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Cruising the Great Lakes: Yes, you can do that

By Katherine Rodeghier Special to the Post-Dispatch

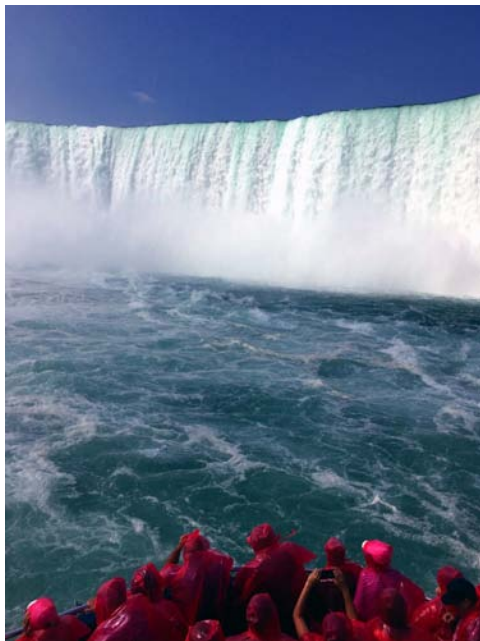
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Victory I docks near downtown Detroit. As on a European River cruise, Great Lakes ships often dock close to city centers. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier



Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame was designed by I. M. Pei. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier



While Victory I goes through the locks of the Welland Canal, passengers take a boat excursion to Niagara Falls. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier



Passing under Mackinac Bridge at dawn aboard Victory I during a Great Lakes cruise. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier



Horse-drawn carriages transport travelers to the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier



Victory Cruise Lines' Splendor of the Great Lakes itinerary travels between Chicago and Toronto. Credit: Victory Cruise Lines

"You're going where on your cruise?" asked our incredulous rideshare driver, his eyes questioning me from the rearview mirror. Thinking he was driving my husband and me to an airport for a flight to an ocean port or European city for a river cruise, he couldn't believe our destination: the Chicago lakefront, departure point for a 10-day voyage on the Great Lakes.

"I didn't know you could do that," he said, adding his family loves cruises; takes two a year. "I've got to tell my wife."

He's not the only traveler surprised by cruises on this vast inland waterway. Until recently, they've been sold primarily to groups on chartered trips so Average Joe Cruiser rarely heard of them. Victory Cruise Lines changed sales tactics when it began marketing to individual travelers after new owners took over in January. The response has been positive, said Luis de Sousa Marques, hotel director on my cruise on Victory I. "In the Great Lakes there is room to grow."

David Lorenz, chair of Cruise the Great Lakes, a marketing collaboration of cruise lines and tourism bureaus formed in 2018 to promote cruising in the region, agrees. "We believe that cruising the Great Lakes is poised for impressive growth in the coming years." The organization has begun to reach out to travelers desiring a unique and authentic vacation experience, he said. "People are looking for us; they just don't know it yet."

Aboard the Victory I

A cross between a river cruise and an ocean voyage, Great Lakes cruises navigate the five inland seas between the U.S. and Canada for sea days — um, lake days — with no land in sight. But as on a river

cruise, they dock near the heart of cities making it easy for passengers to explore on their own or take an excursion usually included in the fare. Though the late spring to early fall season covers school holidays, most ships lack facilities for children, so kids are rarely on board.



All Victory I staterooms face outside. Those on deck four open onto the ship's promenade. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

All Great Lakes vessels must fit through locks so they run on the small side — no 18-deck 5,000 passenger floating cities here. Victory Cruise Lines, one of three major players on the Great Lakes, has two 202-passenger ships remodeled and relaunched this year. Both have five passenger decks, four with outside staterooms measuring 146 to 335 square feet. My prowl around Victory I took me up to the sundeck, around the promenade and into the lobby for a peek at the tiny spa and fitness room.

Affable bartender Lourdes held court in the English-style tavern, keeping complimentary beer, wine and spirits flowing. Drinks also came included with lunch and dinner in two dining venues where the wait staff worked hard to remember passengers' names and food preferences. Four-course meals starred prime rib, Atlantic salmon, rack of lamb, pan-seared scallops. Meals became a time for mingling with fellow passengers when we opted to join tables of six or eight. Our dining mates were mostly seniors, well-traveled with stories to share.

The Compass Lounge served as the gathering spot for socializing over serve-yourself coffee and sweets, nightly entertainment, shore talks, afternoon tea and cocktail parties. We gladly gave up formal nights for the country club casual dress code.

