

TRAVEL NORTH AMERICA



Viking Octantis inches through a canal; Kakabeka Falls near Thunder Bay, the end point of the cruise, above; Mackinac's Grand Hotel, below.



Cruising through an inland paradise

A leisurely sail on the new Viking Octantis proves an ideal way to explore the Great Lakes, writes **Kate Armstrong**.

To blank out the world. That's how my fellow passenger Lauren explains what drew her to cruise North America's Great Lakes, the series of interconnected freshwater lakes – Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie and Ontario – that straddle Canada and the mid-eastern United States.

In Lauren's kitchen is a whiteboard etched with a map of the world. After visiting a location, she erases it from the board. The lakes remain as black outlines; shapes she's not yet explored. Until now.

I'm captivated by the idea of deleting, rather than highlighting, a destination. To keep an "un-map" that acknowledges the possibility of the unknown in a Google Earth world where everything has already been discovered.

I'm on a week's cruise on Viking Octantis that sails between Milwaukee (US) and Thunder Bay (Canada) across three of the Great Lakes – Michigan, Huron and Superior. Octantis, named after a solitary star in the Octans constellation that forms the pole star of the southern hemisphere, is the company's foray into expedition-class cruising. With her sister ship Polaris (to be launched around October), the new vessel offers an ultra-comfortable way to explore remote destinations, including Antarctica.

After unpacking in my snug but efficiently designed stateroom, I investigate the ship like an enthusiastic bloodhound.

It's hard not to love Viking's signature Scandinavian aesthetics: blonde woods, muted colours and clean lines. Photographs of Antarctic explorers line the corridors, while original artworks hang in stairwells and even overhead, such as the wire bird sculptures on deck two. But what sets the Octantis apart are its new expedition features.

The Hangar, Viking's first in-ship marina, houses more vessels than a James Bond movie set: 17 Zodiacs, 16 kayaks and two jet-propelled Special Operations Boats ("SOBs"). But the "ship stoppers" are two yellow submarines, named Paul and John, a nod to the Beatles (Viking Polaris will host Ringo and George).

Other areas unique to the expedition category? The Finse, an outdoor terrace with sunken "fire" pit; plunge pools of varying temperatures – frigidarium, tepidarium and caldarium; and The Hide, the nearest thing to a speakeasy-style drinking den – Viking doesn't promote it intentionally; locating it is part of the adventure.

But discovery comes in not one but two forms: it seems the design of the expedition



ships' staterooms is based on a Norwegian *bird* hide. While most cabins lack a balcony in case of inclement weather, windows can be lowered to elbow height, which is ideal for scanning with binoculars. My partner is rewarded with a bald eagle; over 300 bird species flock to the area.

Back to the journey. Our first landmark is the Mackinac Bridge, the longest suspension bridge between anchorages in the western hemisphere. It's located at the juncture of Lake Michigan and Lake Huron, our next destination.

In Lake Huron, we're ferried ashore to Mackinac Island, a quaint, car-free locale that's known for its quirky offerings: horse-drawn carriages; numerous fudge shops; and the Grand Hotel, a stunning, historic building constructed in just 93 days in 1887.

On board Viking Octantis

■ The Polar Class Viking Octantis hosts 378 guests, 189 staterooms and 256 crew members.

■ **Restaurants & bars** The ship's dining options include Mamsen's, the Norwegian-themed "snack" bar. Don't miss the *fyrstekake*, a delicious almond tart. The World Café serves global dishes throughout the day and incorporates a grill and sushi bar (evenings only). The two specialty restaurants are The Restaurant and Manfredi's; the latter serves Italian fine fare including *bistecca fiorentina*, a delectable Florentine-style steak. Bars include The Hide,



Coffee time in the Living Room.

Cruise itinerary

Milwaukee, US to Thunder Bay, Canada



Bill Pitfield, at left, the owner of Killarney's general store, and his friend Justin Low recall times past in their small home town. PHOTO: KATE ARMSTRONG

History buffs can poke around Fort Mackinac, built by the British in 1780.

Over the next two days, the ship will meander through Georgian Bay, nicknamed the "sixth Great Lake" for its location, to Lake Huron's north-east. It's part of the Georgian Bay Biosphere Reserve, comprising 30,000 islands. We alight at the town of Parry Sound, one of many onshore excursions, and head to Killbear Provincial Park, a half-hour bus ride away.

Here, we're guided through a forest of hemlock and spruce trees and over grey-pink granite boulders. It's a relaxing start.

The following morning we hit the shores of Killarney, a former fishing township (population 250). Here, I'm drawn by a faded, weatherboard building. A sign across

its top is imprinted in old-fashioned letters: "Head Quarters for Tourists & Campers Supplies". It's the general store that dates to the 1880s.

I chat with store owner Bill Pitfield and his friend, Justin Low, charming 87-year-olds and fifth-generation residents who reminisce about their childhoods here in the 1940s: winter ice (lots), roads (none until 1962) and fishing (the industry collapsed in the 1950s; these days, walleye and sturgeon are plentiful). Bill hands me a published history of Killarney and waves away my offer of payment.

