



Once the private retreat of Icelandic immigrant Chester Thordarson, the boathouse now can be your private retreat, if you go at the right time.

# Heavenly solitude off Door County

**STORY AND PHOTOS  
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ROCK ISLAND, Wis. — It's almost 8:37 p.m., and I rush with my flashlight on a path through the dark forest to get back to the boathouse. If I am late even 30 seconds, I will miss this appointment. It is an ironic bit of time management in a plot of wilderness where human time is a mockable convention. The dolomite beneath me formed during the Silurian Period, more than 400 million years ago, and wave-polished stones, released by winters, water and ice ages, clatter like bones along the shore. Residents have come and gone in a historical blink of an eye.

Coming out of the woods, I make my way past the boathouse out onto the pier. I check my cellphone, which hasn't seen bars for a couple days and has been relegated to clock duty. I lie down on my back to look up at the heavens. Right on time, a bright light appears, unmistakably not a plane, planet or shooting star: the International Space Station. It sails through a sea of stars and is gone, and I think to myself: At this moment, there are more people in the space station more than 200 miles above me than there are on this entire island. 8:38 p.m. The moment is gone, and I drift back to timeless Rock Island.

It's September, school's back on, and so camper numbers have declined in the state parks. In fact, at Rock Island State Park on a weekday, I happen to be the only camper. For someone looking for peace and solitude, the cover of stars and the rhythms of Lake Michigan, this park is a paradise in shoulder seasons — remote yet only two ferry rides from Door County, Wis.

The 920-acre Rock Island doesn't allow vehicles or bicycles, and though day-trippers take the half-mile ferry crossing from the eastern shore of Washington Island just to hike the park's 10 miles of trails and visit the 1858 Pottawatomie Lighthouse, those with a day or two pitch a tent in the primitive campgrounds.

I spend my first full day hiking. Red squirrels chitter at me as I pass, and a deer rustles the underbrush as it leaps away at my approach. One trail circles the island, passing just inside the forest from the lakeshore, but I follow a sandy beach on the south shore, passing some modest dunes along the way. Back on the trail, lined



The boathouse remains an impressive sight outside and in, with its mythological carvings.



A replica Fresnel lens sits atop the Pottawatomie Lighthouse above the pristine Rock Island shore.



with wildflowers, I head north on the east side of the island. The wooded island is great for birders and actually sits on a migratory highway. In early June and late fall, flocks of hundreds of birds pass through. Imagine 500 blue jays in one wave. The park office has recorded as many as 2,000 broad-winged hawks in one day.

But beyond the island's natural allure is its historical side. Evidence of a human presence on the island dates back more than 10,000 years. The Potawatomi (spelled differently from the lighthouse) were the most recent Native Americans to occupy the island before French explorer Jean Nicolet likely stepped ashore in 1634. For a time in the 19th century, there was a fishing village here, and Henry Miner founded the town of Washington — to include Washington and Detroit Islands — in his home here on the island in 1850. Times were not kind to Miner; along the

trail just past an old stone water tower, I come to a small collection of headstones. Four-year-old Rosalina Miner passed away April 25, 1853, her sister, Cecelia, just 21 days later. Their tender departing ages on the headstones are totaled down to the number of months and days.

Just north of Rock Island is the widest passage from Lake Michigan into Green Bay, prompting the construction of the first Pottawatomie Lighthouse in 1836. The light once was fueled by lard oil, then kerosene, before wet-cell batteries were brought in during the 1940s. Since 1988, the Coast Guard-managed light has stood atop a separate tower and runs on solar power. But inside the original building is the memory of a keeper's life. Volunteer docents stay on for a week at a time and give guided tours when visitors stroll onto the grounds. A replica of the Fresnel lens has been placed back in the light tower.



## If you go

There are 35 campsites with picnic tables and fire rings but only pit toilets. Modern restrooms are near the boathouse, and campers can purchase firewood. Reserve a campsite at [wisconsinstateparks.reserveamerica.com](http://wisconsinstateparks.reserveamerica.com), or call 608-266-2181. Camping is \$17 per site per night for nonresidents of the state, \$15 for Wisconsin residents.

The Rock Island ferry (920-535-0122) runs from Memorial Day through Columbus Day (Oct. 10 this year), hourly during the summer but only three times a day in the shoulder seasons. Call or see the state park's website. Beyond that date, water transportation is up to you. If you are leaving a vehicle parked at Jackson Harbor on Washington Island, you must have a state park vehicle sticker. Ferry fares for campers are \$11 for ages 11 and older, \$6 for ages 5-10, and free for younger children. (These fares are \$9 and \$5 for day-trippers.)

Rock Island State Park, 920-847-2235, [dnr.wi.gov/org/land/parks/specific/rockisland](http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/parks/specific/rockisland)  
Plot sightings of the ISS on NASA's website at [spaceflight.nasa.gov/realdata/sightings](http://spaceflight.nasa.gov/realdata/sightings)

The unlikely lodge is the creation of an Icelandic immigrant from Chicago who owned Rock Island.

Chester Thordarson came to America from Iceland when he was a child and went on to become a prominent inventor, winning a gold medal at the 1904 World's Fair for his creation of a half-million-volt transformer. An avid reader, he had 11,000 rare books in this boathouse that became the foundation of a collection at the University of Wisconsin. His estate was sold to the state to be preserved as a park.

The boathouse is open, and occasionally campers will stop in to play a game of chess, perhaps to look up a wildflower in the guidebooks upstairs or just to enjoy sun spilling into the great space and the waters lapping in the stone chambers where the boats once moored beneath the wood floors.

After the sun sets and the sky is awash once again with the Milky Way, I head back to my camp to cook a meal over an open fire and listen to Lake Michigan spill into the sands just below my tent site. Thordarson's private retreat is my private island for a night.