

# HIDDEN GEM

*Best known for its ample dockage, breathtaking sunsets and abundance of blueberries, the tiny community of SOUTH HAVEN, MICHIGAN is a boater's paradise just waiting to be discovered.*

BY HEATHER STEINBERGER

## “WE’RE ALMOST THERE,” VIC CALLED FROM THE HELM.

Cozied into *Secret Formula’s* dining lounge with my notes and a Lake Michigan cruising guide, I peeked out one of the starboard portlights to see South Haven’s 1903 South Pierhead Light standing sentinel off our bow. This bright-red cylindrical lighthouse, boasting one of just four remaining original catwalks in the State of Michigan, marked the entrance to the Black River and our port-of-call for the night.

I was on a two-day harbor-hopping cruise with Vic Spellberg of Formula Boats and Brigg Johnston of Johnsburg, Illinois-based Bald Knob Marina aboard a Formula 350 Sun Sport. After casting off the docklines in Michigan City, Indiana, and pointing our nose toward Grand Haven, Michigan, this Wisconsin cruiser was eager to see the Gold Coast communities about which I’d heard for years—storybook-sounding places like Saugatuck, St. Joseph and Lake Macatawa.

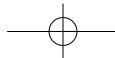
South Haven? I had to admit, the name didn’t conjure an image for me. But I realized, as I stepped through the companionway hatch and perched next to Vic at the helm, that my lack of preconceived notions was proving to be quite exciting. It’s always a thrill to explore a new port. And when that port is a blank slate, I find I can’t wait to fill in the color!

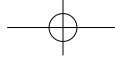
### BOATER HAVEN

As we motored along the short channel and entered the Black River, it was easy to see why South Haven would be designated a Harbor of Refuge. You couldn’t tailor a better spot for a boater to lay low when Lake Michigan kicks up a fuss. The city’s harbor lies just minutes from open water, yet the river’s dog-leg ensures that every dock is well protected from seas that might be thundering against nearby beaches.

Then there’s the fact that the South Haven is literally overrun with recreational marina facilities. The city owns and operates four—Southside, Northside, Museum and Black River Park—with a total of 229 slips for seasonal and transient boaters; when you incorporate the private marinas operating in the area, that number jumps to more than 1,250.

We pulled into the 40-slip Southside Marina, located to starboard downriver from the South Haven Yacht Club. Just 15 years old and easily recognizable with its red railings and trim cupola-adorned marina building, the facility has slips from 30 to 60 feet as well as broadside dockage, and all slips feature 30-amp electric, with 50-amp slips available. Other amenities include restrooms, showers, laundry facilities and picnic areas.





“We take pride in our facilities,” said Robin Abshire, marina manager. “I also think it makes a difference when you have a female marina manager; we pay attention to the details.”

Boaters are free to hail the marina on channel 9 to book a slip for the night or the weekend, but advance reservations are recommended, particularly during the busy summer season.

“Many of our slips are seasonal, especially at the Northside Marina, so we do suggest that people call in advance,” Abshire advised. “We make room for transients based on the float plans of our seasonal slip-holders.”

For a \$7 launch fee, trailer boaters can take advantage of the 10 ramps at the city’s Black River Park Marina, which also has showers, restrooms, picnic areas and plenty of parking.

As we secured *Secret Formula’s* docklines, I couldn’t help noticing I was surrounded by every imaginable type of recreational boat, from power cruisers, sportfishermen and runabouts, to aluminum fishing boats and sailboats. They were everywhere—in the slips alongside, at the Northside Marina across the way and plying the channel in between.

“South Haven is considered a major recreational port,” said Mayor Bob Burr, who started visiting the city in 1978 and became a full-time resident in 1985. He owns a 30-foot Sea Ray and commented that he was originally drawn to South Haven for the salmon fishing. “We have an excellent infrastructure (and) accom-

modate boating enthusiasts from around the region and surrounding states.”

According to Abshire, boaters descend on the city in two groups. The first are the Loopers, who make South Haven a port-of-call in the early spring and late fall. The second are the seasonal enthusiasts who make the city their destination for a weekend, a week or even longer.

In a nutshell, this is a boater’s haven.

## CATSKILLS OF THE MIDWEST

Of course, like so many of its Great Lakes counterparts, South Haven did have a commercial past. When the first settlers arrived in the mid-19th century, they entered the lumber trade, loading harvested timber onto schooners and steamboats and shipping it to growing cities such as Milwaukee and Chicago.

Passenger and freight vessels routinely called at this port city, officially founded in 1869. As the land cleared, fruit farmers moved in, growing apples, peaches and blueberries in the favorable lake microclimate.

South Haven truly boomed with agricultural development. By the early 20th century, it was home to an opera house, an amusement park, a casino, several theaters and many highly regarded resorts. Some of these, such as Mendelson’s Atlantic Hotel and Fidelman’s Resort, became nationally known. Together with fellow resort

establishments The Oakland, The Kenilworth, Baron’s Resort, Samson’s Resort and Weinstein’s Resort, they ushered in the city’s famed “Catskills of the Midwest” era.

