

A beached shipwreck is an eerie reminder of Lake Superior's strength and fury.



THIS PLACE MATTERS

# GHOSTS OF A GREAT LAKE

A museum in Upper Michigan pays tribute to the lives lost on the waters of Lake Superior. **BY MARIJA ANDRIC**

Some call it the Shipwreck Coast. Others call it the Graveyard of the Great Lakes. The waters along this 80-mile stretch of Michigan coastline between Grand Island and Whitefish Point have sunk hundreds of ships.

Edmund Fitzgerald, Cyprus and Vienna are just a few of the vessels lost beneath the waves, their names forever etched in maritime lore. Their wreckages lie in varying depths of Lake Superior, the largest of the Great Lakes.

Every summer, thousands of visitors come here to explore the wrecks and the breathtaking bluffs, including Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. People are attracted to the “human drama, the battle of man versus nature, and our age-old romance with the sea,” says Bruce Lynn, executive director of the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum in Paradise.

The museum is at the center of all this activity. It's a definite first stop for any visitor interested in the maritime history of Lake Superior.

In the 19th century, Munising, near Grand Island, was one of the busiest ports on Lake Superior and one of the few harbors where ships carrying passengers, iron ore, timber and other cargo could seek sanctuary from the lake's stormy seasonal fury.

“This part of Lake Superior is particularly treacherous thanks to a unique combination of geography and storm patterns,” Bruce says. “Storms build up over Canada and the Great Plains. Their strong winds blow uninterrupted over

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—BRUCE LYNN

SCOTT SCHILLER (3)

200 miles of open waters, building up enormous waves that drive ships into the coast or break them in half.” Fog, snow squalls, smoke from forest fires, traffic jams on the busy waters and human error add to sailing hazards here.

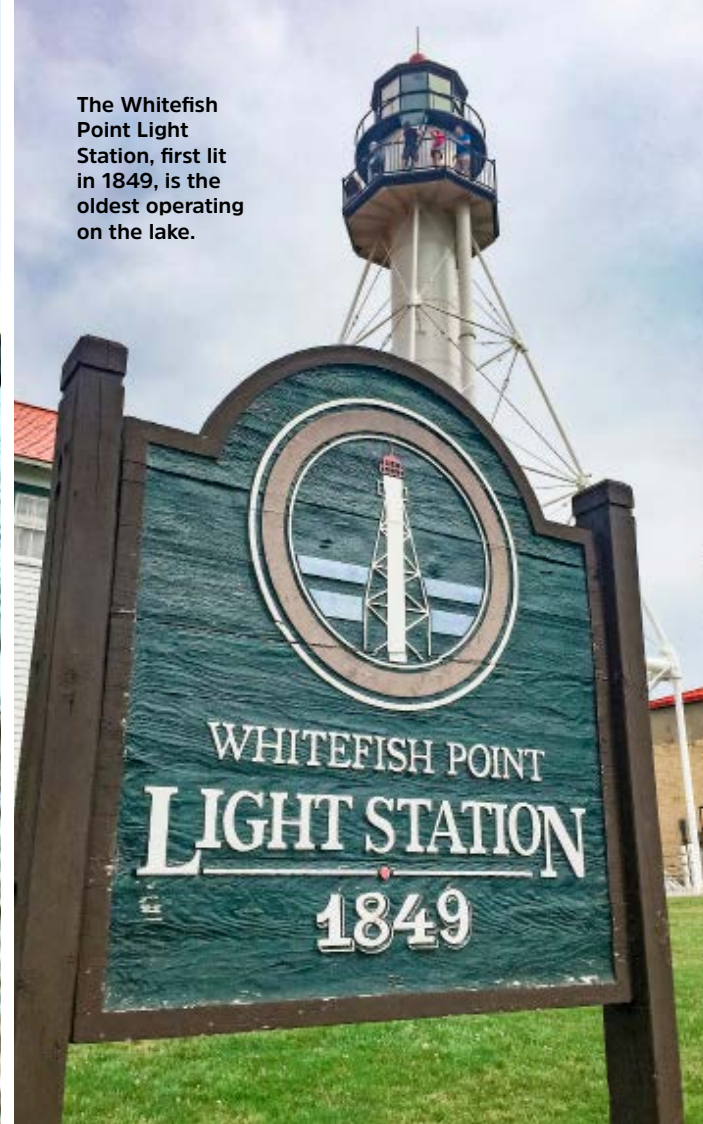
To the east, ships come in and out of Lake Superior through the locks at Sault Ste. Marie. All of them pass Whitefish Point. To help guide sailors through these dangerous waters, the Whitefish Point Light Station was established in 1849. It is the oldest lighthouse operating on the lake.

