



A Viking invasion on the GREAT LAKES

History, scenery, the stunning Canadian Shield, a World Biosphere Reserve and the great outdoors make for a marvellous cruise

SUZANNE MORPHET



COURTESY VIKING CRUISES

“WHAT’S TO SEE on the Great Lakes?” asked my West coast born-and-raised friend Julie dismissively when I told her I was going on a week-long cruise from Milwaukee to Thunder Bay.

I, too, had been a little skeptical when I heard of Viking’s plan to sail its expedition ships on the Great Lakes. The *Octantis* and *Polaris* were designed and built to withstand polar conditions and to take guests to remote and potentially risky regions of the planet in comfort and luxury. The Great Lakes – in the heart of North America and bordered by towns, cities and summer cottages – hardly qualify as remote or risky.

If you grew up around the lakes, then moved away – as I did – it’s easy to forget their enormous beauty, so, it was with a coming-

home kind of curiosity that I boarded *Octantis* in Milwaukee on a warm evening last June, excited but with no big expectations.

Upon boarding, I realized that the ship was so inviting and luxuriously comfortable that I could happily stay on board all week. Indeed, I met a man who did just that. (I’ll introduce him later.)

Viking offers five itineraries on the Great Lakes ranging from 8 to 15 days including the newest and most comprehensive – the Great Lakes Collection – which sails from Toronto to Duluth, Minnesota (or the reverse) and takes in all five lakes.

I’d signed up for the Great Lakes Explorer, beginning in Milwaukee and ending eight days later in Thunder Bay. Of the 311 guests on board, most were American, but other Canadians were onboard too. Each morning we awoke in a new place and most evenings we sailed into the sunset as we slowly made our way west.

“The horses are always right,” joked John, my guide the first morning on a walking tour of Mackinac (pronounced Mackinaw) Island. “Don’t get in the way of the horses!”

Sitting strategically between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron,

Mackinac Island was for centuries home to the Anishinabek people, then became a British military outpost as well as the centre of the fur trade. It later grew into a quaint, car-free island famous for its fudge. Locals and visitors get around primarily by cycling or by horse and carriage. Even Amazon packages are delivered by the latter!

By happy coincidence, we arrived in early June at the start of Mackinac’s annual Lilac Festival. There were so many lilac trees and bushes in bloom – in more than 250 varieties – that everywhere we went, the sweet scent of lilac perfumed the air. It was a pleasant distraction when I rented a bike after my walking tour and pedalled to the top of West Bluff overlooking Lake Huron. On the way I passed the Grand Hotel, where other Viking guests were enjoying High Tea on what’s said to be the longest porch in the world.

After the manicured charms of Mackinac, the maze of granite islands that make up Georgian Bay’s Thirty Thousand Islands felt wild, almost pristine, even though this is the western edge of Ontario’s busy cottage country. It’s also, I learned, the largest freshwater archipelago in the world.

Left: A horse drawn carriage passes the Grand Hotel on car-free Mackinac Island.

Above: Viking *Octantis*.



(Clockwise from top left)
 Explorer's lounge.
 Viking Octantis.
 Nordic Junior Suite.
 Sunset at Ontario's Killbear Provincial Park.
 Sleeping Giant Provincial Park on Lake Superior near Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Near Parry Sound, some of us hiked the pine-clad granite of Killbear Provincial Park, others toured historic lighthouses on one of Viking's Special Operations Boats (nicknamed SOBst!), while still others toured the Georgian Bay Biosphere's administrative headquarters to learn how this UNESCO-designated organization is working to 'nurture a balance between humans and nature' in a region where 50 species are at risk.

The following day, while *Octantis* anchored off Killarney, I joined a kayak group to paddle a sheltered section of the shoreline with its exquisitely clear water.

"This is the start of the Canadian Shield," said Viking's lead kayak guide Elsa Ross. "Just look around. There's very little soil." White pines persevered anyway, some appearing to grow straight out of the red-streaked rock.

Our paddle adventure left us famished and we happily headed to nearby Killarney Mountain Lodge for lunch. The food on *Octantis* was so

good that I was reluctant to miss a ny of it, but a traditional fish fry lunch of local whitefish was not to be skipped either.

This part of northern Ontario was a favourite of the Group of Seven artists and one of the hiking trails near Frazer Bay is named for A.J. Casson, the youngest member of the group.

"He would have taken his easel and paints, his watercolours," said our guide Noemie when we arrived by Zodiac at the foot of Frazer Bay Hill the following day. "He would have hiked all the way up, and painted at the top." Following in his footsteps, we climbed through a light-filled forest before emerging to a stunning view of the long fjord from which Casson created his impression of *Baie Fine Entrance* on a hot July day in 1947.

More history came to life when we sailed through the Soo Locks. Opened in 1855, they link Lake Superior to the lower lakes and the St. Lawrence Seaway, allowing ships to bypass the rollicking St. Mary's River. Even

today, the locks are vitally important to both the U.S. and Canadian economies, supporting 123,000 jobs and moving 134 million metric tons of cargo annually.

On our penultimate day, I squeezed in as many excursions as possible after we anchored off Silver Islet: a hike through the old-growth forest at Sleeping Giant Provincial Park; a descent by submarine to the bottom of Lake Superior (Viking has two subs on each of its expedition ships); and a cruise by Zodiac to the tiny island that gave Silver Islet its name.

Tom, our local guide, explained that in the mid-1880s men painstakingly enlarged the islet by constructing wooden breakwaters and dumping crushed rock. Then, fighting wind and waves, they built a wooden shaft reaching 384 metres below Lake Superior. "I know that if I were leading that, I would have walked away and started farming or something on the mainland," Tom chuckled. "But they didn't, they persevered."



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Ultimately, \$3.25 million of silver (equivalent of \$78 million today) was hauled out before the mine flooded in 1884, making it the world's richest silver mine in its day. The water is so clear that when we float around the islet we can see the gaping hole – the shaft – where men once descended to work. Many timbers are still in place.

Looking back at all I did off the ship, you might think I had no time to enjoy being on-board. But come evening (and on the day we had no stops), I relaxed in the spa that offered an indoor pool, hot tub, steam room, sauna, even a 'snow shower', found quiet spots with comfy leather chairs in The Library to catch up on reading, and listened to live classical music while sipping a pre-dinner cocktail in the Explorer's Lounge.

Even though *Octantis* is an 'expedition' ship, which implies getting off and exploring, retired Toronto architect John Vanstone never left the ship. John was sailing with extended family for a floating reunion (his group called themselves the Group of Eight!) but an injured knee kept him on-board.

Still, he enjoyed daily lectures, fabulous food and the ship itself, including his stateroom. "You have the mirrors that give you that panoramic view. If you look carefully at the sink, that whole wall is a work of art. I mean everything, every location on that ship has been considered and is a work of art, in my opinion."

So yes, Julie, there's plenty to see and do on the Great Lakes. And the *Viking Octantis* will take you there in the utmost comfort. ■