

GREAT LAKES CRUISE - April 29 -May 6, 2025

A trip like this has been on my to-do list for a long time. Up to the early 1960s, there were US and Canadian flagged boats that cruised the Great Lakes during the summer months. There were some smaller, foreign-flagged cruise ships doing this at the end of the 20th century. Historically there were also RR car ferries, some of which carried passengers, which sailed between Michigan and Wisconsin. The *SS Badger* was the last of these and its service ended in Nov. 1990. However, the *Badger*, built in 1952 [just like me] was converted into a vehicle /passenger ferry that still operates in 2025. My family sailed on the *Badger* on July 17, 1999. It is EZ for me to recall that date as we sailed the day **after** JFK JR [“I’m no Lindberg”] died in a plane crash off Hyannis Mass.

However, the idea of doing a Great Lakes cruise became a real possibility when Viking started cruising there in 2022, first with the *Octantis* and then since 2023 with that and the *Polaris*, its sister ship. Last year, we booked a seven-day cruise from Milwaukee to Toronto for the dates above. They were picked to take advantage of the lowest fares [they’re much higher in late spring and early summer] and to be approximately seven weeks after the scheduled replacement of my right knee [didn’t happen]. A longer cruise that included Lake Superior was available but it was **much** more expensive. What follows is my write-up of this trip mostly on a functional basis, rather than chronologically as I have done in previous trip reports.



Getting To Milwaukee [MKE]

When we booked the cruise, Viking’s then current promotion included FREE airfare. The flights that they offered us were on either UAL or DAL and involved connections in Detroit or Chicago. Neither worked for me. For an additional \$44 each, Viking offered flights on AA, albeit via CLT, so we went with that [route in green on map]. On Tuesday 4/29, we drove to the SEPTA’s



Jenkintown station to catch the 555AM train to the PHL. Our flight was scheduled to depart at 835AM. As the train approaches the airport, I always check to see if our flight was moved to a different gate or even a different concourse. Well, that didn’t happen this time. Instead, the flight to CLT was delayed for several hours,

meaning we would miss our connection to MKE. The nice thing about flying AA is that I have *Executive Platinum* status so when things go wrong, they generally take care of us.

In a very short time, AA offered several alternative routings. One via DFW at 840AM was the best and with a connection that should have got us to MKE at 410PM CDT. I took that and shortly thereafter we were at the counter to check-in for those flights. We had three bags to check; two were for us and one full of stuff stored in our PA house that belonged to our daughter Erin who had moved back to Wisconsin from Oregon, the week before. Our flight to DFW left 14 minutes late but made up some time and arrived only six minutes late at 1133AM. We were several down the list, so no upgrade. Unfortunately, while we were enroute to DFW, something happened with the connecting flight to MKE such that it was now delayed till 343PM CDT.

We landed in C and the flight to MKE was in A. I looked at the restaurant in both concourses and it seemed there were more choices in A, so we rode the Skylink people mover there. We had

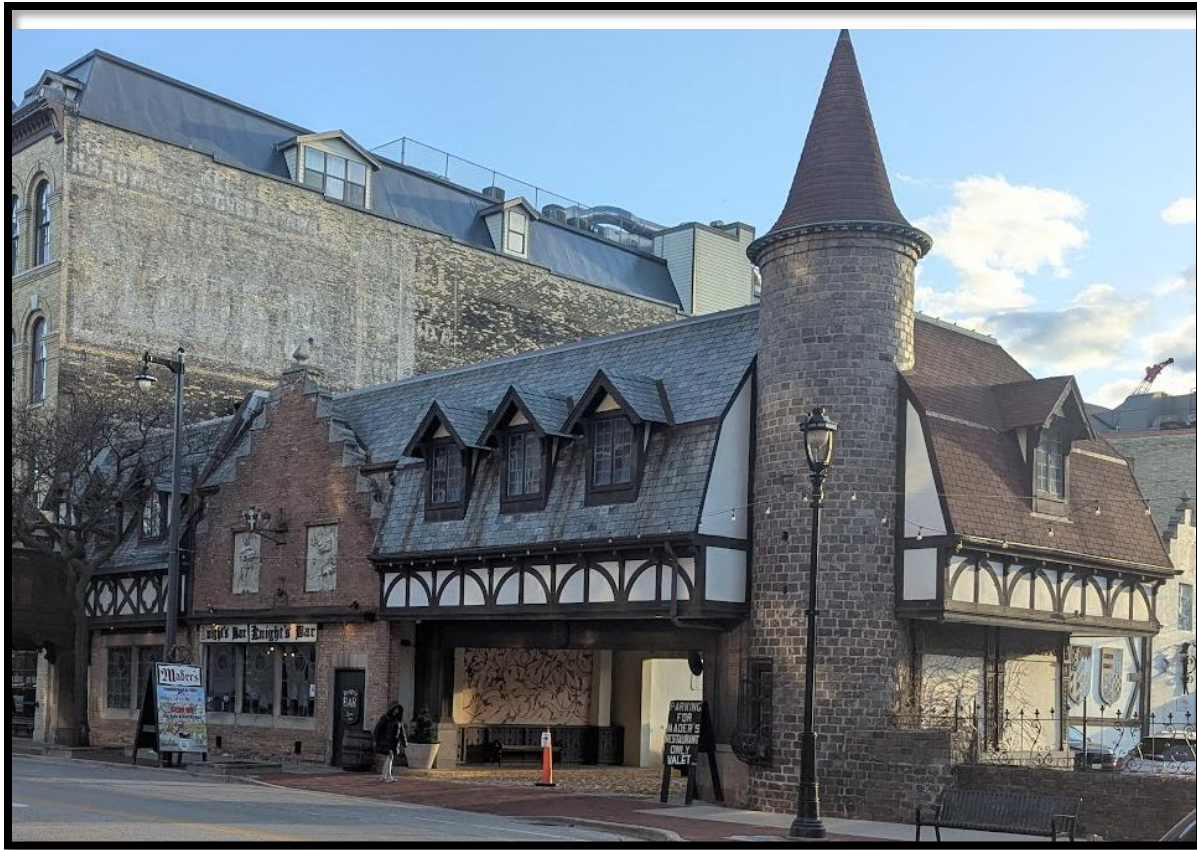


an expensive [\$96] but good lunch at **Pappadeaux Seafood** before heading to our gate. Something was clearly wrong when I looked at the MKE flight in the APP as there was no incoming flight. When I first looked at this flight back in PHL, the incoming plane had landed in DFW the night

