Destination Focus: The emerging Great Lakes

BY **AARON SAUNDERS**

Nestled between Canada and the United States, the Great Lakes are rapidly emerging as one of the forefront small-ship, luxury, and expedition cruise destinations. Buoyed by the growing popularity of small-ship and river cruising, the Great Lakes are enjoying something of a modern-day renaissance after existing as a cruising destination over a century ago, when overnight pleasure cruises would run between the Canada–US border.

It is a destination that small-ship lines have longed to tap into, with varied success, for the past three decades. Now, however, momentum seems to be on the side of the industry: Victory Cruise Lines relaunched on the Great Lakes in spring 2025, and newcomers like Viking and Ponant are generating significant buzz about this close-to-home (at least for North Americans) cruise destination.

We joined *Victory II* for its first inaugural sailing between Chicago and Toronto to see what the region has to offer passengers.

The struggle for the Great Lakes

German cruise operator Hapag-Lloyd Cruises was among the first to base a modern passenger ship here for an entire season, deploying the 1997-built *Columbus* (now Plantours' *Hamburg)* on voyages through the Great Lakes, beginning in 1997. The ship was designed specifically for these waters, with a relatively narrow beam of 21.5 metres (70 feet) and a length of 144 metres (472 feet) that would allow her to fit through the locks of the Welland Canal that connects Lake Ontario with Lake Erie.

Hapag-Lloyd committed *Columbus* to the Great Lakes seasonally until 2011, when it sold off the vessel to Plantours. And while cruises to more far-flung destinations like European rivers have grown, the Great Lakes have remained humbled by their geography.

The season here is short: May to October. Anything past that, and you're subjecting vessels to fierce winter storms and icing conditions. Locks limit the width and length of vessels that can sail here, and vessels ride lower in the fresh water here than they do in the salt water of the oceans.

The list of cruise lines that have come to the Great Lakes in the past is small and littered with the ghosts of lines past. Pearl Seas Cruises, the internationally flagged affiliate brand of US-based American Cruise Lines, has brought its *Pearl Mist* into the Great Lakes since its launch in 2014.

