



ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Cruising the Great Lakes, expedition style



Viking's first expedition ship, Octantis, is the largest cruise ship on the Great Lakes.
photos by Katherine Rodeghier

By Katherine Rodeghier Special to the Post-Dispatch

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Viking's new ship Octantis glided under Milwaukee's Hoan Bridge skirting a bright red lighthouse where onlookers assembled to watch its departure. "Where are you going?" one cried. "Thunder Bay," came the reply from the deck. A man standing alongside Pierhead Light raised his arms goalpost style in approval — or was it disbelief?

Cruising the Great Lakes is far from the norm, accounting for a tiny fraction of North American itineraries. Rarer still: Cruises embarking in Milwaukee to explore the wilds of Ontario before ending eight days later at a mid-size city on Lake Superior.

But the Great Lakes Explorer is no ordinary cruise itinerary and Octantis no ordinary ship. Viking's first expedition vessel, it began cruises in Antarctica in winter 2022 before summering in the Great Lakes. Part research vessel, part floating five-star hotel, it has a full science lab staffed by a team of researchers and a fleet of watercraft toys, including two submarines.

The Great Lakes Explorer itinerary is its most expedition-heavy journey with adventurous shore excursions, hiking, kayaking and zipping ashore on Zodiacs to backcountry lodges. Other Great Lakes itineraries mix adventure with more traditional tours in Toronto, Detroit and Niagara Falls. Viking's second expedition ship, Polaris, launched late last year and also offers Great Lakes itineraries this summer.

Making Milwaukee famous

Viking Chairman Torstein Hagen greeted passengers in Milwaukee as my cruise was about to begin last year. Recalling his youth studying in the U.S. as a Fulbright Scholar from Norway, he held up a bottle of Schlitz beer, a favorite at the time. "What do 20-year-olds do? They drink beer," he joked, repeating the brewer's popular slogan: "The beer that made Milwaukee famous." Viking hopes to make Milwaukee famous, too, he said, with cruises turning it into "the Miami of the Great Lakes."



Map of Viking's Great Lakes Explorer itinerary. Credit: Viking

Viking considered Chicago as an embarkation port but could not get clearance to dock at Navy Pier. Instead, it offers Chicago as a two-night pretrip on some Great Lakes cruises.

The largest cruise ship on the Great Lakes, Octantis carries up to 378 passengers in six categories of staterooms, all outside. Most have Nordic balconies, floor-to-ceiling windows that lower to create a chest-high viewing platform.

Throughout the ship, the clean lines of Scandinavian design will be familiar to those who've cruised on Viking's ocean and river ships, as will the high quality of cuisine. Two fine-dining restaurants require reservations. The main café has a buffet with sushi and seafood bar, a grill with steaks made to order and a bakery open 24 hours to satisfy sweet teeth at 3 a.m.



Octantis passengers tour the Science Lab where researchers work on projects in cooperation with leading scientific institutions.

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Fares fund research

What sets Octantis — and now Polaris — apart from river and ocean siblings is a focus on science. Its 380-square-foot science lab isn't just for show. Researchers work in partnership with leading scientific institutions, including the University of Cambridge & Scott Polar Research Institute, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the University of Western Australia and Akvaplan-niva, a Norwegian firm investigating water issues.

Passengers engage with working scientists on tours of the lab and may even participate in research as citizen scientists. On my cruise, so many signed up to identify microplastics collected from lake water there wasn't an open time slot for me.

One morning I climbed to the top deck to watch the launch of a biodegradable weather balloon. Octantis is the first commercial vessel designated as an official weather station by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and U.S. National Weather Service. Down at Expedition Central on deck two, I watched the balloon's radiosonde transmitter download data as it rose more than 18 miles into the stratosphere.



Passengers witness the launch of a weather balloon on Viking Octantis, the first commercial vessel to be an official weather station sanctioned by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and U.S. National Weather Service. Credit: Katherine Rodeghier

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Who pays for this research? Passengers. Normally, scientists spend 40 percent of their time chasing grants, said Damon Stanwell-Smith, head of science and sustainability for Viking. On Viking expedition ships, they focus on research funded in large part by cruise fares.

Three of five Great Lakes

The Great Lakes Explorer itinerary cruises three of the five Great Lakes: Michigan, Huron and Superior. Together with Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, they hold a fifth of all the fresh surface water on Earth. Often called inland seas, the largest, Lake Superior, is the size of Austria, a fact that floors European passengers.

