TIME out
travel and entertainment

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THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER • SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

Chequamegon Bay offers smallmouth bass fishing and other outdoors opportunities.

Smallmouth HEAVEN

Brent Lawrence of the National Wild Turkey Federation in Edgefield, S.C., smiles after landing a smallmouth bass.

Roger LaPenter has been a fishing guide in the Ashland, Wis., area for 30 years.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS YOUNG
OUTDOORS EDITOR

Don't be surprised if friends who normally behave with grace and maturity suddenly threaten to de-friend you on Facebook when they hear about your smallmouth bass fishing trip.

That's because a trip to the northern reaches of Wisconsin on the shore of Lake Superior is likely to produce smallmouth bass of a size only dreamed of back home.

It's not really fair to blame friends who are stuck at home or in school or offices for their reactions.

Just ask Roger LaPenter, a guide whose shop, Anglers All, sits right on the shores of Chequamegon (pronounced: she-WAH-me-gone) Bay in Ashland, Wis.

LaPenter, 66, has been guiding since he was 15 years old. He's been putting anglers on big fish in the bay for 30 years now.

"I'm planning on doing this until I can't do it anymore," he says. "It's not work; it's pleasure."

He says what constitutes a trophy smallmouth bass is relative.

For example, in Illinois, the state record smallmouth is 6 pounds, 7 ounces.

"It depends on what the individual considers to be a trophy," LaPenter says, hedging his answer.

So what does he consider to be a trophy fish?

"Twenty-two inches and over 8 pounds," he says.

Customers at Anglers All try to hide their astonishment and excitement.

Twenty-two inches is how big the fish has to be to be considered a keeper in Chequamegon Bay. And even then, anglers are only allowed to keep one trophy fish per day. Fishing is catch-and-release only during the spawn in May and most of June, when all smallmouth must be released.

Chequamegon Bay is about 12 miles long. Ashland, population 8,620, is a little more than an hour

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Leaf experts expect intensity

By MORGAN SIMMONS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — Every year, Kathy Gould Mathews takes a deep breath and weighs in on the fall foliage season.

An associate professor of biology at Western Carolina University specializing in plant systematics, Mathews does not take her annual forecast lightly. Neither do the tourist industries across Western North Carolina and East Tennessee who count on the color change to bring in business.

Mathews says she expects an above-average display this autumn based on weather patterns this past spring and summer.

"It's been a hot year, with above-average temperatures this summer," she said. "Rainfall has been slightly less than average this spring and summer. These are two factors I look at when thinking about the timing and quality of the fall color change in the mountains."

Mathews said that while soaring temperatures in June and July might have hurt gardens, well-established trees and shrubs were not adversely affected and in fact should produce more vibrant colors as a result of the heat stress.

"The formation of ample yellow, orange and red pigments in the leaves seems to correlate with dry weather throughout the year," she said.

In Gatlinburg, elevation 1,289 feet, the leaves usually hit full color by the end of October or early November. In some areas, species like tulip poplar, dogwood and sourwood trees already have changed.

In the mountains above 3,500 feet, the leaf change usually hits full stride around mid-October.

Mathews said what's needed now is a little rain to keep the leaves on the trees, and enough sunshine to bring out the vibrant reds that make for a memorable leaf season.

"Now that the weather has finally cooled off, things should start moving along," she said.

About 1.2 million people flock to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park every October, with more than 50 percent of those visits coming during the last two weeks of the month as the colors peak.

In Gatlinburg, the turning of the leaves makes October the town's most lucrative month for tourism next to July.

Jim Davis, public relations coordinator for Gatlinburg, said tourism for 2010 is ahead of last year despite the sluggish economy.

"We're counting on a good fall to make our season," Davis said. "People talk about the quality of the leaf color, but it's always good. There's always color somewhere in the mountains."

The southern Appalachian Mountains are home to some 100 species of native trees, the vast majority of which are deciduous and account for the fall colors.

Majdi Mohammed/The Associated Press

Russian employees work near an ancient sycamore tree in the West Bank city of Jericho. A gnarled sycamore that local lore says is featured in the biblical tale of Jesus and the tax collector is now taking center stage in the Palestinians' attempt transform this ancient desert backwater into a tourism hub.

Jericho touts tree in bid to draw tourists

By KARIN LAUB
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

JERICHO, West Bank — With a giant trunk and boughs towering 60 feet high, a gnarled sycamore near Jericho's main square has long been touted as the very tree that the hated tax collector climbed to get a glimpse of Jesus.