before. We waited and waited. Eventually, we had to move to another gate where there was an A320 plane for us. Once on board [again no upgrade] I asked the crew what happened, and they told me their plane had been “stolen for this flight”. Turned out the plane originally intended for our flight had a maintenance issue and the replacement part did not show up in time. We took off 1’49” late and landed at 547PM or 1’37” late. Had things gone as originally scheduled [but often don’t!], we would have been in MKE at 1227PM, and Viking would have transferred us to the ship. We planned to go out to dinner with Erin and Jason who would pick us up at the ship. We have been to MKE more than a few times and most recently in Nov. 2022 when Carol & I flew there so I could attend RAILFEST and we could see Erin & Jason.

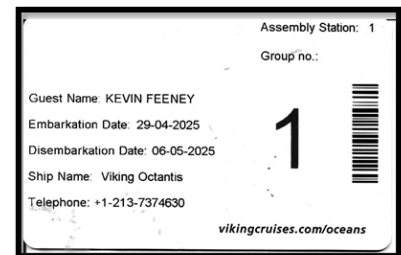
We called Erin from Dallas and told her we would be late. We called again as soon as we landed, and she came to pick us up from their apartment close to the airport. We left our two suitcases with Viking at the airport so that they could be delivered to our stateroom on the ship. Erin dropped off the other bag at her apartment and we met up with Jason who was just getting home from work. As it turned out, they will be moving into a bigger apartment and we all drove there to drop off some things before heading to downtown Milwaukee for dinner at **Mader’s**, a famous

old-school German restaurant. I have been there at least twice before, once at the 2010 NMRA



convention with model RR friends [including Eric Dervinis who passed away on 4/27 and whose funeral we'd missed while on the cruise] and back in Nov. 2022 with Carol. We had a nice leisurely dinner with a bottle of Reising wine. The portions were yuge such that Erin & Jason both went home with leftovers. With tax and tip, the bill was \$292. After dinner, they drove us to a food store where Carol bought a 12 pack of Diet Coke for her and some couch drops for me. It was after 9PM when they dropped us off at the pier, which was next to MKE's sewage plant. MKE is building a new cruise terminal for the Viking and other cruise ships that now make port calls there. However, the \$17 million terminal will not be completed till the 2026 season. It will be built near the existing ferry terminal from where each May thru October, the **Lake Express** catamaran ferry crosses Lake Michigan to Muskegon, Michigan in just 2.5 hours.

We needed to go thru security to board and were then issued our on-board ID cards. Our stateroom was 2015 and when we got there our luggage was on the bed. As Carol settled in, I wanted some dessert and took advantage of the ship's 24-hour room service to order a piece of cheesecake and a glass of iced tea, which came in a few minutes. However, even before I could finish my cake there was another buzz on the door. Carol opened the door to find another man from room service with trays of sandwiches and desserts plus a large bottle of German sparkling wine. I guess Viking assumed that by arriving late, we missed dinner; we kept the wine and the desserts and thanked the server. Carol quickly realized that she



had left her insulated cup in Erin's car so we called and asked her to bring it to the ship on Wednesday before it left port. Given we were up at 445AM EDT, it was an early night.

The Ship

This is drone picture of the ship taken on 4/30 by friend Mike Yuhus who lives in Wisconsin.



Octantis and *Polaris* are Polar Class 6, purpose-built expedition ships, built in 2021 and 2022.



PC-6 means the ship can operate when there is floating ice and in fact can break ice that is up to one year old. This picture is when the ship when it reached Antarctica last November. The *Octantis* cruises there in our winter and then makes a long positioning cruise to Canada

and eventually gets to Greenland & the Arctic in the late spring. Both ships spend part of the spring cruising in the Great Lakes. The *Octantis* started a 76-day positioning cruise back in mid-February from Ushuaia at the extreme southern tip of Argentina that ended on April 29th in MKE. We learned that 34 folks made that entire trip while perhaps 000s more were on board for various segments of the voyage. Starting 9/25/25, the *Octantis* is offering an 85-day positioning cruise from Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, to Buenos Aires, Argentina with staterooms starting at a mere \$76,395 per person.

As cruise ships go these days, the *Octantis* and *Polaris* are both quite small, being only 672 feet long and 77 feet wide [more on that later]. *Octantis* has seven decks with most staterooms on Decks 3 & 4 plus half of Deck 2. At the stern, there is a large internal area called the **Hangar** that is two decks tall with doors to the outside on three sides. Inside are two mini subs, two military grade assault boats plus a whole bunch of kayaks and zodiacs that are typically used in the polar regions. This view, also from Mike Yuhas, shows the ship's stern. The flat area above the hangar has two fire pits that are used in polar regions.



