

The Great Lakes Circle Tours

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The Great Lakes Circle Tours (GLCT) are a total of four routes circling each Great Lake, with the exception of Lake Ontario. The State of Michigan has signed each of the circle tours for the Great Lakes the state touches: the Lake Erie, Lake Huron, Lake Michigan, and Lake Superior Circle Tours. These tours were originally conceived as an aid for travellers who wished to stick close to the shorelines of the lakes in their journeys. The Lake Superior Circle Tour was the first route established in 1986, with Michigan following in 1987, then Huron and Erie following in the early 1990s.

In 1985, Michigan First Lady Paula Blanchard, who was an advisor to the Michigan Department of Commerce at the time, pitched the idea to establish a tour route around Lake Superior at a tourism conference that fall. Soon after, the Michigan Department of Transportation drafted a design for the signs and, working with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT), Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) and the Ontario Ministry of Transportation (MTO), helped devise a route around the largest of the Great Lakes.

Once the signs were Lake Superior Circle Tour (LSCT) signs had been erected in the field in 1986, work began in earnest for a Lake Michigan Circle Tour, which would become reality just one year later. Then in 1988, the Great Lakes Commission approved an overarching "Great Lakes Circle Tour" to help coordinate the various routes among the eight Great Lakes states and the Canadian province of Ontario.

Lake Michigan Circle Tour



After Lake Superior's loosely-organized "circle route" which had been promoted by local tourist organizations since the 1960s became the first officially signed Great Lake circle tour route, the Lake Michigan Circle Tour (LMCT) was not far behind. The only single-nation Circle Tour (Lake Michigan being the only Great Lake completely within the U.S., of course), the LMCT also has the most mileage of any Circle Tour in the state of Michigan: 616 miles.

Working in conjunction with the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), the West Michigan Tourist Association (WMTA) helped to make the Lake Michigan Circle Tour a reality. On the MDOT side, Jack Morgan, assistant to the department's deputy director, introduced the concept of a Circle Tour in 1987. Just 14 months later, agreement had been reached on a route and signs to be posted along the 1,100-mile tour completely circling Lake Michigan. The WMTA filled the need for a guidebook and when the *Chicago Tribune* and *Milwaukee Journal* ran articles in 1988 about the new Circle Tour, 150 callers from the Chicagoland area along deluged the WMTA staff the next Monday morning, requesting the guide. Two days later, 700 guidebook requests came in from Illinois and Wisconsin and the following day an additional 1,000 phone and mail requests poured in to their offices.

The route of the mainline LMCT in Michigan follows signed state trunkline routes in its entirety, although in some places the nearest state highway to the Lake Michigan may be several miles away. Along with the primary Circle Tour route, several marked "Lake Michigan Circle Tour Loops" have been posted using white-on-brown signs. These loops may follow state highways or utilize city streets and county roads running closer to the shoreline. The photo at right shows the mainline LMCT following M-22 as it turns southerly in Glen Arbor, while a Loop route continues ahead along M-109 toward Glen Haven.



Present-Day Concerns and the Tri-Modal Corridor

In November 2012, the inaugural meeting of the Lake Michigan Trails Conference was convened in Saugatuck by Western Michigan University professor Dave Lembeck. Lembeck is championing both the completion of a Lake Michigan “water trail” for kayakers, canoeists and other paddlers around the lake’s entire shoreline as well as an interconnection between the water trail, the new U.S. Bicycle Route 35 (USBR-35) and the existing Lake Michigan Circle Tour. The envisioned “Tri-Modal Corridor” would accommodate non-motorized transportation and recreation via the “water trail” in the Lake and the bicycle route on land. The LMCT would help link the various bicycle trailheads and water access points together.



Figure 1. One of the few remaining Circle Tour markers appearing on freeway exit signage in Michigan. Most others have been removed, making it very difficult to follow the posted route.

Unfortunately, actual signage along the Lake Michigan Circle Tour route has deteriorated over time. While Wisconsin has generally kept the Circle Tour reasonably well posted, signage in Michigan and Illinois is lacking and long segments of the LMCT in Indiana are now completely unsigned. Indeed, when the numbered highways that the Circle Tour ran along were rerouted in Northwest Indiana in recent years, the LMCT route markers were regrettably not relocated or replaced. Furthermore, highway signing standards may have changed to the point where including Circle Tour route markers alongside the other numbered highway markers on freeway signage is no longer allowed or encouraged. While hundreds of the standard Circle Tour markers are still found alongside the roadside in Michigan, some locations where the LMCT changes directions (e.g. transitions from one highway to another) are now unsigned or completely unsigned altogether. This was cited as a major concern by the attendees at the 2012 Lake Michigan Trails Conference.

Conference attendees vowed to support the ongoing efforts of the existing organizations assembling the resources necessary to complete the Lake Michigan Water Trail and the signed U.S. Bicycle Route network now underway around the periphery of the Lake. Additionally, attendees cited a need to renew coordination and oversight of the Great Lakes Circle Tour Program within the various state departments of transportation, the Ontario Ministry of Transportation and the *de facto* coordinating agency, the Great Lakes Commission. Several of those in attendance have pledged resources and a commitment to both preserve the Circle Tour routes and look for ways to improve the coordination and signage into the future. Creating background documentation, documenting and recording the officially-adopted Circle Tour route, clarifying route signage standards and formalizing a route maintenance policy are just some of the concepts put forth in the revitalization of these important tourist routes.

Links to More Information:

GreatLakesCircleTour.org website (new–May 2014): <http://www.GreatLakesCircleTour.org>

Michigan Highways: Great Lakes Circle Tours: <http://www.michiganhighways.org/other/glct.html>

Michigan Highways: Lake Michigan Circle Tour: <http://www.michiganhighways.org/other/lmct.html>

West Michigan Tourist Association: Lake Michigan Circle Tour: <http://www.wmta.org/lake-michigan-circle-tour-670/>

West Michigan Tourist Association: Lake Michigan Circle Tour History: <http://www.wmta.org/circle-tour-history-680/>

Great Lakes Commission: Great Lakes Circle Tours: <http://www.great-lakes.net/tourism/circletour/>

This article was originally compiled by Christopher J. Bessert, November, 2012 (updated May 2014). Information sourced from the “Michigan Highways” and GreatLakesCircleTours.org websites, authored and maintained by Christopher J. Bessert. Contact: chris.bessert@gmail.com, (616) 822-6719.