MICHIGAN BLUE

MICHIGAN'S LAKESTYLE MAGAZINE

TRAVEL & ADVENTURE ISSUE

Riding the Curls

Surf's up on shorelines all over Michigan

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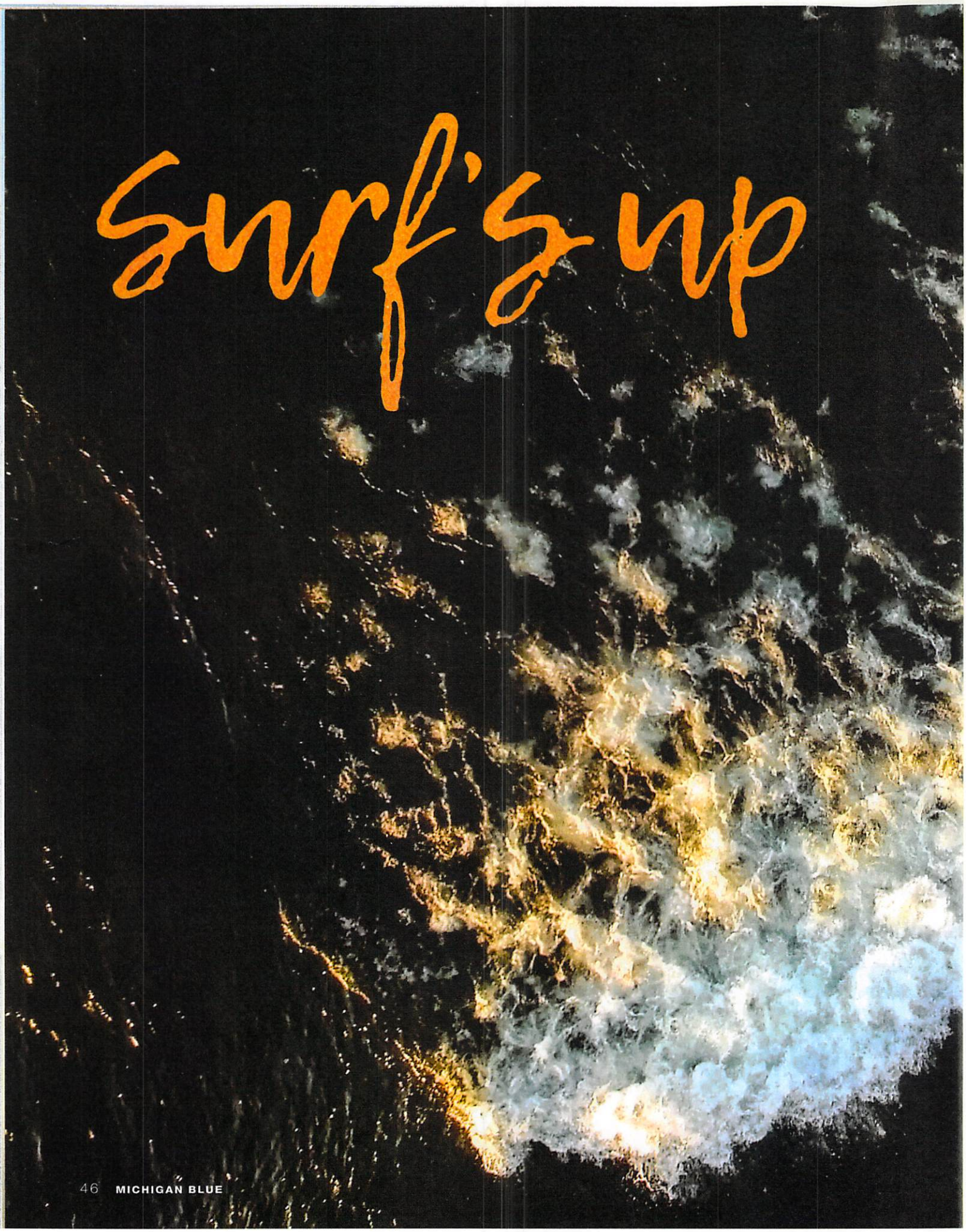
Surf's up



BY LYNNE GOLODNER

Michigan shorelines are increasingly popular with surfers.