The *Octantis* carries just 378 passengers and was full on our cruise. In fact, it was actually over sold like the South American Cruise we were supposed to take this past February. I talked with two passengers who received a message from Viking asking them to move to any other Great Lakes cruise for FREE but they didn't. You may recall we accepted Viking's offer and rescheduled our FREE South American cruise to Dec. 2025. Virtually all of the passengers were Americans. I asked and was told there were just four Canadians on board. I met one couple from the UK and another couple from Australia who were otherwise in the US visiting a son who lives in Michigan. I am 72 and Carol is 70 but many of the passengers seemed older than us. I talked with one man who said he was 94 and still drives! There were more than a few with canes plus a small contingent of the Walker Brigade. FYI - none of these folks would be allowed on one of the polar expedition cruises as Viking requires those passengers to have complete mobility, medical pre-clearance plus a \$250K medical evacuation policy.

Serving the passengers were an international crew of 260. The senior officers and department heads were all European except for the restaurant manager who was from Peru. There were over 20 on the Expedition staff and they were from Argentina, Europe, and Canada. Admittedly, we never saw the engine crew, but with very limited exceptions, the deck, restaurant, hotel and other

staff were Filipinos, Indonesians, Indians with a few Africans. In the World Café, one of the supervisors was from Serbia and a new server from Bosnia joined the crew in Detroit. The operating staff are on board for six-to-10-month contracts while the officers and Expedition staff have shorter ones. The Expedition Leader, Pablo, left the ship in Toronto to attend mandatory firearms training followed by a short vacation. Because of the threat of polar bears in the Arctic, the Expedition team must have someone carrying a rifle. There is no need for this in Antarctica.

Our Stateroom



We originally booked the lowest [cheapest] stateroom category [N1] but not a specific room. We were told that we would be in that category or better. As time went by, we were assigned to Stateroom 2015 in that class. It was a very decent size with 215 sq. feet. I have certainly stayed in some hotel rooms that were smaller. It had a king-sized bed, a desk, and a small sitting area. The bathroom was decent with a good-sized shower. There was a mini fridge that held six cans of soda. There were built-in drawers and three closets, one of which was a clothes warmer [pictured]. While intended for use in the polar regions, we used it to dry our laundry. There were two launderettes that were free to use with soap included. Our stateroom

was the same size as the next three-room categories [N2/DN2/DN3], all of which had a “Nordic Balcony”. Actually, there are NO balconies on the ship at all, just “a floor-to-ceiling distortion-free glass window of which the top glass lowers for a sheltered, al fresco lookout”. The price difference among the lowest four categories results from where the stateroom was located on the ship, how often the mini fridge is restocked, earlier access to the ship on the departure day, and earlier ability to book shore excursions and restaurant reservations.

Food & Beverages

For many folks, this is the most exciting part of the cruise. On board there were a variety of places to eat or have drinks. The most popular was the **World Café** that occupied the rear half of Deck 5. It was open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. It was shaped as a long square U. At the bottom of the U was the bakery and across from that were the desserts and gelato bar. The legs of the U had identical entrée and salad station on both sides. However, to the far rear things were different; one side had a grill while the other had a sushi stand. I had my breakfast there all but one day. Carol is still on a weight mgmt. program and usually just had a breakfast shake in the room, though some days I brought her bacon and sausage from the Cafe. For breakfast, I usually had a Nordic waffle [very thin] and bread from the excellent bakery led by this master baker. The sourdough bread with fruit was to die for. I don't eat eggs but made-to-order omelets were available. One day we both overslept and the Café closed at 930AM.



Fortunately, Mamsen's, described as a deli café, was open till 1030AM. Had I missed that, 24-hour room service was available. On Sunday evening after the trip to Niagara Falls, a woman on our deck said she was hungry. I said you have 24-hour room service. She had no clue this was available and said now I find out at almost the end of the cruise.

For lunch, there was plenty to choose from. There were entrees, cheeseburgers from the grill, a daily special pasta, a decent pizza and sandwiches. One day I had a hot salmon and shrimp hoagie. There were salads and of course lots of desserts – cookies, muffins, slices of cake and mini things. For dinner, there was always a roast and several other entrees. Across from the sushi bar was a cold seafood table and most nights I went thru a plate of king crab legs as my appetizer. There were two upscale, sit-down restaurants on Deck 1. Unlike other cruise lines,



there was NO additional charge to use them though reservations were required. We ate in Manfredi's on two evenings. It had a fixed menu with daily specials. There were no formal or fancy nights on board, though men were supposed to wear a collared shirt in the upscale restaurants. One night, we signed up to have dinner with members of the Expedition team at a reserved table in the World Café. FYI - most of the tables in the Café as well as in the two restaurants were for just one couple. While we talked with folks at adjacent tables during our meals, we never shared a table with another

couple during the whole cruise.

There was no shortage of beverages available. There was a coffee maker in the room but we don't drink that. There were several coffee machines that made espresso & lattes around the ship available 24/7. Beer and wine were included with lunch & dinner. We had wine with dinner and I think once at lunch. I was able to make iced tea as needed thru out the day and evening. There was lemonade available but I tried it and it was poor. On Mackinac Island, I bought two bottles of Dr. Pepper and had them with lunches. There were free Coke products but Carol does not like Coke ZERO which is why we bought a 12 pack of Diet Coke in Milwaukee before we boarded. I had Sprite with lunch 2x.

Overall, the food was VG. The desserts were all commercially made and somewhat mediocre except for one day when there were several special cakes. We're not drinkers but those who were had their choice of five bars and lounges located throughout the ship. One of them was called the HIDE and located in the bow of the ship. I heard some passengers say they could NOT find it. Any drinks or cocktails from the lounges were extra cost but for the real boozers Viking offers the unlimited Silver Spirits Beverage Package *at \$27 per night per guest*. However, this package must be purchased for the full length of the cruise and by all parties sharing a stateroom.

