

Cruising the Great Lakes on an 11-day voyage



The 202-passenger Ocean Voyager cruises in Georgian Bay, part of Lake Huron. *Courtesy of American Queen Voyages*

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Posted 5/8/2022 7:32 AM

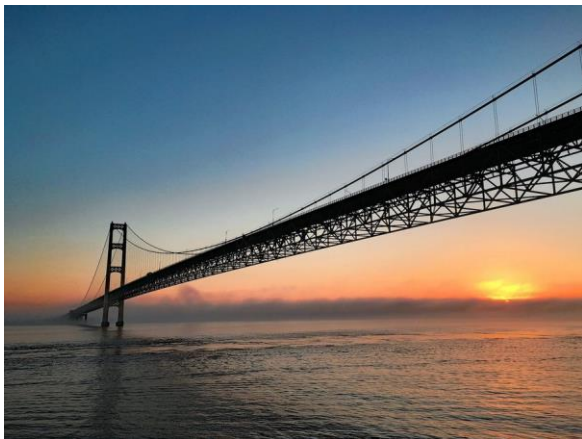
The COVID-19 pandemic pulled the plug on cruises of the Great Lakes after I experienced mine in 2019. Now these voyages of our inland seas are back ping-ponging between ports in the U.S. and Canada from May into September.

Little has changed about my 11-day Splendor of the Great Lakes itinerary between Chicago and Toronto aside from the name of the ship and the cruise line. [American Queen Voyages](#) took over Victory Cruise Lines and its two vessels, now called Ocean Voyager and Ocean Navigator. Each carries just 202 passengers, small enough to fit through locks connecting these inland waterways.

Think of a Great Lakes cruise as a cross between a river cruise and an ocean voyage. Some of the lakes are so vast that shorelines fade from sight as the ships spend an entire day cruising. We'd call them "sea days" on an ocean voyage. Once the ships pull into port, they take on the characteristics of a river cruise, docking near the heart of cities, making it easy for passengers to explore on their own or take a shore excursion. And like many river cruises, passengers tend to be up in years and, with no children's facilities, there are few little tykes on board.

Lake days, port days

The Splendor of the Great Lakes itinerary can be begun in either Chicago or Toronto and touches all five Great Lakes. I embarked in Chicago passing the city skyline around dinnertime. We cruised Lake Michigan all night and the next day. The experience gave me a new appreciation for the size of these five lakes holding a fifth of all the fresh surface water on the planet. I curled up with a book, watched my fellow passengers working jigsaw puzzles in the lounge, joined in bingo and other games, and retired to my stateroom to nap and channel surf on a flat-screen TV.



Cruising under Mackinac Bridge, joining Upper and Lower Michigan, was a memorable experience, especially at dawn. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

I'm not an early riser, but when the captain announced we'd be passing under the Mackinac Bridge around first light the next morning I made sure I was up on deck with my camera and my hands wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee. Dawn was just breaking as the ship slipped under the longest suspension bridge in the Western Hemisphere. Only the hum of the ship's engine and light traffic overhead broke the silence.

Having crossed the Straits of Mackinac, the ship now cruised Lake Huron to our first port, Mackinac Island. Motorized vehicles aren't allowed on this island, so our shore excursion took us on a horse-and-carriage tour with stops at Mackinac Island State Park where we witnessed a cannon firing, and the Grand Hotel, a Victorian beauty left over from the Gilded Age. After resting in rocking chairs on the world's longest porch, I joined passengers headed for the hotel's eye-popping lunch buffet.

A word about shore excursions: One is included in most ports, and others may be offered at an additional cost. On Mackinac Island, for example, two premium excursions -- focusing on lighthouses and island history -- cost \$79 each.



The 11-day Splendor of the Great Lakes cruise visits all five of the Great Lakes. - Courtesy of American Queen Voyages

Our next port sat on the Canadian border in the twin cities of Sault Ste. Marie, one in Michigan, the other in Ontario. The engineers among us admired the view of the Soo Locks from its observation deck. A visitor's center has exhibits explaining how the locks work and we saw them in action when our ship passed from Lake Huron to Lake Superior, then doubled back.

