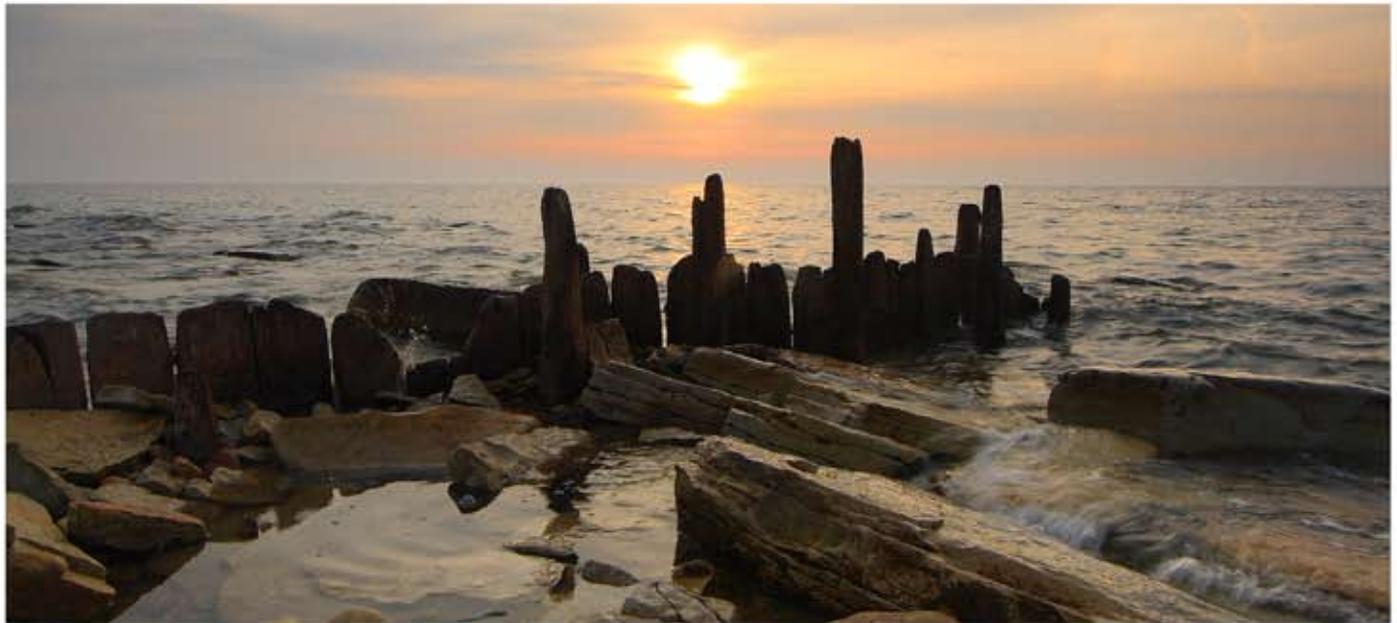


North Point

Milwaukee's Number One Free Tourist Destination



Text and Photography: Michael Stotler

At first glance, North Point is an uninspiring nib of land claimed from Lake Michigan on the east side of Milwaukee's Memorial Drive, just south of Bradford Beach. It features a beaten up parking lot, a ramshackle snack bar, chunks of broken concrete, graffiti-covered rocks, and a few trees. Does this sound like the stuff of epic inspiration so far? "Well, probably not, now that you mention it." As with many things in life, first impressions can be deceiving.

As described by one old North Point aficionado, "North Point is Milwaukee's number one free tourist destination." Why would a place with these apparently uninspiring features receive such a glowing accolade? The answer rests in the transformative magic of sunrise.

On any given day throughout the year, you'll find cars parked along the east edge of the parking lot with their occupants waiting to experience the glory of a sunrise at North Point. Some have shaken off a night of sound slumber just for the experience. Some seek a brief respite before heading to work for the day. Others, mostly the exuberant young, find sunrise at North Point a perfect destination to end a celebratory night.

In warmer months, people congregate next to their cars with coffee in hand or on the large rocks. Even where people have congregated, there isn't generally much conversation involved. In colder months, people huddle in their cars to defeat the chilled lake breezes. Regardless of the season, the parked cars track the exact location of the sunrise. In summer, the gathered cars point in a more northern direction, while in winter the cars point more towards the south.

On this little nib of land, the sunrise and Lake Michigan are in front of you, and the whole of the world and its problems are behind you. As Bern Williams once noted, "There was never a night or a problem that could defeat sunrise or hope."

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On weekend mornings, you’ll probably see at least a few photographers vying to capture a perfect composition of sun, clouds, waves, and rocks. With tripods in hand, the photographers carefully pick their paths to the lake through the concrete rip rap placed on the water’s edge to prevent erosion. In winter, ice formations make a surreal contribution to the scene.

North Point photographers have names for the prominent features. Deteriorating pier pilings in the lake are affectionately known as “The Sticks.” A large tree that features in many photographs is known well enough among photographers to simply be called “The Tree.” There are few elements to be photographed at North Point, but photographing the same elements again and again results in photographs that are remarkably different from one day to the next.

Some of the best photographs are made in the 15 minutes before the Sun actually peeks above the horizon. The light in the sky and the reflections on the lake often strike a beautiful balance. The non-photographers assembled at North Point seem only to be impressed by the rays of the Sun stabbing over the distant horizon, however. The parking lot often empties just as the gap between Sun and water first appears.

All of this gushing about sunrise doesn’t preclude a visit later in the day. By then, the peace of dawn has been broken. Children chase each other over the rocks and broken concrete. Gulls noisily attempt to establish dominance by chasing each other from the tops of “The Sticks.” In hot weather, the parking lot fills during the day with the cars of people using Bradford Beach. Later in the day, clouds over the lake are often serenely illuminated by the golden light of dusk.

In summer months, the parking lot is cleared of cars and locked at 8 P.M. In winter months, the parking lot remains open throughout the night. During windy winter weather, you’ll sometimes see people watching the waves crash into North Point at night, illuminated by car and truck headlights. Of course, they might just be watching the “Submarine Races” made famous by the television show “Happy Days.” One never knows.

Perhaps it’s worth losing an hour or two of sleep to make the drive to North Point for sunrise. You can always go back to bed after grabbing some breakfast.

North Point is located on Milwaukee’s Lake Michigan’s coastline just South of Bradford Beach and North of McKinley Beach on Lincoln Memorial Drive.

