

Fall Colors Driving Trip October 2016



Bob and Molly Hillery

This trip was planned as a “replacement” for the ten days lost on our September driving trip in the Northwest. We had cut short the earlier trip due to medical concerns (unfounded, as it turned out) so this trip through the Upper Midwest was put together to compensate.

We had visited this part of the country fifteen years ago in late September and recalled seeing some beautiful fall foliage in both the US and Canada. We were hopeful that we wouldn't be too late to catch the best of the colors and were pleased when things seemed to be a little late—at least in our home neighborhood.

As it turned out, we arrived at each destination at essentially the perfect time so we were treated to some spectacular scenery as we drove north and then west. Even on the return south and then east to home, most of the trees were still in beautiful color. So, our hastily assembled replacement trip turned out to be excellent, with beautiful weather and superb scenery.

Upper Midwest Fall Colors, October 2016

Monday October 10

We picked up a rental car shortly after 8am, returned to the house to load and then met Elizabeth, Colin and Cameron at Bob Evans for breakfast (Columbus Day – no school).

About 11 we left on our journey north to Bay City, Michigan in the hope of seeing the best of the fall colors. We were a little apprehensive about the timing but since virtually no color changes had occurred at home we were hopeful that we would not be too late even a few hundred miles further north. WE drove on Interstate 75 until we reached the Michigan border (with a brief stop for coffee at Bowling Green), where we left the Interstate and headed north, skirting Ann Arbor on US 23 before rejoining I-75 for the last 40 miles to Bay City.

It was a beautiful clear and sunny day although quite a bit cooler than we have been experiencing at home, but the temperature did reach the mid-sixties in the afternoon. It seemed that as soon as we crossed into Michigan we began to see fall colors on some of the trees. This appeared to be a rather abrupt change but in part this was due to the fact that there were very few trees on the Ohio farmland north of Dayton. However, it was clear that the changes have already started but we think that there should still be at least a few very colorful days as we go north and then west along the Upper Peninsula.

After a 340 mile drive (with far more traffic than we saw in the entire two weeks out west) we arrived in Bay City which, at first glance appeared to be a very attractive small town on the river. Tonight we ate at Real Seafood, a restaurant in walking distance of the hotel and sitting right on the Saginaw River, perhaps five miles upstream from Saginaw Bay on Lake Huron. It was a good meal in very pleasant surroundings.

Tuesday October 11

It was clear and cool as we went to McDonald's for breakfast in Bay City. Then we checked out and



drove across the river to River-view Park, a recreation area on an island in the Saginaw River which has been connected to one bank by a boardwalk. It not only makes the island easily accessible (with its walking tracks and nice views) but also gets visitors up close to a wildlife refuge where we saw many ducks and birds, including herons.



After an hour in the park we set off north on US Route 13 and 23 which follows the western edge of Saginaw Bay and Lake Huron, although the water wasn't in view the whole way. It was a very pleasant drive and we did get some good views of the lake, particularly as we got further north.



One close up view of Lake Huron

The land became more forested also and we could see that the trees here were beginning to turn. It looks as though we may have some really good scenery, if the rain (forecast for Wednesday) doesn't spoil things.

At Alpena (about 100 miles north of Bay City) we turned west on US Route 32 and followed this virtually all the way to our hotel at Bay Harbor on Lake Michigan. Route 32 rose quite a bit from the lake and we went up a few hills for the first time on this trip and noticed that many of the hills were basically large sand dunes. We have seen many of these on the western side of Michigan but these were not as impressive nor – surprisingly – very close to Lake Huron.

From the car view of color changes.

Hoping for better shots later!



Now we were in a lot of forested terrain and it was clear that we are only a few days away from the peak so we are looking forward to the next few days. We also saw a lot of farmland as we headed west and lots of fruit farms and pumpkins! As we approached our destination we also saw a few vineyards and some wineries.



On arrival at our hotel – new to Marriott – we saw that it was a huge facility in the classic resort style and we have a room with a balcony overlooking Lake Michigan. We made a reservation at the main restaurant in the hotel. This was a little disappointing in its ambiance because it was essentially a large bar area and very noisy; not what we had expected from such a nice hotel. However, the food was good and the wine even better so we had a good evening.

Wednesday October 12

We were up quite late and it was after nine before we got to the hotel restaurant. We had a very nice buffet meal overlooking the lake on a cloudy but reasonably bright morning. Rain was forecast for later in the day and it certainly looked a bit darker to the west.