If the journey is the destination, then surfing the Great Lakes is the consummate excursion. Once considered an East and West Coast pastime, surfing is gaining popularity all around the Great Lakes, where given the right conditions, surfers are in their glory.

Part of the fun is the search for a wave grand enough to ride and weather conditions to sustain at least an hour or more of fun, says Tim Folkert, a surfboard builder and West Michigan surfer. In the ocean, there's always "a wave of some height," he says. Not so on the Great Lakes.

"A lot of it is the fun adventure of searching; the actual act of surfing is the end destination of a journey," said Folkert, owner of Migration Surf in Holland. "You get to explore new bends in the coast line; you get to work with your friends on how to find the good waves. When everything clicks and you're there, that's a pretty incredible experience to find great surf."

On the right day with the right conditions, the surf line on Lake Superior can be ideal for surfers.

People have surfed on the Great Lakes since World War II, said Ryan Gerard, owner of Third Coast Surf Shop in St. Joseph and native of South Bend, Indiana, who converted from skateboarding and snowboarding to surfing Lake Michigan by the time he was 20. Now a father of two and entrepreneur with three shops generating more than $1 million in sales, Gerard explains Great Lakes surfing has exploded since he opened his first store in 2005.

"These days, there are multiple stores, the numbers of surfers have continued to grow aggressively, and the technology and equipment has accelerated that," Gerard said.

Because the best surfing takes place in the coldest weather, it took advancements in wet suit technology before more people signed on to the sport with true dedication. With thick neoprene wetsuits, special mittens and heated battery-powered vests, surfers are colder once they leave the waves than when they're riding them.

"I'm no colder surfing on the coldest days than I would be skiing or being outside in general," Folkert adds.

Why surf?

What draws surfers to the Great Lakes? The chance to be one with the elements and lose themselves in the moment, the most dedicated say.

Surfing allows participants to abandon the stresses of life and immerse in the present, explains Ella Skrocki, who grew up along Lake Michigan's northeastern shore, influenced and inspired by her entrepreneur parents, Frank and Beryl, who opened Sleeping Bear Surf & Kayak in 2004 in Empire.

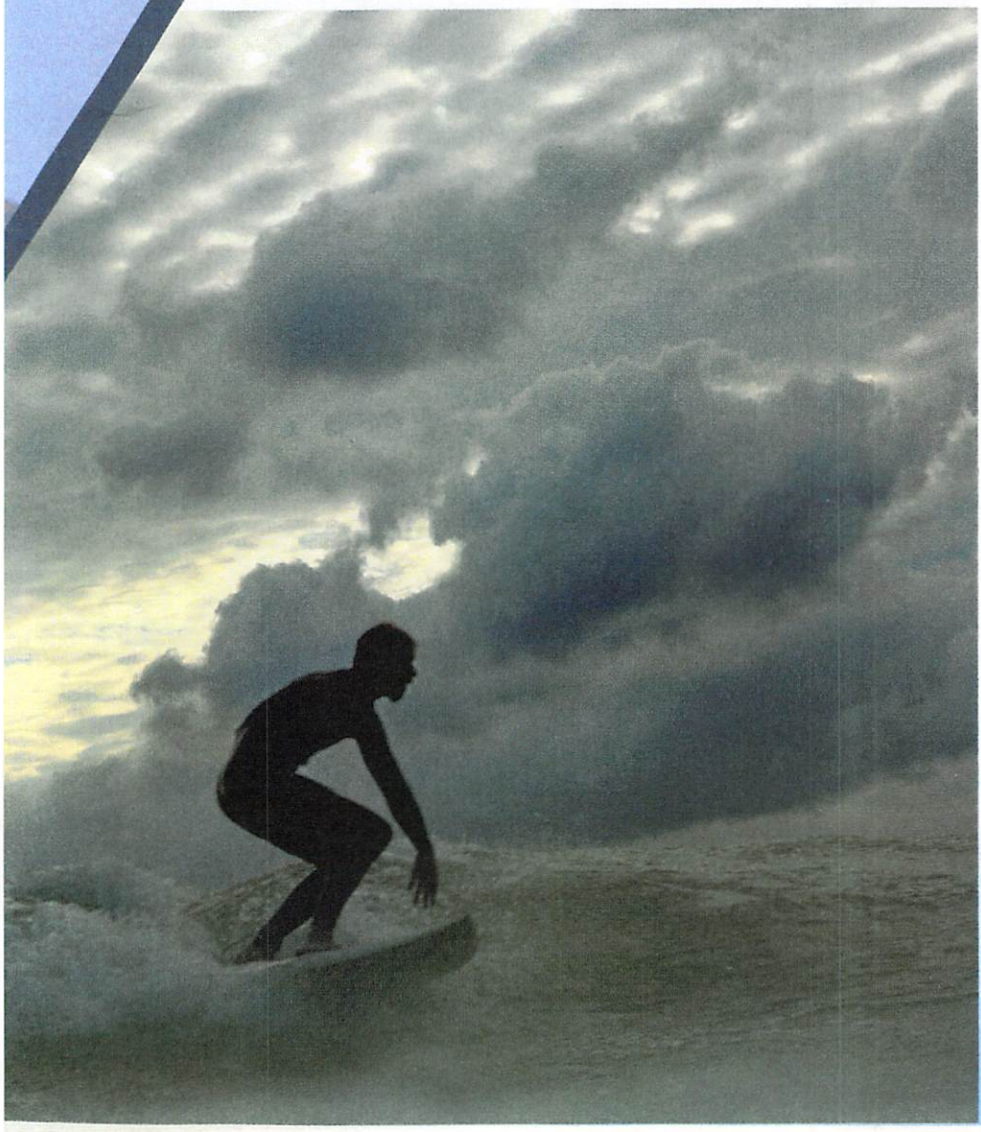
"They decided to embrace the culture of the shoreline and the geological beauty we had in Empire," says Skrocki, who was 8 years old at the time. "Everybody thought they were crazy. We probably could have paid rent if we collected a penny every time someone called my parents nuts or told them they couldn't surf on the lake — which is actually a common phrase we still hear today."

