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LIFESTYLES

SUSAN AGER: Lighthouse sweepers

You can stay overnight in the DeTour Reef Lighthouse, but you have to work for the privilege

July 2, 2006

BY SUSAN AGER
FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

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Last weekend, for 48 hours, my husband and I and two women we'd never met lived together in isolation on a remote lighthouse in a channel traveled by thousands of Great Lakes freighters.

The experience was harder than I'd imagined, but so powerful that I'd like to live there for three days all by myself.

Weeks ago, when I asked readers to "Tell Susan Ager Where to Go" this summer, a 17-year-old from Royal Oak told me to go the DeTour Reef Lighthouse.

Noah Greenia, a senior in the fall at University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy, said the story of its recent renovation, with \$1.2 million in grants and donations, makes it "one of the most encouraging and impressive stories on the Great Lakes."

He's never seen it, but studies lighthouses, and knows that it's the only off-shore lighthouse on a



🔍 zoom

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man-made island that offers overnight stays, in addition to two-hour tours. Both began last summer.

"It would be amazing," he said, "to spend a night there."

With its promise of isolation and challenge, I visited for two nights and three days.

It is no B&B, and the weekend is no vacation. First, you must demonstrate serious interest by sending a resume, two references and an essay outlining your motives.

Although you pay \$170 per person for the weekend stay, you must bring your own food and linens and bug spray.

And you must work -- hard -- cleaning up when you get there, cleaning up when you leave. You must greet visitors, sell T-shirts, answer questions. It's your job to strap departing guests into harnesses that keep them safe as they descend a 20-foot ladder straight down the concrete side and into their boat.

Before we climbed into the boat that would deliver us to the lighthouse, I met many of the key players in its restoration. I was shocked to learn that none of them had spent even one night sleeping out there.

One of the most passionate lighthouse lovers is Jeri Baron Feltner, a founder of the DeTour Reef Lighthouse Preservation Society (www.drtps.com), who has homes in Dearborn and on Drummond Island. When I asked why she hadn't overnighted on the light, she answered: "I hate spiders."

The brochures didn't mention them.

Day 1

Friday, 3 p.m.: From a small, distant boat, the DeTour Reef Lighthouse looks like a hunk of concrete and steel, its colors indistinguishable.

It stands sentry on a 60-foot-by-60-foot slab of concrete that tops a man-made "crib" of stones and steel. The crib sits on the channel bottom in water

reports this week, only in the Free Press.

DETOUR STAYS, VISITS

Two-hour visits (\$75) by boat from DeTour Village run Saturdays until mid-August. Call 906-493-6609 or e-mail drtps@lighthouse.net

Only a handful of slots for weekend keepers (three days/two nights) remain open for this summer. Cost is \$170 per person (\$150 for members), plus \$20 for an excellent DVD about the project that keepers are required to buy.

DeTour Village is about 350 miles from downtown Detroit.

For more: www.drtps.com

MICHIGAN LIGHTHOUSES

Michigan has more than 110 lighthouses, and it's possible to visit many of them -- even if you don't want to stay overnight. The state of Michigan's Web site has a massive list with go-to information for many of them. Go to www.michigan.org/travel/ and search on "lighthouses."

Two other Web sites, www.michiganlights.com/ and www.michiganlighthouse.org/ are also loaded with information.

only about 22 feet deep. In the old days, without a warning here, big ships went aground.

This is an intersection every ship entering or leaving Lake Superior must pass. All of the 5,000 vessels a year that go through the Soo Locks pass by.

Now, ship captains navigate by GPS. Many of Michigan's 120 lighthouses, all obsolete, are being rescued, turned into museums or B&Bs. But this one, erected in 1931, is so remote most Michiganders have neither heard of it nor seen it.

To do so, you must drive straight up I-75, across the Mackinac Bridge into the Upper Peninsula, then east through the Les Cheneaux Islands area until the road ends at the ferry to Drummond Island. One mile offshore sits the lighthouse, a 15-minute ride on a fast boat.

Only as you get closer do you see how stately it is, repainted its original colors of white and green with a bright red dome.

Friday, 3:30 p.m.: We wave good-bye to the charter fishing boat that delivered us from Drummond Island. We four are a little embarrassed that hauling our stuff up the ladder takes longer than the boat ride. I count 18 bags plus four coolers, each tied with rope then pulled up by the sheer strength of Dave Bardsley, a retired Ford executive, and the unpaid president of the DRLPS.

We take turns climbing the rungs of the ladder. Because they are tucked into an indentation on the concrete, scaling it is not so bad if you don't look down.

Dave gives us a fast tour, many instructions and warnings: Power wash the bird poop off the deck. Put nothing but human waste in the toilet, not even cleaner, or it'll ruin what he called "an expensive, sophisticated digestive system."

And don't neglect to climb up to the rotating lantern to clean it inside and out of spiders, so tomorrow's guests can stick their heads up to look around.

We stand on a concrete deck thick with the waste of gulls and cormorants, my husband and I, and our fellow keepers. They are Ann Mayer, an elementary phys ed teacher from Okemos, and her good friend Ceil Heller, an ER nurse in Lansing.

