

# CRUISE

GREAT LAKES CRUISE FROM TORONTO TO CHICAGO  
HITS ALL THE HOT SPOTS ALONG THE WAY





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story by **LAURIE WALLACE-LYNCH**

There is an air of mystery and intrigue about the Great Lakes, which is one of the reasons so many people have a Great Lakes Cruise on their bucket list. Perhaps it harkens back to the olden days of voyagers and explorers who sailed the Great Lakes or hearing tragic tales of shipwrecks and lost lives, such as the one told in Gordon Lightfoot's *Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*.

If you didn't know that a Great Lakes cruise exists, you are not alone. The renowned Great American Steamboat Company, which runs cruises on the Mississippi, Columbia and other iconic rivers, purchased Victory Cruise Lines, and as of May 2019, began offering small-ship cruising on the Great Lakes from Toronto to Chicago and Toronto to Boston. The inaugural season was a resounding success, with 25 of the 35 cruises boasting more than 80 per cent occupancy and 12 cruises completely sold out. Of the 5,500 passengers who sailed aboard the 202 passenger M/V Victory I and Victory II, guest satisfaction scores rated 9.10 out of 10, according to a press release from Victory Cruise Lines.

Having recently enjoyed the experience of the 10-day Great Lakes Cruise from Toronto to Chicago, I agree with the top passenger ratings! This is a rare chance to explore all five Great Lakes on a relaxing voyage that offers scenery reminiscent of Group of Seven paintings.

Cruises leave from Pier 51 in the Port of Toronto (near the Netflix studios) where about 200 passengers and 84 crew members board the gleaming navy and white Victory I. While the crew took the luggage to the staterooms, guests convened in the well-appointed Compass Lounge for welcome cocktails and the mandatory safety drill. Many guests mentioned they had explored some of the Great Lakes on pleasure boats and were eager to cruise the lakes in luxury. Passengers would sail across Lake Ontario, through the Welland Canal to Lake Erie, into Lake Huron and through the historic Soo Locks at Sault Ste. Marie for a brief sojourn on Lake Superior, and then into Lake Michigan, top to bottom, ending at our destination port of Chicago. »



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ONE OF THE ADVANTAGES OF SMALL-SHIP CRUISING MEANS THAT WE ARE ABLE TO ACCESS SMALLER PORTS AND OFFER OUR GUESTS THE RICHNESS AND VARIETY OF EXPERIENCES AND LOCATIONS FEATURED IN EACH ITINERARY.





«“Victory I and Victory II are closer to a European river cruise experience and centres on the beautiful scenery of The Great Lakes, with a focus on the cities along the way such as Toronto, Niagara, Cleveland and Detroit,” states John Waggoner, Founder and CEO of the American Queen Steamboat Company and Victory Cruise Lines. Waggoner is the same person who saved the legendary American Queen steamboat from dry dock to transform it into one of the most opulent steamboats in the world.

Our first stop is Niagara Falls. As is often the case, we don't explore our own backyard and this was actually my first boat ride on the Hornblower (formerly the Maid of the Mist). Guests don bright red rain capes, and while you can stay warm and dry inside, it's great fun to stand on the outside deck as you get remarkably close to the falls and about as wet as someone pouring a bucket of water over your head! Then warm and dry and back on the bus, our next stop was the gorgeous Chateau de Charmes winery for lunch and a winery tour, followed by a few hours of shopping in historic Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Other ports include Cleveland, Detroit, Little Current on Manitoulin Island, Sault Ste. Marie, and a highlight - Mackinac Island in Michigan where no cars are allowed and you tour the island on a horse-drawn carriage that drops you off for lunch at the Victorian-era Grand Hotel, which boasts the largest front porch in the world!

I must admit to being totally, and expectantly, impressed by both Cleveland and Detroit.

Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is worth the visit alone. This massive complex has seven floors of state-of-the-art, and often interactive, exhibits honouring some of the world's greatest musicians.

Detroit was another nice surprise. Obviously, parts of the city seem to have had a reincarnation from troubled times and what we witnessed were several downtown streets lined with trendy, busy bars and restaurants, while swarms of sports fans streamed into the three downtown stadiums.

The Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation is so much more than a bunch of Ford cars! In fact, this vast museum is second only to the Smithsonian in terms of American cultural significance. Here you'll discover exhibits of planes, trains and automobiles of every make and model. The notable display of U.S. Presidential cars includes the limo in which President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. The touring *Star Trek* exhibit was understandably packed with visitors. Next we scooted over to the Detroit Institute of Arts where our well-informed guide pointed out some of the highlights of the more than 65,000 works of art. »

Bottom left: The Tavern offers guests a cozy, English-style tavern serving a variety of cocktails, beer and wine.

Bottom right: Guests can lounge on the Sun Deck on comfortable, cushioned outdoor sofas or lounge chairs under the pergola and enjoy an afternoon cocktail, evening sunset or a little late-night stargazing.

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« All of the excursions are included as part of the package. Every afternoon as we returned from our sightseeing, crew members welcomed us back onboard with a warm hand towel and a hot cup of cocoa. Late afternoons, guests would take a nap in the comfy and well-appointed staterooms or head to the Compass Lounge or Tavern to read, play cards, or take advantage of the free WiFi in the public spaces. I thoroughly enjoyed a visit to the onboard Latitude Salon & Spa under the direction of the wonderful spa manager, Karin Fourie.

Each afternoon as guests sipped the complimentary themed cocktail of the day, or the non-premium wine and liquor included as part of the package, the cruise director would explain what to expect the following day.

Dinner was served nightly at 7 p.m. featuring white linen tablecloths, first-rate service, delicious and varied menu options – my favourites were the lamb shanks and lobster dinner – along with impressive wines. Each wine is specially selected by Terry Lunder, hotel director of Victory Cruise Lines and American Steamboat



Company. Says Terry: “Offering exceptional hospitality is the heart of our operations and our staff are well trained and are passionate about making sure our guests are well cared for.”

A visit to Little Current on Manitoulin Island (Ontario), offered yet another unique cultural experience as we were honoured to participate in an interpretive tour and smudging ceremony at the Ojibwa Cultural Foundation.

“One of the advantages of small-ship cruising means that we are able to access smaller ports and offer our guests the richness and variety of experiences and locations featured in each itinerary,” says CEO John Waggoner. “We are thrilled with the success of our first season and look forward to expanding our offerings with the same authenticity and passion for service that exists across our fleet of riverboats as we head into the 2020 season.”

New itineraries for 2020 include cruises to the American Southeast, Yucatan Peninsula, Costa Rica and Panama, in addition to the Great Lakes, Canadian Maritimes and coastal New England. The cruise season runs from March 29 and will be extended through December for select destinations

For cruise dates and destinations, visit Victory Cruise Lines at [victorycruiselines.com](http://victorycruiselines.com).



Above: Located in the heart and soul of the social spaces on board Victory I, the Compass Lounge is the place for morning coffee and pastries, fun interactive games, evening happy hours or just quiet chats with friends. Ample windows allow those enjoying the space to watch the world go by.

Bottom right: Victory Cruise Lines' suites and staterooms are all ocean view and feature premium mattresses with 100 per cent Egyptian cotton bedding, complimentary robe and slippers, eco-friendly bath amenities, hair dryer, electronic safe, individual climate control and flat-screen television (satellite).