Entertainment & Education

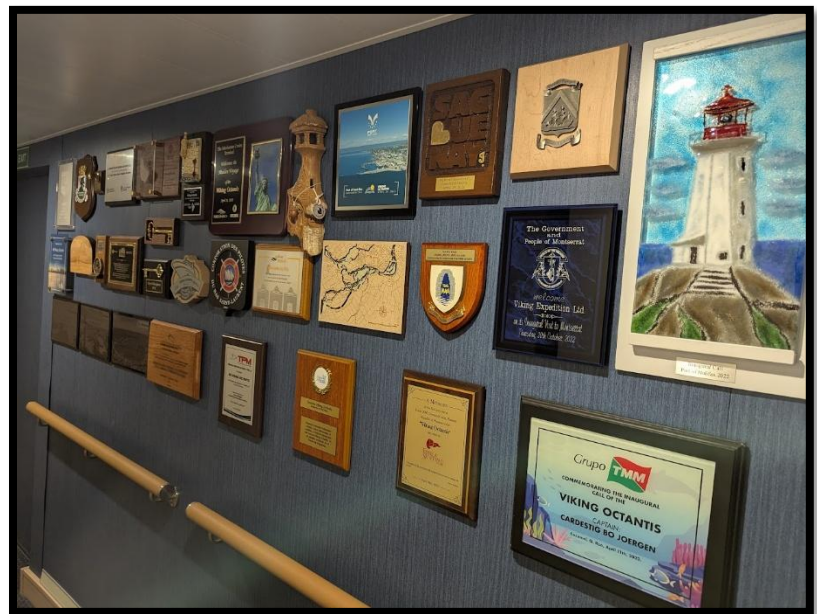
This was not a typical cruise as the entertainment was limited. There were three musical entertainers who played in the Living Room and the lounges during the late afternoon and evenings. There was a large auditorium in the very stern of the ship called the AULA that hosted lectures, the daily briefing, movies, documentaries and one musical performance by the Entertainment Director who was British. Two PhDs were on board. One was a retired geologist from Shell who gave interesting talks that I attended on the Great Lakes [learned they are lakes in name only; they are actually inland seas that contain 21% of the world's fresh water], glaciers and space weather. I skipped the presentations from the other PhD, an ornithologist [a birder] retired from the Canadian Wildlife Service. Members of the Expedition Team gave other presentations in the Aula, in the Science Lab and at Expedition Central on Deck 2. As part of its mission, Octantis conducts scientific experiments during its cruises. On this cruise, this included collection of water samples, launching a weather balloon for NOAA and conducting video surveillance of the lake bottom to observe what fish are present. On the last day, the ship's chief scientist presented the results of the week's research. When video footage from off Alpena Michigan showed very few fish. I suggested that they might do better at night as fish spend their days in schools.

During free time, Carol read her books, walked the decks, and rode an exercise bike in the gym. I read thru a pile on model RR magazine and actually built parts of a HO wooden fruit stand. There was a wide screen TV in our stateroom with a variety of viewing options. Most of the presentations in the Aula could be seen in the staterooms at the same time or watched later. The last night of the cruise as the ship was going thru the Welland Canal, I looked for something to watch and found "The Verdict", a 1982 movie with Paul Neuman. I have not seen this great movie for a long time. My friend [Dr.] Dan Lang was an Anesthesiologist in Boston back then and is very familiar with the actual case on which the movie was based.

When the ship was docked in Port Colborne Ontario, waiting to enter the Welland Canal, tours of



the bridge were offered. The ship is fully automated and using the TRACKPILOT system it can sail autonomously in three different modes [heading, course, or track]. Gone are paper charts and there were nine display units like the one above across the width of the bridge. I was a bit surprised that two of the junior officers were Filipinos. The lift bridge [pictured] was completed in 1929 and is one of 21 bridges that cross the Welland Canal. As I left the bridge, I walked thru a hallway where one wall was covered with plaques from the various ports the Octantis has visited. While the ship had a medical doctor on board, there was no dentist to deal with this plaque build-up.



Port Calls

Over the course of seven days, the ship sailed a total of 851 nautical miles. Leaving Milwaukee



on Wednesday afternoon, the ship passed under the **Daniel Hoan Memorial Bridge** that is of tied-arch construction. The bridge is named for a socialist who served as the city's mayor from 1916-1940. The bridge was completed in 1972 but didn't open till 1977 when the connecting freeway was completed. One of its supports partially collapsed in 2000 with the result that the bridge was extensively rebuilt over the next few years. Once in Lake Michigan, the ship turned left and sailed north for 234 nautical miles to Mackinac Island, Michigan. We passed under the

