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# Atop Michigan, atop the world

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*A note from Susan: No story I've done has triggered so much response, half from folks who wish they could do what I did, half who shiver to think of it. It launched my "Tell Susan Where to Go Story" and began a summer of adventures.*

I practiced in bed the night before, imagining myself at the top of the Mackinac Bridge. Once, twice, three times, trying to subdue that queasy sensation which exploded in my stomach, swelled in my groin then slid to my knees.

By morning, I had resolved: No matter how sick you feel, you must go all the way up and stay there until you can suck in the whole experience.

Do it for your readers. Do it for every Michigander who would love to stand above our glorious state, at the spot where its two peninsulas are joined by steel, and say, "Wow."

About 1,000 of you sent me detailed suggestions of where to go in Michigan, and what to see, and who to meet as I travel the state this summer. But only one of you sent me here.

Noreen Keating, who has homes in Auburn Hills and Cheboygan, e-mailed me a long paragraph of things to do on the Sunrise Side of our state. Tucked in the middle, between commas, was "take a trip to the top of the Mac Bridge."

What? I'd never heard of such a thing. That alone made me curious.

I called first, then pointed my yellow Ranger north, both eagerness and anxiety in my lap.

## **The journey begins**

Bridge director Bob Sweeney told me the bridge is overwhelmed with requests to go to the top of one of its two towers. People even ask to be married up there.

But policy is strict: The bridge gives away just 25 Tower Tour certificates each year, to nonprofit organizations that auction or raffle them to raise money. Last year, about 200 organizations applied, and numbers had to be drawn from a hat to pick the winners.

The tours aren't even mentioned on [www.mackinacbridge.org](http://www.mackinacbridge.org). "We don't advertise," Sweeney said. The towers weren't built to entertain tourists. They were built to hold up the 2-foot-thick cables from which the road of the bridge hangs. Painters use the decks at the top of the two towers to stage the painting of cables and the changing of lightbulbs along them.

But, Sweeney agreed to take me to the top of the South Tower as a special favor. He's never taken his wife or kids up. No governor has ever been atop the bridge. He only goes up once or twice a year himself.

"For me," he said, "the hardest part is the elevator."

It's not much bigger than a coffin standing on end, windowless and dimly lit - and it's unpredictable.

The last time Sweeney went up, with a TV reporter on a 90-degree day last summer, the elevator stopped midway up. The two stood chest to chest, sweat to sweat, for half an hour as the reporter swooned, at one point announcing, "Bob, I'm sorry, but I think I gotta go."

"I wasn't sure what he meant," Sweeney said, chuckling. But when engineers got the elevator moving again, the fellow crawled out onto the open-air deck, 552 feet above the water (equal to 46 stories), and just sat there. "He wanted nothing more to do with it."

Sweeney told me this in his huge-windowed office at the north end of the span as I was signing away my right to sue the State of Michigan in case I fell off the bridge. I had to turn over my driver's license for a routine background check.

We all zipped on lightweight bright-orange and yellow vests, perhaps to make us easier to find in the water.

### **Great Lakes splendor**

Sweeney and steeplejack Joe Champine, who does maintenance and painting on the bridge's highest places, drove us in a black Dodge Durango to the South Tower. We parked in one of the center lanes, closed to traffic with orange cones. We scooted

across one open lane and pressed up against the hulk of the tower, just a yard from trucks lumbering by.

I saw no way in. But Shampine started fiddling with a simple padlock on an oval panel painted the same ivory color as the rest. He swung it open, revealing an oval hatch just 3 feet high and 16 inches across.

Like Gumby dolls, we twisted our bodies to fit through, then squeezed into the elevator, in two groups, for a three-minute ride up as the mechanism groaned and chugged.

When the elevator grate opened, we were not on top, but still deep inside the dark honeycomb of steel in the tower.

Walls of steel intersected each other every few feet, with oval hatches cut into them in every direction. If I didn't know I was high up, I might have thought I was in a bunker below ground.

Someone had used a black marker to pen arrows and directions, such as "THIS WAY," above the right passageways. Others, visitors from the past, had penciled their names on the steel: "Adam Smith was here 98" and "Bob Tilton Local #28" and more.

I was surprised to see litter: a 20-ounce foam cup from a Shell station, some empty Diet Coke cans.

We pushed ourselves through eight more hatches, and climbed up steel rungs, at one point 27 feet straight up. I was last, at the bottom of the pack. Whenever I stopped to take notes, Bob called down to me, "Are you OK?"

Not everyone is. But, much to my surprise, I felt fine.

Then, suddenly, light at the top of the ladder. I stuck my head through a round hole to the sky.

"Oh my God," I said. I pulled myself out of the darkness and onto the deck of the tower and stood up in the breeze. All of my words failed me. I said again, "Oh my God."

I turned in a circle, surrounded by horizon. Above me and around me, sky. Below me in every direction, water. Lake Michigan and Lake Huron and the Straits of Mackinac in between.

The land was the least of it.

On Mackinac Island I spotted the speck of the Grand Hotel. In Mackinaw City, two modern windmills caught the breeze, doing their job. Sweeney pointed at the waterfront home he built for his family in St. Ignace, his hometown, a five-minute bike ride to his job.

He can see his bridge from the beach.

### **Coming back down**

Sweeney was named bridge director four years ago. He was 40.

"Ironically," he told me, "when my father was 40, he was captain of the Vacationland, one of the ferries that transported people between the peninsulas. The bridge put him out of business."

We laughed like kids up there. Shampine told us he had accompanied people who paid \$700, \$800, \$1,500 and even \$2,000 for a Tower Tour certificate. "Some of them stick their head out of the hole and say, 'That's enough.' "

Not us. For 45 minutes I stood on that sturdy steel deck, 7-feet wide, 56-feet long, leaning against the railing which, 42 inches tall, came to my waist.

It, like most of the bridge, is painted "foliage green," the official color name.

I watched clouds. I counted islands. I heard the gentle hum of trucks and cars, as small as toys, on the metal grating of the road below. I waved at boats. A few truck drivers tooted, which I took to be hellos.

A rust-orange freighter slid beneath the bridge like a fish.

I wanted to stay. I wanted to sleep on top of the Mackinac Bridge. I felt above it all, above trouble and anxiety. I felt safe. And free. And grateful for this incredible place where we live, and for the bridge that unites us.

But Bob and Joe had work to do.

And I had a story to tell.