We had a taste of maritime history at Valley Camp Ship, an old freighter turned Great Lakes museum. Among the more than 100 exhibits, one devoted to the sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald stood out. I was especially moved by two lifeboats recovered from the freighter after Lake Superior claimed 29 of its sailors' lives in 1975 in a disaster memorialized in a Gordon Lightfoot song.

The next day we entered Georgian Bay for a port call at the world's largest freshwater island, Manitowish, where we were greeted by rugged granite outcrops and rolling farmland. We docked in its largest town, Little Current, Ontario, where the heritage of First Nations peoples blends with European history. The Church of the Immaculate Conception nearby in M'Chigeeng First Nation, Ontario, combines Roman Catholic teaching with indigenous culture in its tent-like architecture.



A shore excursion stops at the Detroit Institute of Arts where Diego Rivera's massive "Detroit Industry" frescoes are a hit. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Back in the U.S.

Another sea day, or rather a lake day, took us south on Lake Huron to Detroit where we docked downtown near the Renaissance Center. Our included hop-on-hop-off trolley excursion stopped at the Detroit Institute of Arts where I was wowed by Diego Rivera's massive "Detroit Industry" frescoes. Premium shore excursions, \$79-\$149 this year, travel to suburban Dearborn and the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation. My favorites on my self-guided tour of these nine acres of exhibits were the blood-stained chair where Abraham Lincoln sat the night he was assassinated and the Montgomery, Alabama, bus Rosa Parks rode when she refused to give up her seat to a white man. Longer premium excursions include the historical attractions at Greenfield Village next door and a tour of the Ford Rouge Factory, birthplace of the Ford F-150.

In Cleveland, our ship docked a short walk from the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, an architectural icon by I.M. Pei overlooking Lake Erie. After a morning spent reliving my youth through exhibits detailing the careers of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Elvis and The Supremes, I took an afternoon trolley tour of Cleveland's gentrifying and old-money neighborhoods. This year the hop-on-hop-off tour makes stops at the Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland History Center, The Arcade shopping center and the Old Stone Church, a downtown landmark.



Passengers can join a boat tour departing from the Canada side of Niagara Falls. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

From Lake Erie, we headed toward our last great lake, Lake Ontario, which meant our ship had to maneuver through locks to bypass Niagara Falls. As it did, we boarded motor coaches to the Canada side of the cascades for a thrilling catamaran ride right up to the base of the thundering falls. For those of us who chose to stand on deck, disposable waterproof ponchos kept us dry -- sort of.

After rejoining the ship, we cruised during dinner on Lake Ontario arriving in Toronto just at the sun was setting next to the CN Tower.

The onboard experience

Both the Ocean Voyager and Ocean Navigator were built in 2001 and refurbished in 2019. Each has five passenger decks, four with outside staterooms measuring 146 to 335 square feet. Two owner's suites have private verandahs.

Because the ships are small, some of the public spaces, especially the sundeck, spa/salon and fitness center, are tiny, but I always found room in the Compass Lounge at the heart of the ship. It served as the gathering spot for socializing with fellow passengers, serve-yourself coffee and sweets, nightly entertainment, shore talks and cocktail parties. American Queen Voyages' fare includes all meals plus pre-dinner cocktails, soft drinks, house wine, beer and non-premium spirits throughout the cruise.

For meals, I chose between two spaces and styles. In The Grill, a buffet was set out in a casual setting in the stern on deck four. In the more formal Coastal Dining Room, four-course meals -- prime rib, Atlantic salmon, rack of lamb, pan-seared scallops -- were served by an attentive waitstaff who often addressed passengers by name and remembered their food preferences. I especially enjoyed chatting with fellow passengers when I opted to be seated at tables of six or eight.

But it was in the English-style Tavern where passengers seemed to have the most fun, thanks to our affable bartender, Lourdes. After a day in port or at sea, we traded stories as we mingled over passed hors d'oeuvres and the signature cocktail of the day.

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If you go

American Queen Voyages: Splendor of the Great Lakes, 11 days including first night hotel in Chicago or Toronto, from \$4,699 plus port charges and crew gratuities of \$16.50 per day; (833) 548-0187, victorycruiselines.com/cruises/great-lakes-cruises/.

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

• *Information for this article was gathered during a cruise sponsored by Victory Cruise Lines, now American Queen Voyages.*

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