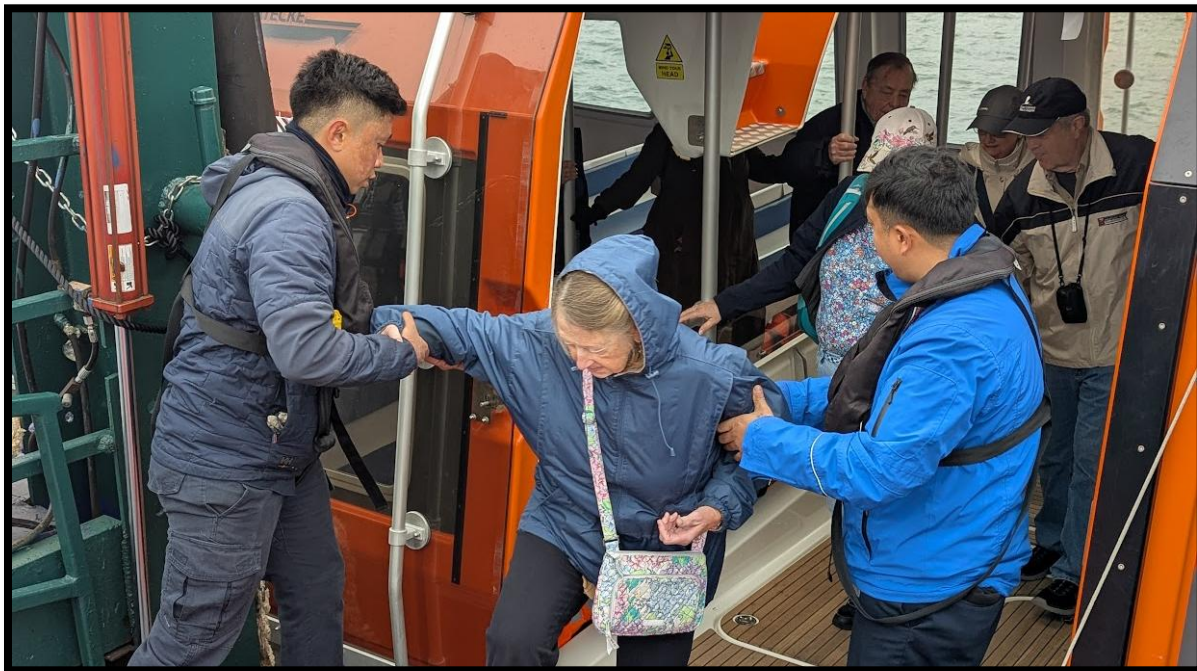


Mackinac Bridge at about 830AM on Thursday. When completed in 1957, the Mackinac Bridge that connects the two parts of Michigan was the world longest suspension bridge *between anchorages*. We arrived at Mackinac Island about 9AM and anchored offshore.

Mackinac Island is a famous tourist resort that dates back to the 19th Century. Back then steamboats carried vacationers from Chicago and Detroit, many of which stayed in the Grand



Hotel. The island is famous for its horse drawn carriages as automobiles are banned on the island. We were tendered in and this picture shows Carol exiting the boat.



We left in the late afternoon for Alpena Michigan, which was 112 nautical miles to the south. That evening the ship showed “Somewhere in Time”, a 1980 movie that was set and filmed on Mackinac Island.

Alpena was founded in 1840, and for many years logging and fishing were the major industries. Today, it is home to one of the largest limestone quarries in the world and next to it is one of the largest plants making cement in the US. Again, we anchored offshore. Late Friday afternoon, the ship departed for Detroit, which was 220 nautical miles to the south.



Readers may not be aware that Lake Huron does not directly connect to Lake Erie. Instead, the connection is thru the fairly narrow St. Clar River and then Lake St. Clar. The ship was passing thru



these as I awoke and had breakfast. At the bottom of Lake St Clar, the ship entered the Detroit River. There were lots of small boats fishing in both rivers and on the lake. The *Octantis* arrived at Detroit's Cruise Terminal around noon on Saturday and this was directly across from Windsor Ontario. Folks in Windsor actually travel north to get to Detroit and the US. While docked several laker boats passed by on the Detroit River.



The ship left Detroit about 6PM and was *supposed* to cruise 52 nautical miles to Point Pelee, ON, which is the southmost point of mainland Canada.

However, due to expected 31 knot winds the next day, the Captain chose to cancel that stop and sail straight to our scheduled stop in Port Colborne at the southern end of the Welland Canal. We learned later that Viking tried to extend the stay in Detroit but another ship was scheduled to use the cruise terminal. They looked at stopping in Cleveland, but that port could not handle the request. We arrived in Port Colborne at about 10AM on Sunday and stayed there till 215PM on Monday when the ship entered the Welland Canal that allows ships to go between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, avoiding Niagara Falls. The eight locks on the canal handle the 326-foot difference in elevation between the two lakes. The present canal that opened in 1932 is actually the fourth one there. The first canal was opened in 1839, the second in 1846 and the third in 1886. With each canal, the locks were made longer, wider and deeper. The current locks are now 80 feet wide, which is why the *Octantis* and *Polaris* are 77 feet wide. Because of other ship traffic and the time spent in each lock, it takes about 11-12 hours to transit the 27-miles long canal. The *Viking Daily* published the estimated Canal transit times, and the ship was 1.5 hours behind the schedule just thru lock #7. We were asleep when the ship finally exited the canal for a short dash across Lake Ontario to Toronto. When we awoke on Tuesday at 7AM, the ship was docked in Toronto that was covered with low fog.



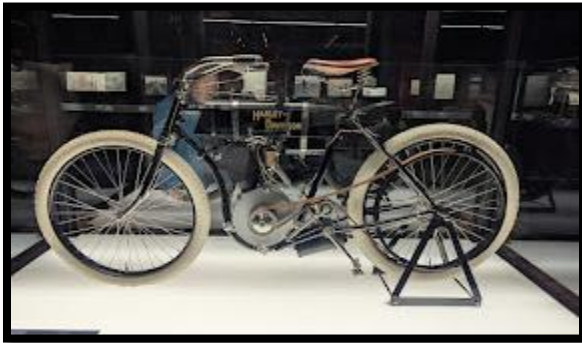
Excursions

With Viking, there is at least one included free excursion tour for each port call. There were optional excursions, some of which were quite pricey, such as a helicopter tour of Niagara Falls. The tours were made available for booking months in advance with the more expensive staterooms getting first crack. We did not go with any of the optional tours.



In Milwaukee, we had an escorted motor coach tour of the city that lasted almost four hours. Our guide was an Equity actor who lived his whole life there. We drove along the lakefront that is covered with parks and beaches. We saw the former Pabst Brewery complex, drove thru the Historic Third Ward, and saw many other historic buildings. We stopped for about an hour at the Harley Davidson Museum; the company started in Milwaukee in 1903. Outside of the Museum is a replica of its first building called the Shed.

There were lots to see there so I had to carefully budget my time. This was my first time there.



Carol had visited the HD museum back in 2021 while I attended the NRHS' annual convention in Milwaukee.