Now it's taking center stage in a plan to transform this ancient desert backwater into a tourism hub.

The tree, once tucked obscurely away on a side street, is a featured attraction of a Russian-funded museum complex to be unveiled this month as part of Jericho's 10,000th birthday celebrations.

At the Oct. 10 launch of yearlong festivities, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will outline ambitious plans for Jericho, a Jordan Valley oasis that bills itself as the world's oldest and lowest-lying town, at some 780 feet below sea level.

"This is to promote Palestine as a destination," Palestinian Tourism Minister Khoulood Daibes said of the venture, which includes a resort to be built on the shores of the nearby Dead Sea. The Palestinians even hope for an airport in the area, though both projects hinge on Israeli approval.

The plans reflect the Abbas government's approach of building a Palestinian state from the ground up, regardless of the ups and downs of negotiations with Israel. Such pragmatism grew out of painful years of conflict, especially in the past decade, when Palestinians across the West Bank saw many economic gains wiped out.

The road leading into Jericho still bears witness to the scars of the fighting, but also fledgling signs of prosperity.

It's now a four-lane highway instead of a potholed country road, and an Israeli army checkpoint that used to snarl traffic and deter visitors has been removed because of a growing atmosphere of calm. But a casino, shut after the outbreak of fighting in 2000, remains closed because the Israeli military believes it is too dangerous for Israelis — the main clientele — to return to Jericho.

Still, more foreign tourists are visiting, about 1 million a year since the Israeli-Palestinian fighting began to drop off in 2006, said Jericho Mayor Hassan Saleh. Their main stops include Tel Sultan, an archaeological dig some say proves Jericho was first settled around 8,000 B.C., and an 8th-century Umayad palace with intricate mosaics.

Many visitors also stop at the ancient sycamore, usually snapping pictures before getting back on their buses. The hope is that the $3 million museum and visitors' complex to be opened next to the tree will encourage visitors to linger.

Local lore has long maintained the tree, whose massive, partially hollowed trunk measures 7 feet in diameter, is the very one featured in the biblical tale of Jesus and Zacchaeus, the tax collector of short stature who, according to the Gospel of Luke, climbed the tree to get a better look at Jesus.

The tree will eventually be ringed by the perimeter wall of the museum compound.

Last week, dozens of Palestinian and Russian workers laid brick, rushing to finish the white stone building with two domes and several graceful columns in time for today's opening. The museum, which sits on land bought by the Russian government in the 19th century, will feature Russian art and an exhibit on cultural ties between Russia and Palestine, as well as artifacts discovered during a salvage dig before construction began.

In the garden, workers laid tiles for a walkway from a recently excavated Byzantine-era mosaic to the sycamore tree. Landscape architect Sofiya Minasiyan said she plans to fill the grounds with plants mentioned in the Bible.

Daibes, the tourism minister, said tests are being conducted on the health of the tree, in hopes of finding ways to keep it strong. She said preliminary tests have shown the sycamore is more than 2,000 years old.

Mordechai Kislev, an Israeli archaebotanist, said it is quite possible for sycamores to live that long, though it's difficult to estimate a sycamore's age because it does not have annual growth rings.

Bus patrons say ride is cheap, comfy, hip

By TINA SUSMAN
McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

NEW YORK — In the summer movie thriller "Salt," Angelina Jolie's character smashes her way out of police cars, dives from a highway overpass onto the top of a passing big rig, then tackles a speeding motorcyclist and roars off on his two wheels, leaving a flaming landscape of twisted metal, shattered glass and bloodied cops.

But when it's time for Jolie's indestructible spy, Evelyn Salt, to flee Washington, D.C., for New York, her mode of transport takes a deluxe turn. From her reclining seat, the lights of Manhattan twinkle outside. The only sounds are the engine's purr and the soft snoring of fellow passengers on her ... bus.

Uh, call it a "motor coach," some in the industry say, the better to distinguish Salt's getaway vehicle with its Wi-Fi, footrests, overhead luggage bins and flush toilet — complete with blue swirly water — from the clunkers that belch exhaust and dump passengers at grubby stations in forlorn neighborhoods. The elegantly appointed BoltBus that streaks along an expressway into midtown Manhattan epitomizes the changing face of long-distance bus travel.