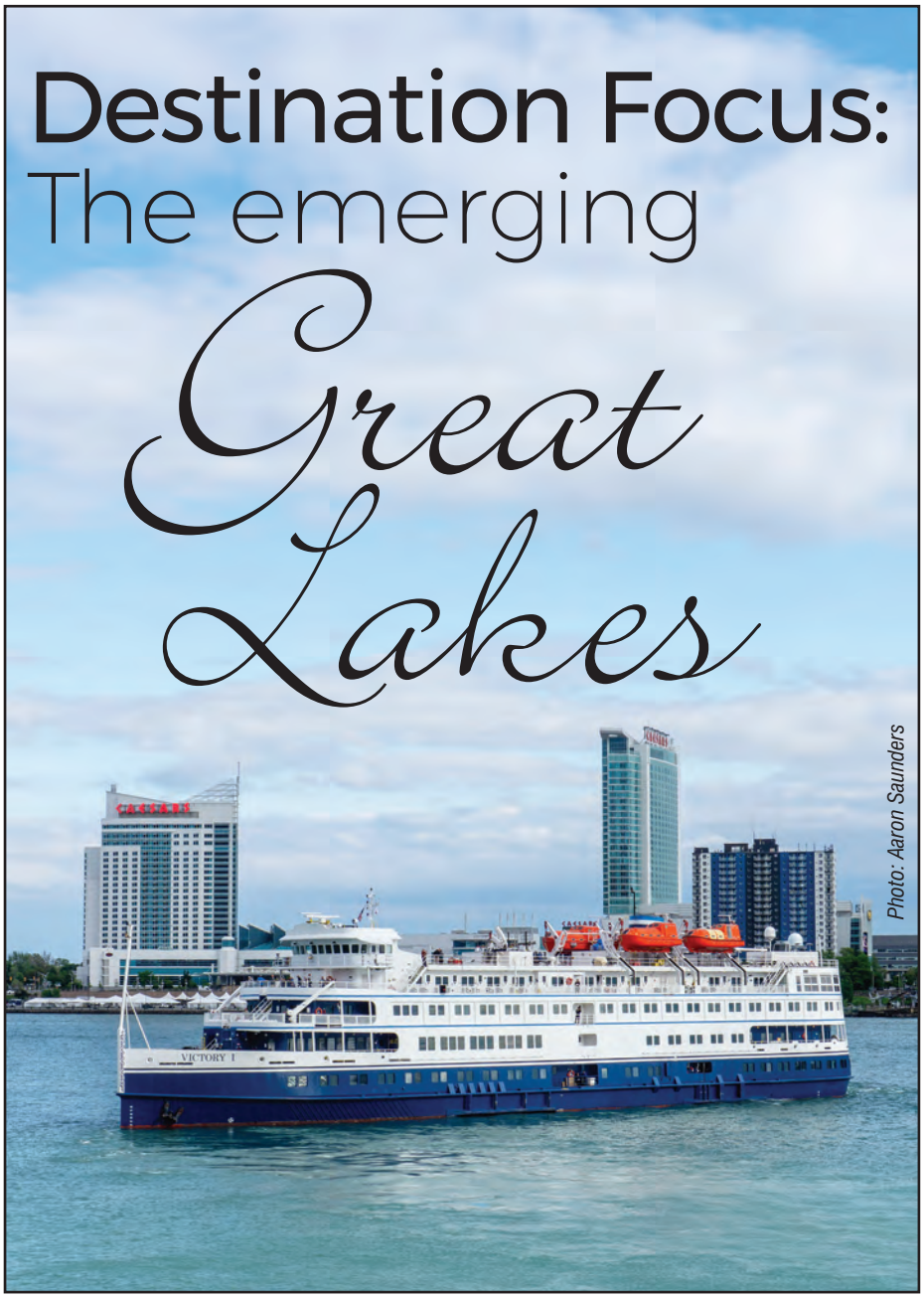

Photo: Aaron Saunders

***Victory I* departs Detroit, Michigan.**

Meanwhile, Victory Cruise Lines deployed its 200-passenger *Victory I* and *Victory II* here until the company went bankrupt in 2024 as part of the collapse of parent company American Queen Voyages.

But Victory is back, having relaunched both *Victory I* and *Victory II* this past spring. And they're not alone: cruising juggernaut Viking is here too, deploying the 378-passenger Viking Polaris on a variety of itineraries from Milwaukee, Thunder Bay, Toronto, and Duluth. French luxury expedition company Ponant, having just finished a successful inaugural winter season in the St Lawrence River aboard *Le Commandant Charcot*, also enters the Great Lakes market with its 184-guest Le Champlain in 2025 and sister vessel *Le Bellot* in 2026.



Photo: Victory Cruise Lines

John Waggoner, CEO, Victory Cruise Lines.

Victory on the Great Lakes

"If it was easy, everyone would be doing it," said Victory Cruise Lines founder John Waggoner in an interview with *CruiseTimes* about operations on the Great Lakes.

"The biggest challenge for awareness of cruising the Great Lakes on Victory Cruise Lines is time," said Waggoner. "We christened two ships in less than four weeks, and we were sailing with guests just over a year from when I purchased the ships. That is a quick turnaround."

"We continue to get the word out, and our travel advisor partners are the most important tool in our tool chest to do that. They know their clients; they know the Victory Cruise Lines experience on the Great Lakes and can effectively sell that experience."

Referring to his wife, Waggoner said, "Claudette and I just fell for the beauty of the Great Lakes so many years ago, and others will follow. It just takes time, and we thank our travel advisor partners for their support."

That support is growing alongside interest in the Great Lakes as a cruising destination.

"The demand has increased, which is why you see other operators coming to the Great Lakes," said Alexa Paolella, public relations manager with Pearl Seas and its affiliate, American Cruise Lines. "Because every cruise line on the Great Lakes does something slightly different, there's more variety for the consumer. We all have small ships, but Viking has got a little bit more of the expedition flair. Victory has its small ships; Ponant is good for the international traveller. And then Pearl Seas has, for years, basically just been quietly selling out every summer and just expanding our itinerary options on the Great Lakes."

Paolella also revealed that the itineraries that sell out the fastest are not the line's 7-night explorations of the Great Lakes but their substantially longer, 15-day journeys between Toronto and Duluth or the reverse.

"The longer [itineraries] sell out so far in advance," said Paolella. "And we only have one ship. So we're constantly tweaking the sailing schedule to add more of these 11-day, 15-day, and 14-day sailings, and pushing the season out a little longer in both directions."

Paolella said that *Pearl Mist* consistently operates at full or near-full capacity. And while the line put *Pearl Mist* through a complete refresh for the first time in its service life in 2023, the product tends to run under the radar compared with affiliate brand American Cruise Lines, which is in the midst of an aggressive newbuild campaign for its costal and domestic US river and small-ship fleet.





Not all ports of call are created equal

While the Great Lakes have a lore in North American history equal to that of the Mississippi or the Oregon Trail, in practice the ports of call are a varied bunch that may leave experienced cruisers disappointed in the shore-side offerings.

Embarkation ports like Chicago and Toronto are world-class cities on both sides of the 49th parallel. Cities like Cleveland and Detroit offer plenty of charms, including the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Museum in the former and the Henry Ford Museum in the latter. And while Port Colborne, Ontario, may not ring a bell, its nearest geographical feature, Niagara Falls, certainly resonates with passengers.