Many resort buildings still stand. Some provide upscale rentals, while others house businesses, condominiums and apartments.

After years of regular passenger and freight traffic in South Haven’s harbor, the last passenger steamboat departed in 1941. Commercial traffic dwindled after the 1960s. Enter the 1980s Riverfront Development Program and the recreational boaters.

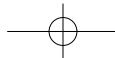
As Robin Abshire was quick to point out, many Great Lakes harbors are still commercial ports, with recreational facilities sandwiched in between industrial operations, and with amenities either scarce or scattered beyond easy reach.

“With a commercial harbor, you can be a long way from town,” she said. “Here, anywhere you can float in, you can walk everywhere.”

She wasn’t kidding. When *Formula’s* Scott Smith arrived in our “shore crew” van to take us to dinner, I felt a little embarrassed to ride in comfort to the downtown district—which, truly, was barely a hiccup from the marina. Oh well. We were tired from all that fresh air. Or so I kept telling myself.

## THE CITY’S BEATING HEART

In fact, so many appealing attractions lie at the city’s heart—with in a stone’s throw of transient dockage—you’ll have a hard time



The South Pierhead Light, erected in 1903, is a popular tourist destination and one of just four remaining original catwalks in the State of Michigan (top). Some of the Midwest's most beautiful beaches are in South Haven (bottom).

deciding how to spend your sojourn here.

The Michigan Maritime Museum, located on Dyckman Avenue at the bridge, is a must-visit. It features permanent and revolving exhibitions dedicated to the state's rich maritime history, as well as a teaching center for boatbuilding and related skills. Visitors will especially enjoy visiting *Evelyn S.*, an original fish tug that displays authentic equipment, tools, clothing and her distinctive Kahlenberg engine.

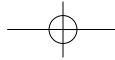
Also at the museum is the Tall Ship *Friends Good Will*, which provides an interactive venue to learn about Great Lakes ecology, environmental science, history, geography, economics, cultural heritage, astronomy and nautical skills. Docksides tours and passenger sails are available.

Once you've visited the museum's multiple-building campus, pick up a HarborWalk map and take a walking tour along the South Haven waterfront. You'll learn about the city's history of shipbuilding, commercial fishing, passenger steamships, commercial shipping, lumber, fruit and resorts. You'll also see the site of the former U.S. Life Saving Station and the museum's impressive Marialyce Canonie Great Lakes Research Library on Michigan Avenue, which is open to the public. The renovated two-and-a-half-story structure, built in 1872, once served as lightkeeper's quarters for the South Pierhead Light.

History buffs may want to stop at the Historical Association of South Haven, located on Hubbard Street in the old Hartman School building. Formed in 2002, the association seeks to collect and preserve local archives while actively promoting the city's history. It does this through revolving exhibits, which have included "Catskills of the Midwest," and special events such as "South Haven in Songs and Stories," Michigan History Day, the Sherman Dairy Ice Cream Social, and even vintage baseball games.

Next, check out the South Haven Center for the Arts, housed in a neoclassical 1906 Carnegie Library building on Phoenix Street. The center celebrates artists from near and far through exhibitions, special events, classes and art fairs, and its 2010 schedule includes the Annual Members' Show, titled "Reflections" (May 7 to





With an abundance of both municipal and privately-run marinas, South Haven is never short on dock space. More than 1,250 slips are available city-wide.



June 20); “Skin to Rims,” an exploration of human and auto/cycle body art (June 20 to August 8); and the India Exhibit (August 8 to September 26).

If you haven’t gotten your cultural fill, there’s still the Michigan Flywheelers Museum, which allows you to experience 19th century farm life. On display are an old-town jail, farm machinery shop and exhibit building; and a variety of antique flywheel engines and tractors.

And there’s Foundry Hall, a visual and performing arts center on Eagle Street.

Thanks to the efforts of these dedicated groups of historians, artists and enthusiasts, the energy in town is palpable. And mind-boggling as well, considering the city had a population of roughly 5,000 during the last census. South Haven’s cultural attractions ensure that this charming little 19th century city has a cosmopolitan vibe—and a deeply beating heart.

## GARDEN OF DELIGHTS

Don’t worry if you get museumed out. South Haven has plenty of delights left in store, and they’re all immediately at hand.

“All boaters must see a South Haven sunset off the lighthouse pier,” Mayor Burr advised enthusiastically.

That really is a must-do. Local Ottawa, Miami and Potawatomi tribes originally called this area Ni-Ko-Kong, or “beautiful sunsets.” I can vouch for the sunsets; they’re breathtaking.

“Visit the white-sand public beaches that are within just a short walking distance from the city’s transient dockage,” the mayor continued. “Shop our well-established Farmers’ Market on Wednesday

and Saturday mornings. And the fishing is awesome, with salmon, steelhead, lake trout and perch from May through August.”

Both Mayor Burr and Robin Abshire encouraged boaters to enjoy the festival season as well. Highlights are the annual Harborfest, held over Father’s Day weekend in June; the Fourth of July celebrations, with fireworks actually scheduled for July 5; and the National Blueberry Festival, held the second weekend in August. That’s not all. South Haven also hosts arts and crafts fairs, a Classic Boat Show, a Festival of Cars, a Garden Walk, and much more.

