TOUR 4
Vineyards and Vikings
(3.9 miles)
1. The Engel Farm
2. The Stone Wine Press
3. The Alois Niele House
   (also known as the Wiesler House)
4. The George Bickford House
5. The Reibel House Hotel
6. The Foster Farm
7. The Daniel Vroman House
8. The Philip Vroman House
9. Cooper's Restaurant
10. The Mortimer Wine Press
11. The José de Rivera Estate
12. The Mammoth Cave
13. The Heineman Winery and Crystal Cave
14. The Charles Miller House
15. The de Rivera Wine Facilities
16. The Viking Longhouse
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A series of limestone caverns crisscrosses the center of South Bass Island near the intersection of Catawba Avenue and Thompson Road. Crystal Cave at Heineman’s Winery, Perry’s Cave, and Mammoth Cave (no longer open to the public) are among the best known of these; such underground attractions have added to the romance and intrigue of the island over the years, and they also offer a cool retreat on sultry summer days. Prior to leading past the caves, Tour 4 starts along the southern stretch of Airport (or Langram) Road—the main thoroughfare from the Lime Kiln Dock to the village—across from the airport. The tour takes us to some of the South Bass Island vineyards that were established in the 1860s by German grape-growing pioneers who purchased land from José de Rivera; many early farmhouses and stone press houses can be viewed from the roadway. Tour 4 ends at the secluded Viking Longhouse.

1. The Engel Farm. One of the few island properties to stay in the same family is the Engel Farm, first settled by Christian Engel. He immigrated to the United States from Saxony, Germany, in 1840, and in 1868 arrived at South Bass, where he soon established a sprawling vineyard. The production of grapes has been carried on by his son Christian, grandson Herbert, and great-grandson Robert, who currently owns the farm. The farmhouse was built in 1872, and a boulder in the front yard bears a plaque commemorating the 1972 centennial. The home is an L-shaped Italianate structure with clean lines and peaked moldings over the doors and windows. Behind the main dwelling is a frame wine-press house. Press buildings, where grapes were processed for their juice, can still be seen on many island farms. Usually the pressing took place on the ground floor, and the fermentation that
changed the juice into wine occurred below in a stone cellar. The current tour will pass several wine-press houses, but a particularly fine example is the Press House Bait Store which we shall see in Tour 5.

2. The Stone Wine Press. Following Langram Road toward the village, just before Meechen Road we see a cluster of trees set back from the highway. The trees shade a renovated stone press house that is now a private residence; the once prosperous vineyards that kept workers busy in this press house are now runways for the nearby airport. Built by English stonemason Alfred Parker, who came to South Bass in 1865, the press’s walls are massive and rough and the cellar bears a gabled entrance.

3. The Alois Niele House (also known as the Wiesler House). Past Meechen Road is another of the island’s rare brick structures. This one was built around 1870 of brick shipped from the mainland. The building sat vacant and decaying for many years but was renovated in 1979 and now houses a shop. Long narrow windows and bracketed cornices indicate the Italianate style, as do the ornate window moldings and the restored bay window on the house’s north side.

4. The George Bickford House. This residence was built about 1868 by a vintner and township trustee. Set well back from the road amid the overgrown vineyards that once supported its owner, the building is L-shaped and Italianate in design.
5. The Reibel House Hotel. In contrast to the Bickford House, the Reibel House stands in a clearing near the road. The property was bought in the 1880s by German native Henry Reibel and was owned by his heirs until 1954. The Reibel House was once a rambling forty-room inn that stood surrounded by vineyards and orchards. The building’s construction date is disputed, but the structure may have already existed in 1882 when Reibel bought the land. An 1864 penny found in a door frame during renovation suggests that the structure was built during the Civil War era. Gothic peaks on the front gable and a wide Italian Villa type wrap-around porch are examples of the mid-1800s tendency to mix architectural styles.
6. The Foster Farm. Just past Thompson Road, the two stone structures of the Foster Farm—the farmhouse and the press house—mark it as a typical example of mid-nineteenth century island farms. Both buildings date from about 1860 and are made of rubble stone; they are attributed to English stonemason Alfred Parker, who built the Stone Press House seen earlier. The press house has wood trim, peaked window moldings, and a small, gabled cellar entrance. The house is a stone version of the island’s familiar L-shaped farmhouses.

7. The Daniel Vroman House. Located opposite the end of Concord Avenue, this residence was built around 1870; it is a good example of the architecture of its period. The dwelling exhibits Gothic elements in its steep roof, and its stylish wooden ornamentation is also worthy of note.