Skrocki graduated this spring from Northern Michigan University, which drew her because she could surf Lake Superior between classes. She studied environmental studies and sustainability and spent her summers teaching kids to surf at her parents' shop.

"The lake never gets warm up there," she says. "It makes it fun because you find the willpower and the motivation to … embrace the snow and wind or sleet or hail. My favorite thing about winter is that everybody that gets in the water is filled with the same energy. It's only the hearty, passionate, full-of-life and character, community-oriented surfers that are going to be in the water at that time."

Kite surfing (left), boogie boarding (opposite top) and surfing (opposite bottom) have all become popular on Michigan shoreline waters.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHNNY QUIRIN (RIGHT AND PAGE 49, TOP); BETH PRICE (PAGE 49, BOTTOM)



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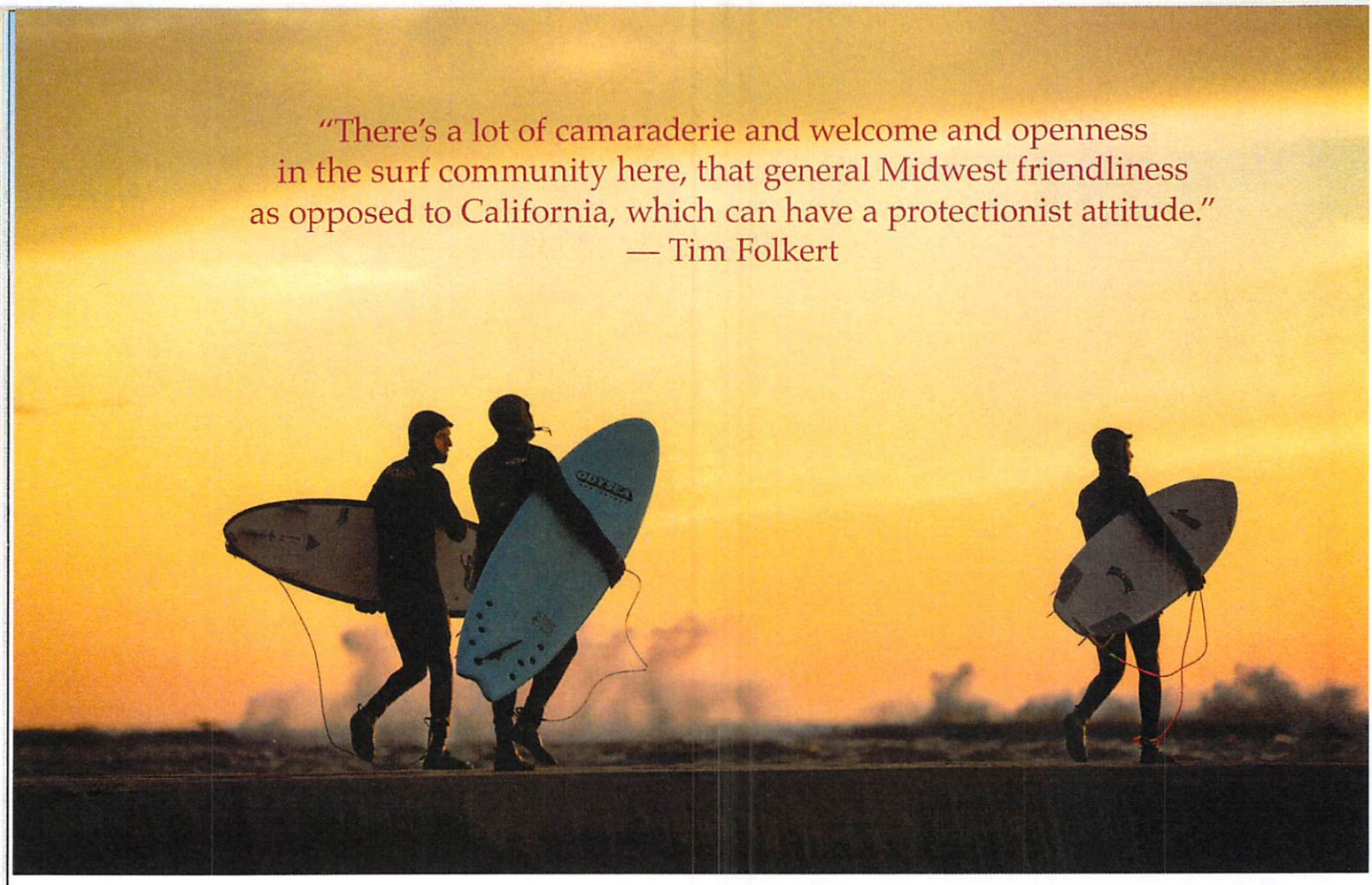
— Tim Folkert



Find the curl

Fresh water surfing has different challenges than ocean surfing. The period between waves is shorter on the lake, five to seven seconds on average between crests, Skrocki says. That's little recovery time to get your bearings.

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Great Lakes waves are weaker than ocean waves, says Folkert, a stay-at-home dad and board builder who didn't take up surfing until he moved to Santa Cruz, California, after college. Home for a visit one December, he was drawn to four surfers on a cold day. He and his wife Sara moved back to be near family after their three children were born, and that's when he embraced year-round Great Lakes surfing.

Surf Community