Around 10:30 we started out on a 100 mile drive that was supposed to take us through some of the best fall foliage in the area. The hotel desk had given us a brochure which gave directions for the route called “Tunnel of the Trees”. It took us basically up the eastern end of Lake Michigan and back south along the western end of Lake Huron, before heading west again across country to Petoskey.

The first 2 ½ hours (we took a lot longer than the time suggested) was beautiful, although the leaves were still not quite at their best; we are guessing



just a few more days. Despite that, we did see some gorgeous colors and indeed part of the route did take us through a tunnel of trees over the road. At other times, we were driving alongside the water or next to sand dunes, with occasional climbs to a slightly higher elevation where we got some good views across the finger of the lake towards the Upper Peninsula.



There were some interesting sights other than the trees, including a rather over-the-top restaurant (The Legs Inn) built by a Polish immigrant, and many huge homes overlooking the lake or set back in



the trees. Obviously this is a very expensive area and has a lot of summer homes for the rich and famous, presumably primarily from down state. Many homes and several hotels that we saw were built in the style of the famous hotel on Mackinac Island – as, indeed, is the hotel where we are staying at Bay Harbor.



When we reached Mackinaw City we stopped for coffee and a stroll along a few streets to the north end where we got some great views of the Mackinac Bridge as well as a number of information boards describing the history and commerce of this area. Now we were at the point where



Lakes Michigan and Huron meet and later (Thursday) we should be alongside Lake Superior. Having seen both Ontario and Erie during our trip to Syracuse in May we will be able to claim visits to all five Great Lakes this year.

As we returned to the car it started to rain; just a few drops at first but by the time we were headed south again it was coming down quite heavily. This continued to Cheboygan ("Mention my name") and virtually all the way back to the hotel so, although we passed through many beautiful areas of trees, we didn't see them at their best. Nevertheless it was a great drive today and we saw some wonderful scenery.

Tonight we ate at a restaurant in Petoskey called Chandlers. It was very small and had an overall rustic feeling but the food was excellent, probably the best meal so far on this trip.



Thursday October 13



We had breakfast again in the hotel and then checked out around 9:30. Today we drove north to Mackinaw City, across the iconic bridge over the Straits and then headed west on the northern shore of Lake Michigan.

It was a cold day (mid-forties) but the skies were generally clear and often bright with sunshine. There were also a few showers but they didn't last long.



The fall foliage on this part of our trip was the best so far and as we passed through a number of heavily forested areas we saw some beautiful colors. We tried to get some good photographs – mostly through the car windows – but, as usual, the best ones “got away”. Still, we saw them and have them for our memories.





Last view of Lake Michigan (below)

At Manistique, we left Lake Michigan and went north across the Upper Peninsula to the southern shore of Lake Superior. We got some very nice views of the lake as we now headed west to our destination for the day in Marquette.



Lake Superior at Grand Island





Fall Colors on Lake Superior

We drove through the town before finding our hotel and it would appear to be a very old city. Indeed, it was known to 17th century French Missionaries and to trappers of the early 19th century but the city of today was based on the iron ore mining of the area. Perhaps we'll be able to get a closer view before we leave tomorrow.

Tonight we ate downtown at Elizabeth's Chophouse, about 15 minutes' drive from the hotel. It was a large restaurant (but not very crowded) but had excellent service and a very good meal. As its reviews said, this is quite an unexpected treat in Marquette and "brings a little New York" to the city. We enjoyed it thoroughly.

Friday October 14

When we got up this morning the temperature was around freezing and it was overcast. However, rain wasn't forecast so, after a McDonald's breakfast, we spent about 1 ½ hours taking a self-guided walking tour of the historic business district. We found the brochure at the Historical Center and it turned out to be a very useful document. It described many of the grand buildings in a 3 by 3 block area and gave a summary of its original use, its building materials and perhaps something about its changes over the years. Once again, we were surprised not only at the number of splendid buildings in what to us is a very out-of-the-way city but, even more remarkable, the speed with which the city grew once a reason for a settlement was established.

In the case of Marquette it was largely iron ore mined in the region that provided the financial incentive to build civic buildings, churches, banks, hotels, stores and very fine homes that have stood for at least 100 years and in many cases, closer to 150 years. We have often been impressed how rapidly the basic infrastructure is complemented with more



cultural or entertainment establishments and it would appear that Marquette is just another example of such impressive growth.



