



Great Lakes Cruise 2024

By Mike Bracket ('Smoke, 9150)

This year marks our 23rd anniversary of cruising on the Great Lakes. It should be 24 but we took one year off to cruise on the Chesapeake with Fleet 10. Planning started last year shortly after the 2023 cruise on Grand Traverse Bay. We decided to cruise the northern waters of Lake Huron and visit Mackinac Island. Planning began for real in January as we nailed down the dates and sent out the initial invitation. One lesson we keep learning each year is that in the Great Lakes, all the marinas and state parks close at the end of October and don't open again until May 1. But the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) on-line reservation system allows you to make a slip reservation six months in advance. This worked well for the most part.

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Our launch site was the Cheboygan County Marina in Cheboygan, Michigan. Unfortunately, their link in the DNR system wasn't working initially so it took some work arounds. But Tom and the crew at Cheboygan were perhaps the most helpful harbormaster that we encountered. They worked to get us all docked together and even cleaned out the picnic shelter so we could have our welcome picnic on Sunday evening.

We had ten boats: *'Smoke* (Mike Bracket); *Whole Lotta Rosie* (Patrick/Heather O'Neill); *Catja* (Erik Ehrke and cousin Mathias); *Spartan* (Steve/Candace Kohut); *Repose* (Geoff Endris); *Old Blue* (Andrew / Melanie / Olivia / George Power); *Viking Dream* (Jim VanWinkle / Rick Yoder); *Shark Bait* (Steve / Diane Robinson and Paul); *Randa Sue* (Randy Carie); *Dreamin'* (Lewie Wallace).

Everybody arrived on Sunday and got boats rigged and tied up in slips. We all met under the picnic shelter for our welcome picnic. This gave us a chance to meet the new folks this year and see old friends from past years. Mike laid out the charts and gave everyone a brief on our itinerary and what to expect at each location.

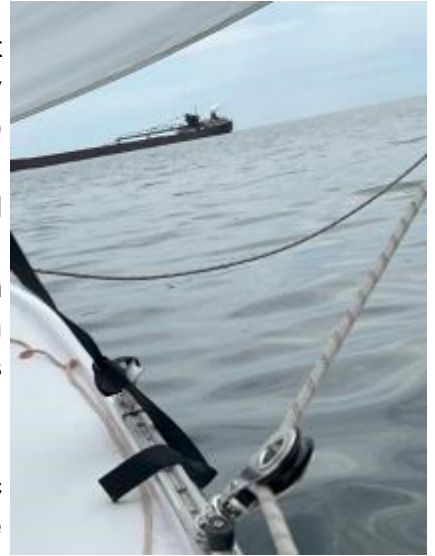
It was a short sail over to Bois Blanc Island from Cheboygan on Monday. Catalina 22 skipper Jay Beugly lives on Bois Blanc island. The marina there doesn't participate in the DNR system but that was not a problem because Jay is the Harbormaster at Bois Blanc!! He squeezed us all in at the docks, provided us a guided tour of the lighthouse on the island (he is the caretaker) and ferried us all up the road to the general store, restaurant, and bar. I think we made their day as they even stayed open past normal closing because there were more people in there drinking and eating than they had seen in a month! It was a short walk back to the marina in the dark.

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On Tuesday we headed out for Hessel in the Michigan Upper Peninsula. The wind didn't cooperate initially, and everyone motored around the east end of Bois Blanc Island. Once clear of the island, the wind filled in nicely and it was a beam to close reach for about 13 miles to Hessel. We saw two large freighters along the way, and everyone had a great sail. At Hessel, everyone was able to shower and restock the ice supply. Hessel is a small town with one bar/restaurant, a general store, and a culinary school. Unfortunately, the school only serves lunch and dinner Thursdays through Saturday. Fortunately, EJ Mertaugh Boat Works has an ice cream bar in addition to their core business of wooden boat restoration. Beautiful boats and ice cream. What more could you ask for?



On Wednesday morning, we got moving early for the sail over to Mackinac Island. It's only about 12 miles so we arrived shortly after noon. The State Park Marina on Mackinac Island is very popular, so we were spread out in the marina. The shoreside facilities were new in 2023 and were the nicest facilities we encountered on our trip. We were only about 100 meters from the heart of town and nestled under the bluff where old Ft. Mackinac is located. The daily cannon firing provided a gentle wake up call for those sleepy heads trying to sleep in. Mackinac Island is serviced by ferry boats from Mackinac City and St. Ignace. So, every 15 minutes or so, a ferry docks and unloads a couple hundred tourists. While there are no cars on Mackinac Island, there are a lot of horse drawn carriages and every tourist wants a ride in one. There are several bike rental facilities and more fudge shops than you can possibly appreciate. A day there was enough.



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Thursday saw us sailing over to St. Ignace. Another large and very nice marina. The sail over was more like a motor over as the light wind was on the nose. Once there, we began preparations for our "Christmas in July" gift exchange and communal pot-luck dinner. Geoff Endris also found his dream boat, a 38' Grand Banks Trawler. The owner was working his way around the "Great Loop" and had plans to be in Chicago in three weeks. After the gift exchange, we all sat around and told tall tales of past sailing adventures until waaaay past bedtime.



On Friday, a few boats departed early and sailed under the mighty Mackinac Bridge before turning southeast and headed for Cheboygan. The distance was probably the longest of the week at around 18 miles. A bit more for those who tried to sail under the bridge. It turned out to be another long day of motoring with the wind at two knots. It did fill in later in the day and a few of the boats got in some nice sailing for about an hour. When we arrived back in Cheboygan, a thunderstorm blew in and interrupted the docking for a few boats. A couple boats went directly to the ramp and hauled out for an early departure on Saturday morning. Everyone cleaned up and headed into town for our end of cruise dinner. After dinner, Jim VanWinkle and Rick Yoder on Viking Dream II treated everyone to ice cream across the street. What better way to end the cruise! We had great weather all week although the wind was relatively light except for one day. No storms or rain until we got back to Cheboygan on Friday.

Plans for 2025 have not been set but discussion centered around Door County and Green Bay Wisconsin. It has been several years since we have been over there so it may be time to return. Watch the pages of *MainBrace* for the official announcement in January.