The second stop was at the historic Pabst Mansion where we were offered a glass of

beer. The mansion was completed in 1892 at a cost of \$250K. The Pabst family lived there thru 1908 when it



was purchased by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee as home for its bishops. In 1978, it was purchased by a non-for-profit org that has restored the mansion to its original splendor and opened it to the public. We bought two T-shirts in its adjacent gift shop. On the way back to the ship, we passed Marquette University, Milwaukee's nationally ranked Public Market and one of the new streetcars operating there.



In Mackinac, we were tendered to the island in one of the ship's large lightboats. We were both signed up for a walking tour but because of issues with my right knee, I switched to a carriage tour. This was our second visit there with the first being back in 2021 when we visited Wisc., the UP [the upper peninsula of Michigan] and MN. We both had early 9AM tours, which turned out to be a very good thing. It was cold and windy when we landed on the island but bye, after lunchtime it was very cold, with rain and even some sleet.

The afternoon tours were cancelled, and some passengers were very disappointed at this port stop is why they booked the cruise.

My carriage ride went thru the downtown area and drove out to the historic **Grand Hotel** that has the world's biggest covered walkway. An optional tour visited the Hotel and had lunch there. The Hotel charges \$12 for folks to just to walk in and see it. The carriage went up a hill to the central part of the island where there was a massive livery stable that in the summer house 00s of

draft and other horses. My carriage stopped there so the yuge two Belgian draft horses could get a drink. Driving along, there were branches and tree limbs down everywhere and I learned these from a crippling ice storm that hit northern Michigan on 3/30.



We heard later that some state parks and back roads are still closed a month later. Along my ride, I passed Carol on the walking tour 2x. and she didn't look so happy. Eventually, the carriage returned to the dock area. I walked down the main street and stopped in two fudge stores; there are 14 on the street. However, that was just to warm up as I don't



like fudge. It was a very bouncy ride back to the ship.

In Alpena, we were again anchored offshore but within sight of the large cement plant there. We



later learned that cement dust has contaminated the lake bottom and ship's research there was to send a camera to the bottom to observe the extent of marine life. The tender boat this time went up the Thunder Bay River, under this lift bridge and docked by the **Great Lakes Heritage Maritime Center**. This is a major museum that is affiliated with the NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that includes the National Weather Service].





We boarded a waiting shuttle that took us to the downtown area a few blocks away. As we exited the shuttle bus, folks from the local tourism board were there to meet us by this mural. We walked around the downtown that has certainly seen better days. Obviously, the town is counting on visits from cruise ships to perk things up. We took the shuttle back to the museum that operates on a free will offering and gave \$10. Alpena is the major port on the *Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary* protects a nationally significant collection of nearly 100 historic



shipwrecks in Lake Huron off the Michigan coast. Shipwrecks are the major theme of the museum. A major display was devoted to the *SS Nordmeer*, a German freighter, which sank on Nov. 19, 1966. I talked with a woman who had a fish tank with several sea lampreys. I was amazed to learn that the lampreys may have reached the Great Lakes by the 1840s thru the Erie Canal. We rode on an executive golf cart back to the tender and about 30 minutes later were back on board.

In Detroit, I had a problem. The NRHS of which I am a director, and its comptroller was holding its spring meeting in Johnston City, Tenn. and I need to attend three meetings by zoom. This kept me on the ship for most of the day, so I cancelled my included tour of the **Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation & Greenfield Village**, in near by Dearborn Michigan. During a lunch break between the second and third zoom meetings, I left the ship and walked along the Detroit Riverwalk towards the Ambassador Bridge. Back on board, I attended the final meeting that was the actual BOD meeting and that ended at 330PM. I immediately left the ship



and requested a LYFT ride to the Sweetest Heart of Mary Roman Catholic Church, about 2 miles away. There were closer Catholic churches, but this was the only



one with a 4PM Mass. I was there by 347PM and when I walked in an usher wearing a red blazer greeted me. When I said I was a visitor, he gave me a quick history and tour of the church that has 101 stained glass windows, some of which are absolutely amazing. The church was built in 1890 independently by a renegade Polish priest to serve 000s of Polish families. Only later did it come under diocesan control. The guide said I was lucky as that Saturday was the last one with a 4PM Mass. I asked why and was

told that the church is extremely popular for weddings so for the Spring and Summer, up to three wedding happen each Saturday. The 4PM Mass shifts to another church in what is now the combined Mother of Divine Mercy Parish. I stayed till just after the collection. I called another

LYFT ride and was back on board at 450PM. We were told to be back on board by then though the ship actually didn't leave till after 6PM.

Carol went on the included tour by herself so this report is from her. It was a four-hour tour that centered around **Henry Ford Museum of Innovation**, which is actually in Dearborn MI. So, we needed to take a 45-minute bus ride through Detroit passing by the General Motors HQ on our way to Dearborn. The Dearborn site includes: The Museum of Innovation, Greenfield Village, Ford Rouge Factory tour, a copy of Thomas Edison's Menlo Park Lab, and an enormous Ford car assembly plant. We spent two hours at the Museum and just touched some highlights. Henry Ford collected things that he felt made a leap forward in innovation including beautiful and efficient cast iron stoves, a dissected Model T with parts hanging from ceiling, water-powered grinding wheels to electric gears and belts that powered machine tools, a DC-3 in



the air, presidential limousines from Lincoln to Reagan [that were made by Ford Motor Co.], an original Holiday Inn sign and a McDonald Arch. Kevin missed seeing this massive C&O steam locomotive and

several other rail cars. Out of time, it was back to the bus for the return trip to the ship. An optional tour [extra fare] at the same time as this tour went to Motown Records so I missed that. The weather was great and the city was actually quite nice and new. There was a lot to see in Detroit so I need to plan a return trip.

