

*This report is intended
as a very brief introduction
for newcomers to the Great Lakes
whether they are arriving
by water from the Atlantic or Gulf of Mexico
or by truck or trailer from the Pacific.*

GREAT LAKES OVERVIEW

CRUISING THE GREAT LAKES – AN OVERVIEW

THE WATER

The Great Lakes contain one-fifth of the world's fresh surface water. If spread evenly across the continental US, the Great Lakes would submerge the entire country under about 9.5 feet of fresh water.

It is truly fresh—in areas away from population centers in northern Lakes Michigan and Huron, or anywhere on the open waters of Superior—stop, drop in a bucket, and take a drink. The water will be clear, cold, and fresh. It's a special treat of the Great Lakes. Most people, in our bottled-water-happy world, will now think this writer is crazy; but in a number of remote locations the water of the Lakes is used without processing.

The total coastline of the Great Lakes in the United States and Canada is 10,900 miles (including connecting channels, mainland, and islands). Michigan's portion of the shoreline totals 3,288 miles, more coastline than any state but Alaska.

THE WEATHER

The ice is off the lakes in April and will not return till December. It does take a lot of time for that much water to warm up, so expect cool days and cooler swimming till July but comfortable temperatures well into September. Early cool temperatures give a greater chance of fog.

Weather systems generally move from west to east, but there is no prevailing surface wind pattern so you will see

winds in all directions controlled by frontal passages. Expect an occasional two-day blow. There will be periods of calm to light winds when a high-pressure area stalls.

VHF marine weather is provided by both the US and Canada. Nearly every broadcast includes the words "Winds and waves may vary considerably due to shore line effects." Marine weather provides good warnings for the occasional thunderstorms (which can be violent), and in the late summer these storms can produce water spouts.

The Great Lakes are known for the way they develop a short and steep wave train. Respect any forecast above 20 knots when crossing a fetch of 20 miles or more.

THE AREA

From the thumb of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, draw an east-west line on a chart of the whole Great Lakes. South of that line are most of the major



The Oswego Canal meets Lake Ontario. Photo by Jim Wooll...

population centers. Therefore, you will find developed shores and larger cities on most shorelines of Lakes Erie and Ontario and southern Lakes Huron and Michigan. If you enjoy big cities, don't miss Toronto and Chicago—they have spectacular skylines, and you can dock your boat and walk downtown.

North of that east-west line you will find decreasing populations and, on one shore of Lake Superior, 120 miles of wilderness. No roads come to the shore, no cabins, and no boating services, but there are plenty of protected anchorages.

The Lakes are rich in history from early exploration to resource development and finally industrial might. You will pass historic battle sites, early forts, and more lighthouses than in any other part of North America.

REACHING THE LAKES

The natural drainage is out the St. Lawrence River. The locks of the St. Lawrence Seaway will lift your boat the 270 feet from Montreal to Lake Ontario.

Canals reach Lakes Erie or Ontario via the Hudson River and Erie Canal. A route also exists via Lake Champlain to the St. Lawrence River. Access to the US river and barge canal system is available at Chicago to the Illinois River and the Mississippi.

This system has a 9-foot depth but some 20-foot bridges.

All waters of the Lakes are available to boats of every description. Currents in the connecting rivers are usually less than 2 knots. The large locks around Niagara Falls and the St. Mary's rapids are open to pleasure craft. The Trent-Severn Canal system with 43 locks links eastern Lake Ontario and Southern Georgian Bay—limiting depth is 5 feet and boats drawing more than 5 feet must sign a waiver to attempt the canal.

CUSTOMS

All the Lakes except Michigan are an international boundary. Checking in at customs means arriving at a designated Customs Port and reporting. In Canada there are many ports and reporting is usually by phone—not your cell phone but designated phones at marinas. You may be told to wait for an inspector.

The US has fewer ports and does not allow phone check in. There are some video phones on the lower lakes, but in general, plan on visiting a US customs officer on entry to the US.

You must check in every time you cross the border.

SERVICES

On the southern lakes it is a rare shore that has more than 20 miles between marinas. Only Superior has a shortage of marinas, so plan a Lake Superior cruise with services as your first priority. Tow-boat services also thin to nearly zero as you head north. Yacht clubs are abundant in the populated regions.

Your boat will need to be equipped with a holding tank in both the US and Canadian waters of the Great Lakes. Y-valves for overboard discharge must be sealed shut. Pump-outs



Cruising grounds in Lake Huron's North Channel. Jim Wooll photo...

are always available. Grey-water discharge is acceptable. You may also wish to set your VHF radio to US or Canadian channel settings.

CHARTS

US charts are available in all formats and free online. Canada has a copyright on its charts, and they are expensive in paper and electronically. Most Canadian charts are excellent, but in several remote areas, charts are still done in fathoms; you will also find notes telling you to correct the chart for GPS

offsets. There are some wilderness areas in Georgian Bay, the North Channel, and Lake Superior where there are uncharted (no soundings) waters for the explorers out there.