Lake days, port days

Victory's most popular itinerary begins in either Chicago or Toronto and touches all five Great Lakes in 10 days. My cruise passed the Chicago skyline around dinnertime. All night and the next day we cruised Lake Michigan. So-called "sea days" give a real feel for the size of these lakes that hold a fifth of all the fresh surface water on Earth. Passengers passed the time working jigsaw puzzles in the lounge, joining in bingo and other games, digging into a good book or retiring to staterooms to nap or channel surf on flat-screens. Forget about WiFi and cell service.

At dawn the next day I was on deck as we cruised under Mackinac Bridge. "Aye, it's a grand morning," said Capt. Gary Kerr in his Scottish brogue as he stepped from the ship's bridge, a steaming mug in hand.

With no cars allowed on Mackinac Island, a horse and carriage took us through Mackinac Island State Park. Costumed interpreters fired cannons and played period music at Fort Mackinac, established in 1780. We stepped into the Victorian era at the Grand Hotel, one of the few remaining wood-frame hotels of the Gilded Age. After strolling the world's longest porch we headed for the hotel's famous — dieters with little willpower might say infamous — Grand Luncheon Buffet.

Engineers and maritime history buffs got their geek on in the twin cities of Sault Ste. Marie on the Canadian border. On the Michigan side we toured Valley Camp Ship, an old freighter turned Great Lakes museum. One of more than 100 exhibits attempts to explain the sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald memorialized in the Gordon Lightfoot song. Goosebumps rose on my arms when I touched two lifeboats, the largest pieces of wreckage recovered after Lake Superior claimed 29 sailors' lives in 1975. We had a look at similar freighters in the Soo Locks. Displays in the visitors center explained how they work before we witnessed the real thing from an observation platform and later from the deck of Victory I as it passed from Lake Huron to Lake Superior and back again.



Victory I passengers are treated to a performance of traditional dances at the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

We had a taste, or rather a sniff, of First Nations culture on Manitoulin Island in Ontario during a smudging ceremony at the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation. Our guide burned sacred plants, wafting the smoke toward our noses with an eagle feather to dispel negative energy. So purified, we relaxed during another sea day cruising Lake Huron to Detroit.

Diego Rivera's massive "Detroit Industry" frescoes wowed us at the Detroit Institute of Arts, and we were wowed again by the Henry Ford Museum's nine acres of exhibits. Among the standouts: The blood-stained chair where Abraham Lincoln sat the night he was assassinated and the Montgomery, Ala., bus Rosa Parks rode when she refused to give up her seat to a white man.



Diego Rivera spent nine months creating his "Detroit Industry" frescoes at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

In Detroit Victory I docks near Renaissance Center, convenient for exploring downtown, and in Cleveland a short walk from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, I.M. Pei's architectural wonder overlooking Lake Erie. We spent all morning reliving our youth through the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Elvis and the Supremes before an afternoon trolley tour of Cleveland's gentrifying and old-money neighborhoods. Who knew half the nation's millionaires lived in Cleveland in 1900?

We parted company with Victory I as Capt. Kerr slowly maneuvered through the eight locks of the Welland Canal bypassing Niagara Falls. A motor coach took us to the Canada side of the falls for a wet and wild boat ride to the base of the biggest cascade. Thank goodness for disposable waterproof ponchos. Lunch at an Ontario winery and a tour of more of the Niagara peninsula brought us back to Victory I and a dinnertime cruise across Lake Ontario. The sun was setting as the Toronto skyline came into view punctuated by the CN Tower marking the end of our journey.

At the airport the following day we summoned a rideshare. Another friendly driver asked where we'd been. This time we anticipated his response: "Really, you can do that?"

If you go

Cruise the Great Lakes: cruisethegreatlakes.com

Victory Cruise Lines: Splendor of the Great Lakes, 11 days including first night hotel in Chicago or Toronto, \$4,899 to \$9,299 plus \$459 port charges and gratuities of \$16.50 per day; 1-888-907-2636, victorycruiselines.com. Nine and 13-day itineraries available.

Passport: Required; must be valid for six months after trip.

Other Great Lakes cruise lines:

Pearl Seas Cruises: 210-passenger Pearl Mist based in Milwaukee, large outside staterooms with balconies, 1-800-981-9146, pearlseascruises.com.

Blount Small Ship Adventures: Two 83-passenger vessels, also cruises Erie Canal between Chicago and New York City, 1-800-556-7450, blountsmallshipadventures.com.

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