Perhaps the best thing about surfing the Great Lakes is the tight community here that does not exist on ocean beaches, Folkert says.

"There's a lot of camaraderie and welcome and openness in the surf community here, that general Midwest friendliness as opposed to California, which can have a protectionist attitude at surf breaks where people get angry sometimes that you're there."

In the summer, Skrocki teaches a surf camp for teens. Gerard offers surfing lessons and kids camps in addition to lake tours and excursions. Folkert produces boards, distributing volume differently to make up for the buoyancy difference of the lakes.

Social media has been a big help to the sport's rapid growth in the Great Lakes region. People witness the thrill of Great Lakes surfing online and want in on the action.

"Growing up along the lakeshore, I watched it and studied it every single day," Skrocki said. "I gained not only an ap-

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— Ella Skrocki

preciation and respect for it. … It's the most spiritual, physical and emotional meditation. I find clarity in the water."

Gerard agrees: "When I surf, I leave all the B.S. behind me on the beach; it's just me and my board. Especially when those waves are good and everything comes together, you're surfing well, it can truly be magical. It's a natural high that is hard to replicate." ≈

Huntington Woods writer Lynne Golodner loves to row and swim but is a bit nervous about surfing.

Advanced wetsuit technology is keeping surfers warm even on the coldest days on Lake Superior (top) and Lake Huron (bottom).

Facing page: Surfers head out along a Lake Michigan pier (top) while another rides a curl (bottom).

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON PETERSON (TOP); ANDREW JOWETT (BOTTOM)

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BETH PRICE