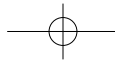
With so much happening during the summer season, walking is truly the best mode of transportation. Its walkability makes South Haven extraordinarily family-friendly—and Abshire has an extra tip for those cruising with kids in tow.

“I always let people know about our movie theater, where you can still get a ticket, popcorn and a drink for \$5.50,” she said. “And we have good ice cream!”

Indeed, the famous Sherman’s Ice Cream Company makes its home on Phoenix Street. Mayor Burr likewise reminded boaters not to miss sampling the sweet, frosty treat on a hot summer day.

Silent-sports aficionados also have much to look forward to. South Haven has an established trail system and is the western terminus of the Kal-Haven Trail, which runs 33½ miles to Kalamazoo. Kayak rentals are available in town; paddlers will want to take advantage of the Bangor/South Haven Heritage Water Trail, a canoe and kayak trail encompassing 20 miles of the South Branch of the Black River between Bangor and South Haven.

Trailer boaters may want to hop in their vehicles and investigate



Just a stone's throw from the waterfront lies the city center, where visitors can take full advantage of the many summer festivals and cultural attractions South Haven has to offer.

a trail of another sort, the Lake Michigan Shore Wine Trail. The area's light soils and microclimate don't just accommodate apples, peaches and blueberries; they have enabled Michigan's southwest region—from the state line north to Saugatuck, and from the shore east to Paw Paw—to become an official American Viticultural Area.

The countryside contains more than 10,000 acres of grapes, and 12 wineries feature award-winning wines in tasting rooms scattered across picturesque rolling hills. Michigan's wine-making tradition goes back three generations and is certainly worth exploring.

And when all that adventuring draws to a close, stroll the downtown district with its many shops, cafes and restaurants.

"Visit with our people," Mayor Burr insisted. "There's a reason we're here. Yes, we love South Haven, too!"

## FLAVORS AND COLORS OF SOUTH HAVEN

Scott parked the van, and he, Brigg, Vic and I made our way through the deepening evening toward Tello's Italian Bistro. This intimate restaurant makes its home in a building that was once part of the original Baron's Resort, and it's become well-known for its warm, inviting atmosphere, authentic entrees and extensive wine list.

It's amazing how much a day on the water takes out of a person. I savored every mouthful of my goat cheese and pine nut salad and delectable butternut squash ravioli.

Afterward, we set off on foot for après-dining cocktails at The Thirsty Perch Grille, which boasts a lively bar scene that's as much Florida Keys as it is Upper Midwest. Debating between a Bell's Oberon, one of my favorite Michigan brews, and a Guinness, I decided a pint of the dark stuff was the right way to end the day.

It was difficult to call it a night, with so many options for evening entertainment and live music in the immediate downtown area, but come morning, the water would call. So we made tracks for the local Hampton Inn.

Before turning out the light, I found myself making notes for a future trip to South Haven—from the tantalizing array of dining options to available lodging, which includes everything from luxurious inns and historic bed-and-breakfasts, to restored cabooses.

By 9 a.m., we were back at the Southside Marina, ready to fire up *Secret Formula's* twin 420-horsepower MerCruiser 496 Magnum engines and return to the open lake.

The wind had kicked up, as had the southwestern swell. Taking the helm, I brought *Secret Formula* onto plane, and we carved smoothly through the lumpy seas at cruising speed. I took one quick look back at the South Pierhead Light, now falling quickly astern.

It was a frustratingly short visit, but I was happy I'd had the



opportunity to see a Ni-Ko-Kong sunset, dine in an erstwhile Midwest Catskills resort and sip a proper pint in a lively local watering hole. And I definitely enjoyed my first taste of South Haven's history, cultural energy and staggering range of amenities and activities for visiting boaters.

"People from all walks have settled out here because of its appeal," Mayor Burr commented. "An unknown destination to many, when folks discover us, they keep coming back—year after year. South Haven is truly a treasure. Some say, a hidden gem."

He's so right.

South Haven is no longer an unknown destination to this cruiser. The blank slate is now awash in color, with plenty of room for more when I return. ⚓

## SOUTH HAVEN RESOURCES

**City of South Haven  
Municipal Marina**  
269-637-3171  
south-haven.com

**All Seasons Marine Inc.**  
269-637-3655  
allseasonsmarineinc.com

**City of South Haven, Michigan**  
south-haven.com

**Harbor Club South Haven**  
269-767-7485  
harborclubsh.com

**South Haven Area Chamber  
of Commerce**  
269-637-5171  
southhavenmi.com

**It Il Do Charters**  
269-214-0051  
itildocharters.com

**South Haven Online Guide**  
southhaven.com

**Shores of South Haven**  
269-637-8555  
shoresofsouthhaven.com

**1st Choice Marine Inc.**  
269-639-0727  
1stchoicemarine.com

**Woodland Harbor Marina**  
866-989-9359  
woodlandharbormarina.com