Marquette, Michigan
Cool but impressive!

Around 11:30 we left Marquette and headed west to our destination of Duluth, Minnesota. Along the way we caught a number of glimpses of Lake Superior, both in Michigan and after we had crossed into Wisconsin, and once again were treated to some beautiful fall colors along the road. We also stopped at a roadside park (Agate Falls) which provided a short boardwalk path to an overlook of the falls themselves. The river here had been a major “roadway” for logging as timber was floated downstream





for



processing and the falls had been a major attraction for viewing this “log road”, to the extent that it had become quite a tourist attraction well into the 20th century.



Just before we crossed into Wisconsin we stopped for a light lunch and then had about 100 miles of rolling hills before entering Minnesota. The Wisconsin hills (not particularly high) were the first climbs of any significance since leaving Cincinnati and provided a different perspective on both the trees and Lake Superior.



***Entering
Duluth
and
Minnesota***



About 4pm (now Central Time) we entered Minnesota at Duluth and found our hotel in what appears to be a high-end residential area. Certainly there appear to be no fast foods shops close by and we are planning to drive to the Duluth waterfront for dinner this evening. We ate at Bellisio's, an Italian restaurant on the main street of the waterfront area and had another good meal.

Saturday October 15

We were up rather late despite the time change and woke to an overcast morning with some rain in the forecast. It was mild, however, and the temperature actually reached the low seventies in the middle of the day.

When we saw the area near the hotel in daylight we realized that there were two shopping malls close by and each had the usual complement of eateries, so we chose a Perkins just across the street for breakfast. Afterwards we drove to the waterfront area again and parked while we walked around this area of downtown.



Duluth is still a major port and the waterfront has its share of grain silos, cranes, warehouses and other dockland buildings but the area where we walked has been converted into a park, with walkways, bicycle paths and other recreational facilities.

There are many information boards with descriptions of the area, local history and the many storms and shipwrecks that have occurred over the years at the western end of the largest fresh water lake in the world. Since Duluth port is contained in two large bays, there are also many bridges in sight of the waterfront walk, including the enormous aerial lift bridge which has become the symbol of the city and is a major feat of engineering.



The weather stayed dry and it became quite warm as we walked in this very pleasant and interesting part of the city. We weren't the only ones enjoying it either; there were many families out taking advantage of a very mild day before the northern Minnesota winter sets in.

We left the waterfront about 1pm and had a coffee before driving out of town on the North Shore Scenic Drive. As the name implies, this route hugs the north shore of Lake Superior and offers some superb views of the lake and the hilly land to the west. It would be a super drive at any time of the year but this weekend was probably the best for viewing the fall foliage so we had a very enjoyable leisurely drive for a couple of hours.



North Shore Scenic Drive



The Scenic Drive actually extends over 100 miles from Duluth, into Ontario as far as Thunder Bay but of course we stayed far short of the Canadian border. We went as far as the small town of Two Harbors before turning round and returning to the hotel after a great "town and country" day out.

Tonight we went downtown again for dinner to the 301 Restaurant in the Sheraton Hotel. This part of downtown is across the main north-south expressway from the waterfront area and has a quite different city feeling – and, again, some magnificent buildings. We were very surprised when we arrived to find that we were the only diners! However, the waiter/bartender was very friendly and the food was good so we had a nice meal all by ourselves!

Sunday October 16

It was cold (45F) but bright as we went to breakfast and then started south towards Minneapolis. Rather than follow the expressway (150 miles) we decided on a quieter route that actually was in Wisconsin for much of the day. We left Duluth and crossed to Superior



(Wisconsin) and then followed Route 35 all the way to the Mississippi at Red Wing, MN before zig-zagging along the border to our hotel in Roseville, near St Paul.



As we went south the leaves seemed to be a little past their best and the reds in particular were dry and dull in appearance. The yellows and golds seemed to be still near their peak. However, after less than two hours the heavily forested area gave way to much more

open farm land where corn and cows were more plentiful than trees. The terrain was generally quite flat with a few undulations, except near the rivers (St Croix and Mississippi) where there were some high cliffs and a number of steep climbs and descents. At this point we were on the



Great River Road (Mississippi) and were joined by hundreds (thousands?) of bikers enjoying the late fall scenery and warm weather.