We set off from Milwaukee to cruise all night on Lake Michigan. Next morning, we passed under the Mackinac Bridge bound for Mackinac Island, Michigan, where motor vehicles are banned. Passengers explored the island on bikes and kayaks as well as on foot. Horse and carriage tours stopped in Mackinac Island State Park, the 18th-century Fort Mackinac and the Victorian-era Grand Hotel, one of the few remaining wood-frame hotels of the Gilded Age. I felt content to explore on my own with stops in town to sample some of its 14 fudge shops.



On its Great Lakes Explorer itinerary, Octantis spends three days in Georgian Bay. Its 30,000 islands form the largest freshwater archipelago in the world.

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Cruising into Canada on Lake Huron, Octantis spent the next three days on Georgian Bay, often called the Sixth Great Lake. Stretching 120 miles long and 50 miles wide, the UNESCO Georgian Bay Biosphere comprises 30,000 islands, the largest freshwater archipelago in the world. Here the itinerary dived deeper into expedition activities more adventurous than fudge shops and carriage rides. Kayak and Zodiac excursions skirted shorelines composed of Canadian Shield bedrock. Hikers followed trails into forests, sometimes scrambling over rocks on excursions rated moderate to demanding.



Expedition team member Alex D'Souza takes Octantis passengers for spin in a Zodiac on Georgian Bay, Ontario.

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A local artist gave tips on painting landscapes inspired by the Group of Seven artists who frequented the area a century ago. A youth group spoke about their indigenous heritage and work to re-create a birchbark canoe used by their ancestors. Some passengers enjoyed a fish fry at Killarney Mountain Lodge. I rode a Zodiac to Okeechobee Lodge at the mouth of a fjord and learned it was a hangout for Al Capone

and corrupt Chicago mayor “Big Bill” Thompson. The pair strung a wire across the fjord to keep out intruders.

Subs and SOBs

Georgian Bay gave me opportunities to try some of the toys on Octantis. After a mandatory briefing and weigh-in, I boarded one of the ship’s two yellow submarines nicknamed John and Paul after the Beatles. Polaris passengers ride on George and Ringo. After a tricky transfer from a Zodiac, I climbed down a hatch and snuggled up with five fellow passengers and our pilot for a half-hour descent 55 feet to the silty lake floor. Not much to see here, but I imagine the view must be riveting when Paul descends as much as 1,000 feet in destinations with coral reefs or polar ice.



Zodiacs transport Octantis passengers to Paul, one of the ship’s yellow submarines.

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A joy ride on one of two military-grade Special Operations Boats, dubbed SOBs, began inside the Hangar, an in-ship marina opening from a hatch in the aft, a first in the cruise industry. Once aboard, our boat eased into the water on a hydraulic ramp for a high-speed thrill ride. We zipped past lake houses in Ontario’s “cottage country” and circled a rocky island where dozens of white gulls and black cormorants perched and nested.

Through the Soo

Cruising from Lake Huron to western Lake Superior required a full day at sea with passage through the Soo Locks at Sault Sainte Marie on the Michigan and Ontario

border. While the crew passed out drinks on deck, passengers watched Octantis enter the Poe Lock raising the ship 21 feet.



Viking Octantis enters the Soo Locks connecting Lake Huron and Lake Superior. Credit: Katherine Rodeghier

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Next morning, the ship's tender docked at the hamlet of Silver Islet near one of the world's largest silver mines before it flooded and closed in 1884. I chose the easier of two hikes through a forest to the Sea Lion, a rock formation formed when magma erupted through fissures in sedimentary rock. Along the way, I stopped to admire views of Sleeping Giant Provincial Park, a series of mesas resembling a slumbering goliath, and caught a glimpse of Octantis framed by trees.

By dinnertime, Octantis had cruised the short distance to Thunder Bay, Ontario, where we would disembark in the morning. Most of the marine traffic here consists of freighters hauling grain, so Octantis is a rarity. During its inaugural season last summer, residents turned out to watch the gleaming white cruise ship pass by. Some raised their arms goalpost-style in welcome —or was it astonishment?

If you go

Viking Octantis Great Lakes Explorer: Eight days departing May 19, June 2, June 20, from \$6,495 including food plus beer, wine and soft drinks at lunch and dinner, at least one shore excursion per port, high-speed boat and submarine ride when available, access to the spa and specialty restaurants, 855-338-4546, [vikingcruises.com](https://www.vikingcruises.com)

https://www.stltoday.com/travel/cruising-the-great-lakes-expedition-style/article_3d6b3c21-9ed4-5a13-8171-18bfb42f7805.html