Still, the light didn't prevent every shipwreck. Many ships were lost after its creation, some 50 to 60 near Pictured Rocks alone. There are plenty of ways to get to these wreckages. Kayaking along the shore will take you to a few that

The 200-pound bronze bell of the Edmund Fitzgerald and a U.S. Navy diving helmet are on display at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum.

are sticking out of the water. In fact, at some shallow spots you can actually wade out. Scuba diving is an option for intrepid explorers seeking intact vessels at the bottom of the lake. But if you lack diving experience, you can sit back and relax in a glass-bottom boat as tour operators take you to protected sites to see wreckages underwater.

Right off Munising, the Alger Underwater Preserve is the final resting place of several historic shipwrecks, including the *Smith Moore* and the *Bermuda*. Visibility in these waters is ideal because the bottom is composed of sandstone and limestone, which resist weath-



The Whitefish Point Light Station, first lit in 1849, is the oldest operating on the lake.





ering. There are hardly any particles floating around to cloud the view.

Farther east along the rocky coast, the Whitefish Point Underwater Preserve covers an area known for heavy boat traffic and catastrophic storms. Several ships went down in these waters as their captains and crew tried to find safe harbor in Whitefish Bay.

Easily the best-known of all Lake Superior shipwrecks rests just north of Whitefish Point in Canadian waters. The *SS Edmund Fitzgerald* disappeared from radar sometime after 7 p.m. on Nov. 10, 1975. No distress call was ever sent. All of the 29 crew members were lost.

The massive ore carrier was the largest to sail Lake Superior, and the cause of its sinking is debated to this day. Gordon Lightfoot immortalized the tragedy in his song “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.”

The Fitz’s 200-pound bronze bell, salvaged from the bottom of the lake and restored, is on display at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum, which is run by the Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society. The group oversees several historic sites, including the Whitefish Point Light Station, the original U.S. Coast Guard Crews Quarters and the U.S. Weather Bureau Building.

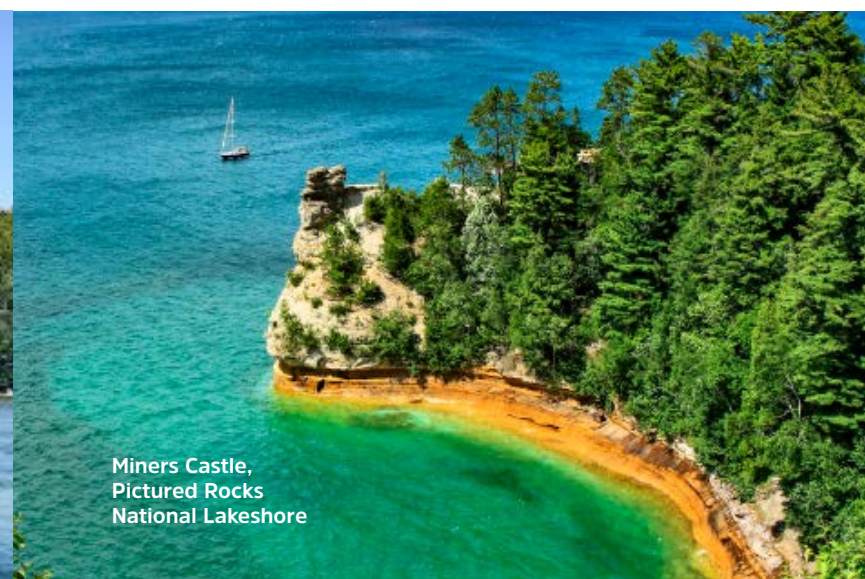
At the museum you can imagine, for a moment, what it must have been like to live on these shores in the 1800s. Here you can examine artifacts from the past, stroll the grounds and explore restored buildings, including a historical replica of the lighthouse keeper’s quarters.

Or climb to the top of the light where the keeper might have stood years ago, watching the horizon for sailors in distress. You can even spend a night in the crews quarters, where the Coast Guard waited for the call to serve. Though many lost their lives in these waters, they will never be forgotten. ☼

*Art Director Scott Schiller contributed to this story.*



East Channel Light  
on Grand Island



Miners Castle,  
Pictured Rocks  
National Lakeshore



A glass-bottom  
tour boat sails  
to a wreck.



U.S. Coast  
Guard Crews  
Quarters

## POINTS OF INTEREST

### 1. Grand Island National Recreation Area

Take the ferry and camp out beneath the stars, or trek to the Grand Island North Light. [grandislandup.com](http://grandislandup.com)

### 2. Glass Bottom Shipwreck Tours

View two shipwrecks and the East Channel Light on this two-hour narrated tour. [shipwrecktours.com](http://shipwrecktours.com)

### 3. Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore

Explore colorful sandstone cliffs, shorelines, maritime sites and more along Lake Superior. [nps.gov/piro](http://nps.gov/piro)

### 4. U.S. Coast Guard Crews Quarters

Reserve a room (April to November) in the original lifeboat station crews quarters built in 1923. [shipwreckmuseum.com](http://shipwreckmuseum.com)