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Lonely Planet's top U.S. destinations in 2014: Why Grand Rapids, Gold Coast lead list

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GRAND RAPIDS, MI — Grand Rapids didn't just make its first appearance on the [Lonely Planet's list of 10 U.S. destinations to visit in 2014](#). It landed on top.

That's right, the folks at the acclaimed international travel [website](#) and publisher of travel guides have put the state's second biggest city at No. 1 — ahead of America's treasure Yosemite National Park, tropical Hawaiian paradise Lana'i and even Sin City, a.k.a. Las Vegas.

In all fairness, Grand Rapids is getting a major assist from about a 300-mile stretch of beaches along Lake Michigan known as the Gold Coast, which runs from South Haven, north to Traverse City, Petoskey and beyond.

THE LIST

Lonely Planet's Top 10 US Destinations for 2014

1. Grand Rapids & Lake Michigan's Gold Coast
2. Yosemite National Park, CA
3. Boston, MA
4. Central Coast, CA
5. Jersey Shore, NJ
6. Kansas City, MO
7. Cumberland Island, GA
8. Las Vegas, NV
9. Sun Valley, ID
10. Lana'i, Hawaii

After a lot of discussion and debate, this chunk of West Michigan rose to the top because Lonely Planet's Top U.S. Destinations is about shining a light on places in this country that travelers should add to their wish lists for 2014.

Some people don't even know where Grand Rapids is, said Emily Wolman, editor-at-large for the Oakland, Calif.-based publication. She was introduced to the state by her husband, who grew up in Southwest Michigan.

"We really want to bring it to the forefront and put it on people's radar for both domestic and international travelers as a destination," said Wolman. "It's not just for art and craft beer, which are two of the coolest scenes going on in the city right now."

Lonely Planet will describe a city brimming with art, from the fall international art competition ArtPrize to year-around destinations such as [Frederik Meijer Gardens](#) with Degas and Rodin sculptures and the [Grand Rapids Art Museum](#), one of the few LEED-certified facilities of its kind. It will highlight Grand Rapids' reputation as a [Beer City, USA](#), dotted with craft breweries that hold festivals throughout the year.

And then there's the "stunning beaches" that are as nice as Hawaii and Florida.

"I think there is a lot of surprise and unexpected joy in traveling in this area," said Wolman. "We really wanted people to know about it."

Wolman, who lives in Northern California, credits her husband for bragging up the shoreline. During their trips to Hawaii, he has suggested Michigan's Gold Coast is just as lovely.

Beyond the crystal blue unsalted waters, soft white sand and picturesque dunes, visitors will find long stretches of roads where they can discover vacant beaches.

"Even in summer, you can go to beaches where you don't have to elbow for a space to put your towel," Wolman said. "You can even surf. Who knew?"

The landscape is also home to [wineries](#), antique shops, U-pick orchards, cider houses and some [Ernest Hemingway history](#).

While Michigan's treasures have been highlighted with award-winning Pure Michigan commercials in recent years, a Lonely Planet spotlight could introduce the region to a new audience of dedicated travellers. Beside Lonely Planet's millions of monthly website readers, CNN will report on the list today.

"It's going to get a lot people paying attention, not just domestically but internationally as well," Wolman said.

Wolman says she couldn't say if last year's top U.S. destination, Louisville, experienced an uptick in visitors. But anecdotal feedback from travelers and tourism groups suggest the Kentucky city did.

"This isn't about statistics and tourism numbers, it's about wonderful travel experiences that people might not think of on their own," she said.

While Wolman's husband, Abbot Moffat, applauded the decision, the list is based on the recommendations of travel experts, writers and authors, whose suggestions were edited to a top 10 list by Lonely Planet staff.

Moffat's Michigan upbringing includes studying at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, living in Traverse City and graduating from Marshall High School.

Wolman, who plans to spend New Year's Eve with her husband's family in South Haven, says she might be one of the tourists who explores West Michigan in 2014.

“I have yet to experience the Gold Coast in the heat of summer, so I’m really looking forward to that,” she said.

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