FYI – Detroit has suffered the most drastic population decline of any city in the US. Its population peaked in 1950 at 1.9 million and it was 84% white. The 2020 Census population was 639K and the city is now only 11% white. The city has numerous neighborhoods with 000s of vacant properties resulting in very low inhabited density in those areas. This has stretched city services and its infrastructure. Folks still living in the few occupied houses have been encouraged to move to other areas. Recently, the city has cleared a 1,200-acre section of land for large-scale neighborhood construction.

Had we gone to Point Pelee, we would have been able to use the boats in the Hangar on Lake Erie. Carol was signed up for a two-person kayak, while I signed up for a ride in one of the Zodiac boats. Instead, the ship docked early in Port Colborne at 10AM. We went online and



saw there was a 11AM Mass at St. Patrick's Catholic Church there. We could see the Church's steeple from the ship. Carol & I plus others lined up to leave the ship at 1030AM, but they would not let us leave. Turns out folks from a few staterooms failed to submit the required Canada Customs form to the Guest Services. A crew from Canadian Customs had boarded as soon as we docked to clear the ship. The form was supposed to be turned in two days before and there were reminders in the *Viking Daily*. Now there was a PA announcement telling those in specific rooms # to turn in their form. I expressed my dissatisfaction about being held captive on the ship and missing Mass to someone in Guest Services. A few minutes later, one of the officers came to see me. I told her know that this situation was unacceptable and totally avoidable as they knew what rooms did not turn in the form. Someone from guest service should have gone to their rooms the night before or earlier that day. [I repeated this comment on the cruise evaluation form.] Finally, at 1112AM we were allowed to leave the ship. We crossed the canal on the lift bridge and walked thru the town. We arrived at the Church at 1125AM just as an African missionary priest was ending his sermon and appeal.



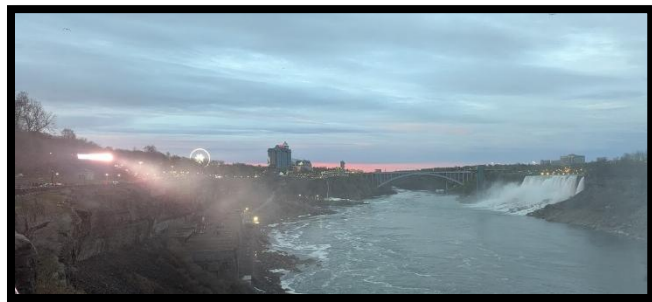
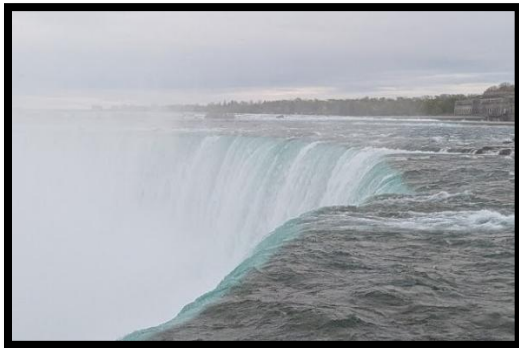
This was the first time I ever attended Mass in two parts. I heard the readings in Detroit and the rest of the Mass in Port Colborne. However, in doing so there were two collections. After Mass, we walked thru the town and stopped in several of the store before getting back on board for a late lunch. This picture shows the ship and some abandoned locks from the 3rd Welland Canal.



There was nothing scheduled for the afternoon and I heard some passengers complaining about that. However, Viking did add an additional included excursion to see Niagara Falls at night. We boarded the motor coach at 6PM for a 45-minute ride to the Falls. The land was surprisingly flat till I realized we were still on the upper side of the escarpment. The bus came to the Niagara River as we approached the Canadian Falls. We were dropped off by a visitor's center and we



stayed there till 9PM, which was just after when the lights came on the illuminate the Falls. This is the edge of the Canadian Falls and a look down the gorge toward Lake Ontario.



This is the American Falls just before we left. We were back on the ship by 945PM. We cancelled the included tour scheduled for the next day [Monday] as it was just a view of the falls.



On Monday 5/5 at 215PM, we entered the canal behind this laker.



The first lock [#8] only dropped the ship by a few feet. It can be more depending on the level of Lake Erie. Next was a 14-mile passage of level water that took considerable time. We passed this massive grain elevator that was seemingly abandoned.



Locks #7, #6, #5 & #4 are called the stairs locks because they are close together and provide

most of the drop in elevation. Being on the ship, I could not take a picture of the ship passing thru a lock. However, this picture was shown during the Finale in the Aula on Sunday evening. Note the ship is barely small enough to squeeze thru the lock. Recall that the *Octantis* is 77 feet wide while the Canal's locks are 80 feet. This leaves about 1.5 feet of clearance on both sides of the ship. Passage thru the Welland Canal was the highlight of the cruise for me.



Here is a view of the crew also from the Finale. The image on the screen behind them was taken



in Amsterdam and shows a Viking ocean ship, an expedition ship and one of its river boats.

The Cruise's Cost

Viking has three types of cruises. Cruises on the river boats are the cheapest with some week-long cruises available for just less than \$2,000 per person. Conversely, the cost is the highest on the expedition ships in part due to the destinations, but largely because the ratio of passengers to the crew is the lowest at 1.45:1. Our cruise had a list price of \$6,495 per person but with the booking discount, past guest and other discounts, we paid actually \$5,595. As mentioned previously, FREE air was included but we paid an additional \$44.28 per person for better flights

on AA. Because Viking cruises are largely inclusive, we spent nothing more on board other than the mandatory gratuities of \$17 per day per person or \$119 for the week. I did the math and assuming that every passenger paid that, the total would be almost \$45K or \$173 per crewmember if divided equally.

