoration that were moved there by boat from the 1933 Century of Progress Chicago World's Fair. Dune Acres is considered the most expensive town.

### Pros

The Indiana Dunes are, above all, accessible from Chicago. They offer solitude and a sense of detachment from the urban mainstream, but are just a few minutes from shops and restaurants. There isn't much traffic, though the Dunes are near Interstate 94 and United States Route 12.

### Cons

Unless you own property or know someone who does, visiting the Dunes can be challenging. Public parking spaces are limited. In some places there are sticker-only community lots with vacant spaces adjoining the few taken public spots. In addition, the smokestacks of the steel mills and the power plant remain eyesores.

### The Real Estate Market

"It's still pretty cheap here," said Debbie Lightfoot, a Chesterton real estate agent. "Prices are not off the charts. It's our little piece of heaven tucked away here in northwestern Indiana." Prices range from under \$300,000 to well over \$1 million. Sales have been slow, though, real estate agents say, and prices are dropping. "It's definitely a buyer's market," Mrs. Lightfoot said.

The nine Dunes communities are well established, dating back to the 1920s and earlier. Homes are sometimes passed down through families, and there isn't much new construction.

One new community under development in the western section, Marina Shores, isn't on the lake but is connected by an inlet. A dozen condos and four cottages have been built so far. Condo prices range from \$225,000 to \$500,000 and cottages start at around \$400,000.

Beachwalk Resort Community, in Sheridan Beach, is a cluster of 150 neo-Victorian-style houses for sale and rent. Sale prices range from \$330,000 to \$1.4 million.

### LAY OF THE LAND

POPULATION 38,113 people live in the region that encompasses the Dunes communities, according to the [Census Bureau](#).

**SIZE** 37 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline that runs through [Indiana](#) from [Illinois](#) to the Michigan state line.

**WHO'S BUYING** Largely professionals, including couples and families, from the [Chicago](#) area, particularly from the South Side neighborhoods and suburbs.

**GETTING THERE** The Indiana Dunes are easily accessible from Chicago, especially from the South Side, via Interstate 94 or the South Shore Line railway. For those flying, the best way in is from the South Bend Regional Airport by way of O'Hare International Airport in Chicago.

**WHILE YOU'RE LOOKING** The Duneland Beach Inn (3311 Pottawattamie Trail, [Michigan](#) City; 219-874-7729; [www.dunelandbeachinn.com](http://www.dunelandbeachinn.com)) has nine rooms. Nightly rates range from \$129 to \$169 and include a full breakfast.

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