8. The Philip Vroman House. On the south side of Concord, this dwelling was built by Daniel’s pioneer father, Philip Vroman, about 1860. Philip arrived on South Bass Island in 1843 and worked for both the Edwards and de Rivera families. One of the earliest island pioneers, he also served as township trustee. The home is now owned by his great-granddaughter. The dwelling is of simple Greek Revival design with a decorative Italianate front porch.
9. **Cooper’s Restaurant.** Opened by the wine-producing family of Fred Cooper in 1947, this building was constructed over the former Put-in-Bay Wine Company wine cellar. The restaurant carries into the twentieth century the stone construction typical of earlier island buildings; it is believed to be built of limestone taken from the walls of the demolished Put-in-Bay Winery.
10. **The Mortimer Wine Press.** Across and down the street from Cooper’s, near the corner of Mitchell Road, is the wine press built by English vintner E. T. Mortimer, who settled on South Bass in 1869. This simple, frame edifice has a stone cellar and has been converted into a private residence.

11. **The José de Rivera Estate.** At the far crest of a rolling hill along Mitchell Road is the estate of former island owner José de Rivera; he planted vineyards here in 1858 after much of the Bass Islands’ timber had been cut for steamboat fuel. De Rivera commuted between the islands and his New York business offices until 1882, when he made South Bass Island his permanent home. In 1886 the millionaire de Rivera went bankrupt and sold much of his island holdings to Put-in-Bay entrepreneur Valentine Doller. On May 31, 1889, de Rivera died a relatively poor man; he is buried in the island’s cemetery. The de Rivera Estate remained in his family until 1912. The estate’s ancient house and many interesting outbuildings are Greek Revival and board-and-batten in design; their simple lines are typical of the mid-nineteenth-century construction date. The board-and-batten barn across the street from the residence is probably part of the original farmstead.

12. **The Mammoth Cave.** We now backtrack along Mitchell Road and return to Catawba Avenue, where, at the corner of
Thompson Road, we find a frame building partly obscured by foliage. This is the former entrance to Daussa’s Circular and Labyrinthic Cave, which was originally owned by José de Rivera’s daughter. The cave was discovered in 1886 and later renamed Mammoth Cave; it has been closed to the public since 1955. Its entrance led sixty feet underground to an eight-by-sixty-foot lake, a six-hundred-foot circular tunnel, and a huge, open cavern. The concession building that once served as the cave entrance sports an ornate square cupola on its roof.

13. The Heineman Winery and Crystal Cave. Across Thompson Road from the Mammoth Cave building is South Bass Island’s only operating winery. Now run by third and fourth generation Heineman family winemakers, the facility offers tours of its modern operations and of Crystal Cave during the summer. Discovered in 1897, the cave has numerous interconnecting chambers and, like a giant geode, features numerous unusual strontium crystal formations of various sizes. Yet another cavern, Perry’s Cave, is located directly across from the winery on Catawba Avenue. According to local tradition, this cave was discovered by Commodore Perry’s men and used by them for the storage of supplies prior to the Battle of Lake Erie.

14. The Charles Miller House. Farther down Thompson, at the corner of Put-in-Bay Road, is the restored home built by German vintner Charles Miller shortly after 1847. Another of the area’s
early German settlers, Miller (Mueller in German) came to South Bass in 1865. His former residence is Italianate in style, and its peaked window moldings are decorated with floral ornaments.

15. The de Rivera Wine Facilities. We continue along Put-in-Bay Road to a small clearing in the woods just past Meechen Road on the highway’s east side. Here is the de Rivera wine-producing complex. No longer used for wine making, the cluster of outbuildings includes a board-and-batten barn that has occupied the site since at least 1874.

16. The Viking Longhouse. A bit farther along Put-in-Bay Road is the final stop on this tour, and perhaps the most unusual attraction in the islands. Erected by Eadwerd and Joyce Hyl, the Viking Longhouse is an eighty-percent scale model reproduction of a traditional Viking barracks. Neither historic nor native to the island in origin, the structure was built using ancient Viking construction techniques: tons of beautiful white pine were joined by the mortise-and-tenon method as the Longhouse was put together barn-raising style between April and August of 1980. Mounds of earth and an earth-covered gateway mark the authentic entrance to the Longhouse, which also serves as a workshop and museum for sculptor Hyl’s artworks. Hyl and his wife conduct tours through the fascinating complex during the summer months.

The wine-producing complex