BoltBus, owned by Greyhound, is one of the major players in the battle for bus riders, whose numbers nationwide have increased as travelers avoid airport security hassles, recoil at Amtrak fares and gas prices, and embrace greener modes of transportation. Unlike the overbooked crates that ply the roads from New York's Chinatown to neighboring cities, these buses cater to a clientele that includes students, professionals, well-heeled retirees and out-of-towners on vacation.

"People just like me," said Ainsley Perrien, a public relations executive in Washington, D.C., who travels regularly to New York on the Vamoose bus service, paying about $30 each way. Cost and convenience are big selling points, but being able to change plans without steep penalties — and the sense of community — is appealing.

Bus ridership in North America grew from 631 million passengers in 2005 to more than 762 million in 2008, the last year for which figures are available, and an increase in numbers is expected for 2009 too, said Eron Shosteck of the American Bus Assn., which represents more than 1,000 privately owned bus and tour companies.

Nowhere is the surge clearer than in the Northeast, where ridership on the Washington-New York-Boston corridor has soared with the emergence of BoltBus, Vamoose, Megabus, DC2NY and others that leave from corners convenient to New York's Pennsylvania Station. The region's routes hit the "sweet spot" of bus travel, Shosteck said: 200- to 400-mile trips.

There are no baggage fees, no pat-down before boarding and no middle seats. Fares for the deluxe buses range from $1 to $50, depending on when and how you buy your ticket — online or at curbside.

"It's a feeling of empowerment and being able to take control of the travel experience," Shosteck said.

Profits are high because of low overhead. Bolt sells 97 percent of its tickets online, meaning few employees other than drivers.

Some of the lines also offer free bottled water, movies and even democracy. On DC2NY buses, riders vote on whether they want to see a movie and whether to make a rest stop. Vamoose wins fans with stops in suburban Bethesda, Md., and Arlington, Va., thus avoiding traffic in the capital. Megabus' big selling point is its double-decker fleet, offering more seats per bus and increasing the chance of having two seats to yourself.

"We got a lot of folks who tried a motor coach for the first time because fuel prices were so high," said Megabus Chief Executive Dale Moser. "Those who came to us have stayed because of the service."

FISHING

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east of Duluth, Minn., and about 45 minutes west of Ironwood, Mich., in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

The city of Ashland and the bay on the southwest edge of Lake Superior are well-kept secrets, LaPenter says.

"Very few people know what we have up here," he says of the area's fishing, hunting and other outdoors pursuits. " ... There are smallies in Lake Superior, but the bay's the thing."

With its rock piles and breakwater structures, it's nearly perfect smallmouth bass habitat.

But don't expect LaPenter to be closely guarding the bay's secrets. In fact, just the opposite is true.

"If they need the GPS numbers (for the best spots) we'll give them the GPS numbers," he says. "We want people to catch fish.

"We've always done that, and that's why they come back," LaPenter says. "If the fishing's bad, we'll tell them. If it's good, we'll tell them."

'The quality is better'

Sometimes, even a trophy smallmouth bass needs a day off. Fish sometimes stop biting for no apparent reason.

LaPenter shrugs his shoulders when the bite slows down. If his fish finder were Doppler radar, we'd be looking for cover. Red and purple blocks of color show densities of fish — no doubt they are down there.

"If the wind is out of the east, they don't seem to bite," he says. "Don't ask me why, but if the wind is in the east, you won't see a single local out here."

What makes fish behave the way they do is a mystery, and it's one LaPenter is in no hurry to solve.

"If you figured that out, then you'd have figured out fishing," he says. "And I don't know if that would be a good thing."

Even on a tough day, the fishing's pretty good. Our group boated four nice smallmouth bass up to about 4½ pounds.

Twenty years ago, anglers might have 100-fish days. Now, 20 to 30 is a pretty good day.

"The bay is pretty constant," LaPenter says. "You don't catch as many as you used to, but the quality is better. The average size went from 14 inches up to 18 inches."

That's partly due to trophy regulations that don't let anglers remove all the big fish.

Smallmouth bass fishing runs from mid-May though late October. October is considered to be "trophy month" for smallmouth.

You can look up LaPenter on the Web, but he'd rather talk person to person.

"I've got a website, but it just tells you to call the shop," he says with a laugh.

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Chris Young/The State Journal-Register

A rock breakwater is a popular fishing spot for smallmouth bass.

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