We are lucky they are who they are, a teacher and a nurse. They believe in order and cleanliness. They get things done.

Upstairs in the kitchen, unloading provisions, I hear the power washer kick on. While my husband sprays, the women scrub with long-handled brushes and brooms.

Later I relieve Ceil, but I hate the work. We're getting the deck cleaner, but not clean. Ann shrugs. "At least we took the chunks off."

Some of the poop looks and sticks like tar. Some of it will be here for eternity.

Ceil, meanwhile, drags a vacuum around our rooms, sucking up spiders,

dead and alive. They are as big as quarters, unless they stretch out their legs. Then they are as big as half dollars.

They cuddle in high corners. They dangle over our pillows.

She says afterward, with satisfaction: "I have killed more spiders today, inside and out, than in my entire life." Later someone guesses that they hitched a ride out here on scaffolding or equipment used by the workmen who restored the light in 2004.

I am most at peace in the kitchen. I set a candle in the middle of the hand-made table, light it and lay out fruit on a plate. I imagine the pleasure a keeper must have felt to have his place in order, and well-stocked, as ours certainly is.

Someone is whistling. In the basement? In the tower? The echo is haunting.

Friday, 8 p.m.: We time dinner so we don't miss the sunset. Ceil brought a big pan of lasagna which she heats in the 1931 stove. We warm up garlic bread, and share wine, and learn the outlines of each other's lives.

We're all married a long time, with grown children. Ceil has spent two weeks of each of the last three Mays as a keeper at the Big Sable Lighthouse in Ludington. Ann loves lighthouses, but this will be her first night in one.

Nobody has room for Ceil's chocolate cake. We ate too many snacks, rewarding ourselves for scrubbing that deck.

Friday, 10 p.m.: Our first sunset is behind us, a modest one, a sky of gauzy magenta. The only sound is the distant barking of gulls and the flickers of the shutters on three cameras.

Only I am without one.

Earlier, I discovered the best, and easiest, view of the sunset is from the toilet.

Another freighter is passing. We shout "Ship!" so Ceil can grab her camera. She wants to document every freighter of the weekend and so far has captured six. By Sunday afternoon, she'll have dozens.

Some pass so close that we can read their names if we squint. Their huge engines groan and grunt like sick animals.

I'm yawning, and typing notes at an old rolltop desk that a lover of this lighthouse spent months refinishing this winter. Many people poured their energies into this place -- and governments poured \$1 million in, too, so people like us could come out and know, for at least a few days, what life was like for the keepers of old.

Except: They had no power washer. And, their shifts were three weeks on and one week off, much tougher than ours.

Friday, 10:30 p.m.: We climb up the 15 steps to the watch room, then up the 33 spiral steps to the lantern. It is turning, making a sound that reminds me of a quietly gurgling stomach.

We step out onto the high, narrow deck to watch another freighter pass, its lights making it look like a party boat. The sky holds onto a deep lavender.

We stand in our shirtsleeves. The wind is still. Summer is new.

Friday, 10:40 p.m.: Good night, all! None of us dares to open a bedroom window for a breeze because too many spiders hang, waiting, just outside.

Day 2

Saturday, 6 a.m.: Ann's alarm goes off an hour early. Just as well. We have work to do.

I make a fruit salad and prepare for a civilized breakfast. Then I hear the power washer and the vacuum. So, to do my own duty, I climb up to the top of the tower -- 83 feet above the water -- with rags and a broom to pull down webs and squirmy spiders. Like Indiana Jones, I get wrapped in webs.

Saturday, 8:45 a.m.: We're ready up top with body harnesses for our first four visitors.

Some guests sprint up the ladder. Some arrive winded. "No more workout for me today," gasps one guy.

Everyone is more chipper than we are. Sunny Covell is the sunniest of all. She and her husband, John, retirees on Drummond Island, have volunteered to give lighthouse tours for nine consecutive weekends this summer to what the group hopes may be 150 visitors, paying \$75 each.

We describe to Sunny our morning chores. She laughs and says, "Yes, there's nothing light about lighthouse keeping."

Some of the people we meet today collect lighthouses the way others collect sports cars. Richard Dodge of Mt. Morris, for example, claims he and his wife have visited at least 150. He lingers for 20 minutes at the top of the lighthouse, asking more questions than most guests.

"This is fantastic," he says, "I didn't think it would be this nice because of its very challenging location."

He and Dave and Jim Shutt, the skipper of the boat that brings guests over, lean on the railing and study the juncture of sea and sky. I listen in awe as they read the hazy bumps on the horizon the way blind men read Braille.

"That's Bois Blanc." "There's Mackinac." "That's Martins Reef light." To me, all the bumps look the same.

Saturday, 2:30 p.m.: Our visitors are gone. We're officially done for the day. I, for one, am exhausted, mostly from smiling, and climbing and descending stairs.

For me, the best moment of the tours unfolded after one man asked Dave about the bulb inside the rotating light. Dave reached beneath the lens to pull from a box of replacements a bulb no bigger than his thumb.

