

Great expectations

See all five of the Great Lakes in one go on *Ocean Voyager*. Jeannine Williamson reports



American Queen Voyages' *Ocean Voyager*

As the dark walls tower nine metres above my head, I feel as if I'm walking into a huge underground cave. In fact, I'm in the yawning hold of the former *Valley Camp* cargo ship, which is now home to a museum spread over two levels with more than 100 exhibits, including other boats and an expansive aquarium.

The colossal size of this 168-metre-long museum ship moored at Sault Ste Marie, on the banks of St Mary's River in Michigan, encapsulates the sheer scale of the Great Lakes shared by Canada and the US.

Known as the 'Eighth Sea', Lakes Michigan, Superior, Huron, Erie and Ontario cover 95,160 square miles – about the size of the UK – and collectively make up the world's largest body of freshwater.

These days, even *Valley Camp* is a relative tiddler compared with the other freighters – or lakers, as they're known – that ply these waters. I stroll along the riverfront to the viewing platform overlooking Soo Locks, which raise and lower pleasure craft and floating workhorses between Lake Superior and Lake Huron. By chance I'm there when the 306-metre ➤

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | THE US



OCEAN VOYAGER

This comfortable, traditional-style five-deck vessel, which was built in 2001 and refurbished just before the pandemic, offers an all-inclusive, intimate, small-ship experience enjoyed by passengers and crew alike. Many staff members, including officers, previously worked for large ocean-going lines but say they prefer being able to get to know their passengers and have time to chat to them. Equally, guests can expect to be addressed by name very quickly and for bartenders to remember their favourite cocktails.

There are two restaurants: the main Coastal Dining Room, with served dishes, and the informal Grill, with buffet dining and a daily carvery. Samples of dishes are set out at the entrance to the dining room, which is a nice touch and helps guests decide what to order. Lobster lovers will be in their element as instead of being a treat – as it is on many ships – it's one of the 'always available' options at dinner.

All the cabins are Outside Staterooms, with windows, and are pleasantly decorated. They're on the small side compared with more modern ships, but it hardly matters when so much time is spent on shore tours or relaxing on deck, in the large lounge or cosy bar. However, the only two staterooms with private balconies are the pair of Owner's Suites at the front of the ship. The other staterooms' verandas open out onto the public deck and have a couple of chairs and a table next to the door.



leviathan *Edgar B Speer*, capable of swallowing 73,700 tons of cargo, passes through. It's so long it had to be built in two halves. The ship is an incredible sight and one of many vessels – big and small – I see on my sailing from Toronto to Chicago, which takes in each of these aptly named Great Lakes.

NIAGARA FALLS

Combining the best of a multi-city break with a cruise, American Queen Voyages' itinerary on the 202-passenger *Ocean Voyager* also ticks off the bucket-list sight of Niagara Falls. Despite having seen countless photos and film clips, nothing prepares me for the reality of taking a small boat to the edge of the thundering cascades and being immersed, quite literally, in the Niagara 'mist'. It's like being caught in a sudden downpour, and we variously shriek and laugh as the boat passes through. The unbecoming bright pink plastic macs

ABOVE:
Niagara Falls;
Cleveland Rock
& Roll Hall of
Fame; Toronto

PICTURES:
Shutterstock/Nina
Alizada, Tathoms, CPG

handed out to everyone when we boarded suddenly prove their worth.

The Niagara trip, along with entry tickets to top attractions and hop-on hop-off city tours at all eight ports of call, is included in the fare.

The next stop is Cleveland, where I spend a toe-tapping afternoon at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, which covers every musical genre across its six floors. If viewed from above, the building is shaped like a giant record player, and is a modern-day landmark on the Lake Erie waterfront.

There's also the option to pay from around £65 to £125 for optional premium tours, including a lofty lunch at the top of Niagara's Skylon Tower. In the motor city of Detroit, where the first Ford Model T rolled out of the Ford Motor Company's plant in 1908, I join one of these tours to The Henry Ford, a museum charting all manner of American innovation that also includes ➤

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | THE US



ABOVE: Horse-drawn carriage on traffic-free Mackinac Island in Lake Huron BELOW: Heavy horses deliver supplies to *Ocean Voyager* PICTURE: Shutterstock/mivod

trains and planes. Neighbouring Greenfield Village is a living history museum where you can take a stately ride around the streets in a Model T.

More unique all-American charm awaits on Mackinac Island, occupying a little over four square miles on Lake Huron. This traffic-free island is a delight. During the tourist season, the world's largest herd of working heavy horses, around 600 in total, outnumber the resident population. They're used to transport visitors through the Victorian streets, past the undeniably Grand Hotel with the world's longest porch and into the tranquil woodland of the State Park.

I'm entranced to return to our ship to find some dry horses outside, which have just delivered provisions to the vessel. While they rest and eat large buckets of grain, the driver chats about life on the island, where almost everything is driven by horsepower. The other option is to walk or take a bike, and in the afternoon I hire the latter for a gentle stress-free ride around the eight-mile shoreline road, safe in the knowledge that I won't encounter any traffic. Mackinac Island is also known as America's fudge capital and Main Street is lined with tempting shops. I can't resist rewarding myself with a sweet treat when I drop off the bike.

Back on the lakes the itinerary includes two 'sea days', so-called because it really is like being on the ocean. There are times when we're 30 miles from land, and I take a cocktail up on deck to watch the sun set on another day on a truly great voyage. **TW**



MICHELLE DANIELS commercial director UK & Europe, Light Blue Travel

"American Queen Voyages has two small ships cruising the Great Lakes, *Ocean Voyager* and sister ship *Ocean Navigator*. Agents have a fantastic opportunity to offer something different with traditional, scenic, quality cruises through Canadian and US waters, and itineraries featuring many iconic cities, such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Toronto and Montreal. Spectacular scenery, varied wildlife and fascinating local cultures abound. As well as visiting remote islands, there is the world-famous Niagara Falls, the picturesque car-free Mackinac Island, pretty French-Canadian villages and Victorian-era towns. To ensure nothing is missed, destination experts accompany every sailing. American Queen Voyages offers an inclusive Great Lakes package to the UK trade, with a pre-cruise hotel, transfers between the hotel and ship, acclaimed cuisine at a choice of venues, unlimited drinks package, gratuities, Wi-Fi, shore excursions, plus live and daily entertainment and enrichment programmes – all included."

BOOK IT

American Queen Voyages

offers an 11-night cruise from Chicago to Montreal on September 30 for £8,250. The price includes flights, two nights' pre-cruise hotel stay, port fees, gratuities, private airport transfers, one premium excursion and a discount. aqvoyages.co.uk