SHIPPING

Commercial shipping is light, but you will see some ships over 1000 feet in length. These freighters are longer than many aircraft carriers and even less maneuverable. Stay out of their way. Commercial fishing is minimal, but sport-fishing boats are numerous.

WHERE TO CRUISE

LAKE ONTARIO

Size—193 by 53 miles, average depth 280 feet.

The shores of Lake Ontario are generally low and wooded. You will see some rural areas on the eastern end of the lake. The western end in Canada is highly developed, with the cities of Toronto and Hamilton and suburbs. If you like to harbor hop, the Canadian shore offers more choices and fine facilities. If you like to anchor, only the eastern end of the lake offers protected bays.

LAKE ERIE

Size—241 by 57 miles, average depth less than 60 feet.

Because it is shallow, Lake Erie will produce steep waves quickly. A sustained blow from the west can lower the western end of the lake by several feet and raise the eastern end.

The shore line is generally low and wooded. The Canadian shore has a scattering of small towns. The US shore has several large urban centers, including Cleveland.

Most of the harbors on the Lake are river mouths that have been protected by breakwaters. Erie, PA, and Rondeau Bay, Ontario, are good natural harbors. The Lake Erie Islands are a pleasure boat mecca in the western end of the lake and are heavily used during the summer.

THE DETROIT RIVER, LAKE ST. CLAIR, AND THE ST. CLAIR RIVER

This connecting channel between Lake Erie and Lake Huron is highly developed, with Detroit at the center. There are a number of marinas, heavy use by boaters, and limited places to anchor. Of the 3.7 million registered recreational boats on the Great Lakes, nearly 10% of them—from runabouts to mega-cruisers—have their home dockage here.

LAKE HURON

Size—186 by 203 miles, average depth approximately 200 feet.

This Lake has a major extension to the east—Georgian Bay—sometimes called the sixth Great Lake.



The historic ghost town, Fayette, Green Bay. Jim Wooll photo...

It is possible to harbor hop up the western Lake Huron (Michigan) shore, stopping at a number of river mouths that have been converted to harbors. Few spots to anchor exist south of Alpena. The lower Canadian shore is similar.

Georgian Bay has exciting shorelines with limestone bluffs on its western side and rounded granite sculptured by the glaciers on the east and north.

An excellent cruising ground offering both marinas and wilderness can be found along the north and northeast shores of Georgian Bay and the North Channel. The north and east shore of Georgian Bay is called the 30,000 Islands. The area between Manitoulin Island and the mainland of Canada is called the North Channel. Both areas feature small towns with marinas as well as wilderness anchorages with spectacular scenery.

At the Straits of Mackinac (pronounced *mackinaw*) where Lake Huron joins Lake Michigan is Mackinac Island. This historic site is a draw for tourists and boaters. Motorized travel is forbidden on the island, so bikes and horses prevail.

LAKE MICHIGAN

Size—118 by 307 miles average depth of 290 feet.

The eastern (Michigan) shore of the lake is marked by sand dunes and natural harbors with the Sleeping Bear section preserved as a National Seashore. You can travel down the eastern shore stopping every 10 to 20 miles with a choice of anchoring or multiple marinas at each harbor.

The western (Wisconsin) shore is low and harbors have been formed in the mouths of rivers at a series of largely industrial cities, including Milwaukee and Chicago.

The northern end of the Lake features excellent cruising in Green Bay and Grand Traverse Bay. The Beaver Island area offers a getaway space. Cruising along the north shore of Lake Michigan is difficult as there are few harbors.

LAKE SUPERIOR

Size—350 by 160 miles, average depth over 500 feet.

Spectacular shorelines with sand dunes and sculpted rocks and rocky highlands and forest-

ed shores, wildlife, two national parks, and two national seashores, and not many people make Lake Superior special.

You can harbor hop along the Michigan and Wisconsin shoreline to Duluth but hops are long between marinas. If you go up the Canadian shore from the St. Mary's river, there are only two places to get fuel before you reach Thunder Bay—this is true wilderness cruising. The Canadian shore has many places to anchor where you may see a moose or watch a beaver bring back branches to the lodge for dinner. A boat trip to this lake takes planning and warmer clothing.

FURTHER READING

The most extensive set of cruising materials is provided by the *Port Pilot and Log Book* of the Great Lakes Cruising Club. It produces detailed harbor reports and cruising guides for all of the Great Lakes and connecting waterways. The paper reports reach nearly a foot high, filling three or four thick binders. These reports are also available on a single DVD.

The Great Lakes Cruising Club can be contacted at:

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The Chicago Harbor light. Jim Wooll photo...