However, we actually did NOT pay the gratuities. We met with the on-board Cruise Consultant and booked two future trips. In addition to the incentives [sale discount, past guest discount, on-board saving discount, FREE gratuities & Silver drink package] we received for the two bookings made during the cruise, there was also a \$400 credit to our on-board account. This more than covered the gratuities and Carol spent the balance in the ship's store on two bracelets made in Lapland. FYI - the first cruise booked will be a round trip from Fort Lauderdale to the Panama Canal and Central America from 10/20-11/03/2026. The second cruise will be a round trip from Barcelona from 12/12 -12/27/2026 with stops in France Italy, Malta, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Spain. These will be some new countries for both of us, more so for Carol. While in Barcelona, we'll made a side trip to tiny Andora – a tiny country between the border of France and Spain. One last thing, to make the future bookings the only payment required on board was \$25 per person per cruise or \$100 in total. While not refundable, we can revise the bookings to different dates or cruises though the cost could change. In the event we just cancel, we still got the benefit of the \$400 on-board credit.

Getting back to PHL & Home

I tried to check-in on Monday for the flight home on Tuesday, but it said we had to check-in at the airport. No reason was given but I knew it was that they needed to see our passports. I did see that we were upgraded on the CRJ 900 aircraft. Monday evening, we had packed up the bigger suitcase and put it out in the hall with an AQUA 4 tag. I got up at 7AM on Tuesday and went up to the World Cafe for a quick breakfast while Carol had her shake and finished packing up the 2nd suitcase. With new passengers boarding that afternoon for a return cruise to Milwaukee, we needed to be out of our room by 8AM. We did that and went as directed to the Living Room on Deck 5 to await the call for our transfer to the Toronto Airport. Other folks had booked extensions with Viking and were waiting for busses to their hotels. We were called rather quickly; we went down to Deck 1 to leave the ship for the last time. We walked around and then inside the Cruise Terminal where our large suitcase was waiting for us. We were directed to a bus and loaded our luggage in the bay for Terminal 3.

By 845AM, we were loaded and on our way. The ship was docked in a port area a bit north of downtown Toronto. There was heavy traffic as we drove towards and thru the downtown. We were seated on the right side of the bus and I was treated to a



constant stream of GO trains on the adjacent tracks. Eventually, we made our way onto an

expressway right by the CN Tower. The traffic was still very congested as we



made it to the QEW and then briefly were on the dreaded 401 Highway, featured on *Heavy Rescue: 401* a Canadian reality TV show seen on the Weather Channel.

We arrived just after 930AM at Toronto's **Pearson International Airport** that is actually located in Mississauga, Ontario. The IATA code for the airport is YYZ. FYI – the codes for all major airport in Canada begin with Y as this dates back to the 1930s when radio stations in each city were assigned a letter code. If that city also had a weather station, then a Y for “Yes” preceded the radio station code. Later, when airport codes went to three digits, Canada just added another Y to the existing two-digit codes. We went to the check-in counter but then we had to take our two checked bags to a self-service loader that required my boarding pass. We went thru the Canadian equivalent of TSA, where I was required to remove my shoes and belt. Next, we cleared US Customs. Yes - US Customs in Canada! This is done at major airports in Canada for flights to the US so when the plane lands in the US folk can just exit the plane or connect.

By now, it was almost 10AM and our flight did not board till 1205PM. We headed to the AA lounge in Terminal 3, which actually was quite small. AA has flights from YYZ to all of its east coast and central hubs but not to PHX, LAS, LAS or SFO. However, since most of the routes



flown were thin [meaning few passengers], most AA flights from YYZ are on RJs. Eventually, it was time to walk to our gate and we found we had to go down to wait in a lower level. It felt like we were in a bus terminal. As we walked to our CRJ, I saw this B-767 freighter. At one



time, US airlines flew cargo planes, but no more.

I hoped that the flight might go over Niagara Falls. Instead, once in the air the CRJ flew due



south as shown by green line in this map. In the middle of Pennsylvania [aka Pennsylvucky], the weather got rough, and the plane actually flew to the northeast to get around it. By the time I could see the ground, the plane was near Allentown. From there, we flew parallel to PA RT 309, a road I have driven on many times. The plane crossed over the PA Turnpike and as it headed towards the Delaware River, I could see the neighborhood where we live but not our actual house. The plane made the typical loop over South Jersey and arrived at PHL's F terminal at 159PM that was 6 minutes early.

After bathroom stops, we walked up and over to baggage claim. Our two bags arrived just as we got there. We walked over to the SEPTA station to wait for the 137PM train that should have gone to Jenkintown. However, when I saw that the incoming train was only two cars long, I knew something was up. The trains on the line to Warminster are never that short. We rode the 137PM train into Center City and were told to switch to a Warminster train in 30th Street. We tried to do that, but the train was NOT across the platform. So, we reboarded and rode to Jefferson to make the switch. There I saw a special notice about track work in Glenside that resulted in single tracking and delays. We eventually boarded a special train to Warminster that arrived there about 335PM. When Carol went to get the car, there was a parking violation on the

windshield that was issued at 312PM. We had not paid for the correct number of days. We were home just after 4PM and this trip was history.

Recapping the miles, points, etc.

We used our AA Aviator card to pay for the cruise, so I got AA loyalty points and reward miles. The final payment was due six months before the embarkation date. Normally, the loyalty points and miles we earn on AA flights are based on the fare. I get 11x the fare while Carol gets 9x. In this case, Viking bought the tickets using special travel agent fares that provide lower awards. However, when we were switched to the PHL – DFW - MKE routing, there was no fare information available, so the calculation changed to one based on distance and oh boy, did we benefit. I received 3558 loyalty points/award miles for those two flights but received only 383 loyalty points/award miles for the short YYZ -PHL flight that operated as originally booked. The additional miles from the flights to MKE also counted towards AA's TWO MILLION MILER Award. In total, I flew 3051 miles with the three flights and now have 1,093,106 lifetime flown miles. However, that is still a long way away from TWO MILLION!