Back on Viking Octantis I fall into a comfortable routine. Breakfast at the World Café. Then an onshore expedition or kayak or boat trip. After lunch, I relax in the Living Room and browse the extraordinary book collection of art, travel and first-edition fiction titles that were curated by London's Heywood Hill bookshop. Afternoons bring educational lectures in The Aula theatre, unique to the expedition ships, and notable for its white leather seats.

Here, onboard geologists, ornithologists and other scientists regale their specialties. I learn (or relearn? Year 9 geology seems a long time ago) how continental ice sheets melted and retreated and created the Great Lakes. And the difference between igneous and sedimentary rocks that form the Canadian Shield, a geological phenomenon that extends from the lakes to the Arctic Ocean.

One morning at sunrise, keen passengers meet on deck to observe two scientists as they release a biodegradable latex weather balloon into the sky. The readings are fed to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that runs the US National Weather Service; Octantis is one of 103 civilian weather stations.

Throughout the day, I visit Expedition Central, the hub for scientific resources, to review the balloon's progress. (It reaches a height of 30 kilometres and registers minus 62 degrees Celsius). Elsewhere, in the onboard laboratory, passengers peer into microscopes and learn about the likes of microplastics and water quality.

Claustrophobia rules me out of the submarine trip, but my partner is happy to take the plunge. He reports back with news of a fish sighting and beautiful aqua hues, but not much else 45 metres below, although it's apparently an extraordinary experience, and a definite crowd pleaser.

By the next morning, Octantis has dropped anchor in Frazer Bay, close to the mouth of Baie Fine, one of the longest freshwater fjords in the world. Cedar, birch and poplar trees form a chaotic carpet of greens, like a coarse woollen tapestry from the 1970s. No one captured this beautiful



area better than artist AJ Casson, one of the famed Group of Seven painters of the 1920s and 1930s who, inspired by nature, camped here and painted the surrounds.

Our group ventures a short way up the fjord via Zodiac. We disembark at a small jetty and tackle a trail, the Casson Peak hike, to one of the painter's favourite destinations. It's hard going. We clamber over rocks and roots. A woodpecker emits a "tac-tac-tac" as it attacks a trunk. After an hour, we reach the

summit, a platform of granite rock, and gasp at the vista: a series of islands through which snakes the forest-lined fjord. It matches the artist's tableau of "The Entrance to Baie Fine", except for the Viking ship that is positioned perfectly on the lake, as though for an advertising campaign.

Suddenly, the clouds roll in and the birds start squawking. A storm is approaching. Our guides, anxious to leave because of slippery rocks, hasten us back to the Zodiac.



The deluge hits while we're returning along the fjord. Choppy water forces a change of plan and we pull up beside Okeechobee Lodge, where we take refuge. This remote, wooden cabin, so the story goes, was the hideout for 1930s gangsters, and hosted two sitting US presidents, Truman and Ford. Later, safely back on Octantis, we're grateful for our in-room drying closet.

If there were to be a highlight, it's entering Lake Superior via the gravity-fed Soo Locks. We gather on deck and peer over the rails. The ship inches upwards 6.4 metres before gliding into this marvellous bed of water.

Scientist Loreen Niewenhuis, the ship's dynamic Great Lakes specialist, is ecstatic. "Lake Superior! The deepest. The cleanest. The wildest. The largest [by surface area]," she exclaims.

Lake Superior contains 10 per cent of the world's fresh water; the Ojibwe First Nations call it an "inland sea". It's easy to see why: we soon lose sight of land and the grey clouds blend with the lake, creating a sense of infinity.



From left: One of two submarines in the ship's 'Hangar', seating outside an Explorer Suite; and the clear waters of Lake Superior.



Need to know

Viking Octantis will sail the Great Lakes on the "Niagara and the Great Lakes" (and other) itineraries between late April and late September, 2023. See www.viking.com for sailing dates.

Rates A lead-in stateroom starts at \$7995 per person, or take the Owner's Suite for \$20,995.

Eventually, land again: the outline of Sleeping Giant mountain comes into view. We visit Silver Islet, an historic mining town on the Sibley Peninsula. Between 1870 and 1884, its underwater silver mine extracted more than \$US3.25 million of silver (about \$US98 million in today's terms).

We wander through surrounding boreal forest and along the shoreline, where we spot logs that ebb and flow in the shallow waters. Crude notches carved into the wood indicate that these were from the mine.

Back on board, I peer over the rim of my whisky glass and through the expansive bank of windows in the Explorers' Lounge. The clouds linger. I'm mesmerised by the blanket of grey. It's a cliché, but I wonder what's out there. It's thrilling to contemplate.

Perhaps that's how expeditioners feel as they head off: a void signifies the unknown, the unexplored.

Or, as in the case of Lauren, she of the whiteboard, it can mean quite the opposite. **L&L**

The writer was a guest of Viking Cruises.

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