It is so small I can hide it in my fist. Yet, when reflected by well-arranged

lenses, it casts a beam visible 18 miles in all directions.

There is, I know, a metaphor in that bulb.

We chow down a late lunch, sandwiches and potato salad I made that froze in the dorm-sized refrigerator. We eat chunks of Ceil's chocolate cake with our fingers.

I make notes while the three of them clean up after lunch, chatting and laughing. I hear Ann teasing my husband, saying, "That doesn't mean we don't love you," and think how rare it is for affection to grow in just a few hours.

Saturday, 5 p.m.: Cocktail hour on the poopdeck.

We pull out the wine that Ceil earlier hid in a cupboard. "It seemed inappropriate for guests to see," she explained. We set crackers and chips and cheese on a bench and pull our chairs around.

A few black flies are biting. Ceil has heard that dryer sheets chase them away. She wears one tucked up a sleeve, and another tucked into her shoe. Ann wears hers as a bib, and sips white zinfandel from a kitchen mug that reads Mamas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Drive Chevies.

Three of the key players in this lighthouse restoration are former Ford executives, two of them engineers, one a lawyer. The mug from the kitchen cupboard is no surprise.

Over wine we explore each others' stories. We talk about our work, our mothers, our children, our faith. About travel and adventure. Ceil, we learn, once biked across the country to raise money to fight lung cancer.

This weekend, less grueling, counts as another adventure.

Saturday, 9 p.m.: Our second -- and final -- lighthouse sunset begins early.

It is long and slow, the clouds reshaping and recoloring themselves over an hour.

I realize, on this 60-foot-by-60-foot slab, that I am the audience at the center of a vast theater. Birds and boats and ships and sky and stars circle around me.

Tonight the sounds are waves lapping against the concrete, the American flag fluttering above us, and the bell of a distant buoy.

I settle onto the deck, knowing how well Ann and my husband scrubbed it this morning. I watch the sky. This evening feels like a smooth stone, a rare blessing.

Saturday, 10:30 p.m.: Unwilling to end the day yet, we sit at the dining room table. I type. Ann reads a novel she bought for a buck at a book sale. Ceil writes in her journal.

My husband studies his digital camera manual.

My candle burns.

Could we do this for three weeks, as the old keepers did? The living space is small, maybe 900 square feet. But the outside is huge.

Day 3

Sunday 9:30 a.m.: Only Ceil catches the sunrise, climbing the tower to photograph it. Since she bought her camera in November, she's taken more than 5,000 pictures, deleting only 500 as not worth saving.

My husband tries to make coffee, but the carafe's bottom has cracked. Using lighthouse-keeper ingenuity, he boils water in a pot, then drops in a Maxwell House filter pack to steep. It's not Starbucks, but it's caffeine.

By 10:30 I overhear Ceil tell Ann, "I'm ready to go." I wonder what's happened. We have no mission today, true. No visitors, either, except for the gulls whose overnight gifts we wash away once more.

Rain is visible on the horizon. "We could get trapped here," Ann says. Storms and wind could make it impossible for the boat to safely tie up.

I mention that I could happily spend three days here totally alone. Ceil says she'd need company after 24 hours. Ann says, "Solitude isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Ceil goes on a cleaning binge, hours before our scheduled 5:30 p.m. pickup. She has swabbed all the floors of the living quarters. Then she heads to the basement with a broom.

Ceil suggests we call Dave and ask to be picked up early, at 2 p.m. instead of 5:30. When I reach him, I can't do it. I suggest 4, instead.

"Well," he says, sighing, "if you're not having fun, and you've eaten up all your food, I guess you're ready to go." He'll see what he can do.

I wonder if we've offended him. Ceil says, wisely: "This is their baby. Their blood and sweat is in it." Ann finishes the thought: "For us it's just a vacation." We're here, then gone. They remain, to try to make it last, to try to raise the \$30,000 they need just to keep it going each year.

He calls back at 3: Be ready in an hour.

Suddenly, 4 seems too soon. We rush to gather our things, clean up our messes, close up the lighthouse by a 15-point checklist. Lock all the windows. Shut and lock the heavy steel shutters. Turn off everything but the solar panels on deck that keep that lantern turning.

I force myself to stop, to memorize. I don't trust photos. I wonder why I didn't linger more on the tower, why I spent so much time inside. I sit again on the toilet to look west.

Sunday, 4:10 p.m.: Our bags and coolers slide down the ladder faster than they came up. Then we're down too, forgoing harnesses, nimble on those 18 rungs the way keepers of old were.

Pictures, pictures, in every direction, pictures, and just as we're pulling away from the crib, an ocean-going ship, high off the water and the first we've seen, sails majestically past. One man on its deck tips his hat casually to us.

As we speed away, the DeTour Reef Lighthouse looks bigger than it did when we arrived. I know it now. I've slept in it, dreamt in it, drunk coffee and spilled red wine in it, flushed its toilet, swabbed its floors, gazed from its windows, counted its stairs.

It is more than a hunk of concrete and steel.

Abstractly, all of us own it.

But now, it belongs to me.

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