The ports of call in between, however, are a mixed bag.

Gregg Bruff, who owns the local bookshop and gallery next door in downtown Escanaba, Michigan, was blunt in his assessment when I asked if he benefited from passenger traffic from our call aboard *Victory II*. "No," he said. "We might get the odd straggler. Rarely. They do the tours that take them out and bring them back to the ship."

Part of this issue is demographics: the average age aboard many Great Lakes voyages skews to 70+. The idea of walking 10 minutes over flat ground is unpalatable for many clients, particularly in a town like Escanaba that looks as if its better days are behind it.

I got the same reaction when I stopped into Hereford & Hops Steakhouse and Brewpub down the street, which stands between a selection of abandoned or neglected century-old buildings.

"Nope," said the twenty-something girl

TOP: The theatre in downtown Escanaba, Michigan.
BOTTOM: The car-free tourist locale of Mackinac Island is popular with guests on the Great Lakes.

Photos: Aaron Saunders


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working the bar when I asked if people from the ships came in. She turned around before I could ask a follow-up. The patrons at the bar were 60-plus and resembled a meeting of the local Rotary Club.

Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan – across the river from Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario – was a similar story. Passengers come for the excursions to the Soo Locks and Valley Camp Museum Ship, but the remote docking location (an empty apron with pooling water sitting next to the Victorian-era power station), coupled with the average age of the Great Lakes cruiser, ends up limiting foot traffic into town.

Even the Soo Locks, which separate Lake Superior from Lake Huron, make for a fascinating entry that might shock those who have sailed the likes of the Danube or the Rhine. Factories belch smoke from the Canadian side of the river, while the American side is littered with crumbling buildings. Front-end loaders pushed rocks and debris across human-made berms, and fog mixed with dust from minerals being loaded onto freighters.

So numerous are the available ports along the Great Lakes, however, that no two cruise lines offer the same itinerary.

"We have such a seasoned and experienced team at Victory Cruise Lines, and when you are surrounded by experts like our COO David William Kelly and VP marine operations Bill Annand, they make everything look easy," said Victory's Waggoner. "Their detailed planning and relationships with the ports – Bill is a long-time Michigander working with these ports for decades – pays off for the guest experience and for me as an owner. I always surround myself with the best people."

Of course, the benefit of these Great Lakes sailings is that there are dozens if not hundreds of potential ports to dock in. And while Pearl Seas, Viking, Victory, and Ponant may offer similar embarkation and disembarkation ports, that's where the similarities end. Each line offers a unique take on the region, from Pearl Seas' voyages that hug the southern coast of Ontario, to Viking's departures from Thunder Bay, Ontario, that focus on the Lake Superior region, to Pearl Seas' massive 15-day voyage that covers all five Great Lakes in exceptional detail.

"Size really does matter when it comes to ships on the Great Lakes," said American Cruise Lines' Paolella. "We can dock almost anywhere thanks to the size of *Pearl Mist*."

For Victory, some unexpectedly positive experiences swapping ports have come out of dock congestion and scheduled events that would have impacted original calls.

"Due to a couple major events in Detroit, including the IndyCar race, we were forced to pivot docking there, which turned out to be a wonderful opportunity to try out Toledo [Ohio]," said Waggoner. "Home of the National Museum of the Great Lakes, our LakeLorian partner, Toledo was a port we had been eyeing for some time. The community welcomed us with open arms, and our guests enjoyed it."





Great Lakes, great demographic challenges

The Great Lakes attract a homogenous crowd. It is a market where entrants are almost exclusively 65+ and American. As a Canadian, I was the lone foreigner on my voyages – surprising when you consider that all major players in the region embark from Canadian ports. And while there are certainly geopolitical considerations that currently play into this, with many Canadian travellers choosing not to travel to the US to protest President Donald Trump's threats of annexation, this homogenous demographic is nothing new.

It remains, however, an obstacle that will have to be overcome in order to expand the diversity of Great Lakes cruising. With Ponant's entry into the market, international travellers will have good reason to visit this remarkable region.

One international line is planning on making a welcomed return. Hapag-Lloyd Cruises, which spent decades cruising the Great Lakes with its then-*Columbus*, returns in 2026 with the brand-new *Hanseatic Inspiration* for a series of extensive Great Lakes and St Lawrence River cruises that sail from Halifax to Milwaukee or the reverse.

Could the Great Lakes be the next small-ship battleground? All signs currently look positive.

TOP: Pearl Mist
BOTTOM: Niagara Falls, on the Canadian side, is one of the signature Great Lakes attractions.

Photo: Pearl Seas
Photo: Aaron Saunders