

Lake Michigan Cruising

– Revised for 2017

By Capt. Bob Kunath, Sans Souci

Lake Michigan is Earth's sixth largest lake. At 307 miles long and up to 118 miles wide, this is one serious body of water that deserves special care! Here are some thoughts drawn from 25 years cruising this fresh water wonder.



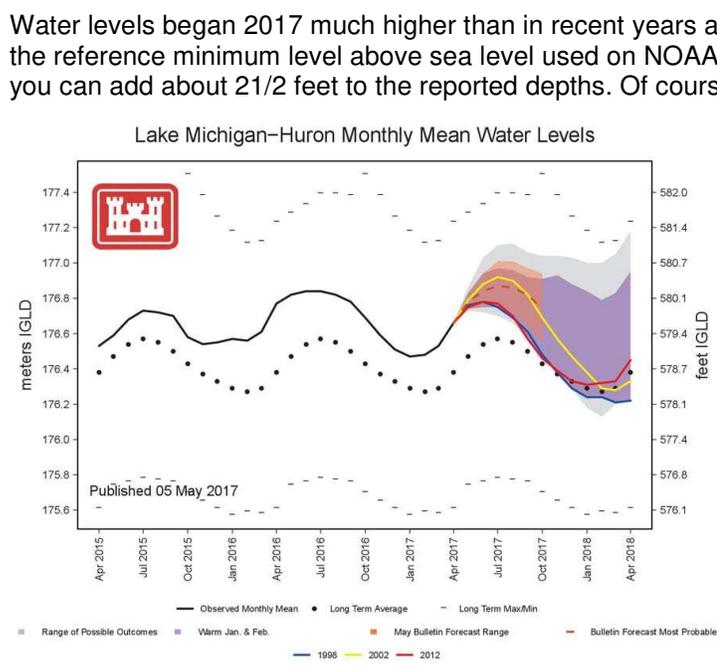
First, here are some basics. The water will be as clear as any you have traveled through but cold, ranging from 40 to 75 degrees. Fog is possible, especially north of Milwaukee; humid, warm air on cold water, especially with an offshore breeze, and... you get the idea. When we see very cold winters with the water staying cold well into the season there is more fog than usual so use caution when planning your trip. Weather changes can be very quick. Squalls with 60+ knots and lightning can come from the west and northwest without much notice, so keep plugged into NOAA, which maintains several local VHF channels around the lake. Refer via Internet access refer to windmapper.com or passageweather.com for wind and wave forecasts, and ndbc.noaa.gov to get real-time data from the three Lake Michigan weather buoys: 45002 (north), 45007(south) and 45022 (Little Traverse Bay). The Coast Guard, TowBoat/US and local marine police monitor 16 but Channel 9 is the

preferred hailing frequency. You can also get other links for fuel reports, navigation and cruising news at waterwayguide.com. Click "Explore Your Waterways" on the home page, that new cruise-planning tool an excellent resource.

Water levels began 2017 much higher than in recent years and are as of April about two 1/2 feet above "Datum" (577.5'), the reference minimum level above sea level used on NOAA charts. That means that reading current, accurate charts you can add about 2 1/2 feet to the reported depths. Of course, this is a welcome change from a few years ago and which

hopefully will be sustained for at least this season. Keep in mind that in unstable weather a phenomenon called a "seiche" may cause the depths to change by a foot or even greater in a very short time.

Many ports, especially those on the Eastern Shore have found it necessary to dredge annually to maintain minimum drafts. Charts of only a few months old may be out of date, so download the free charts at nauticalcharts.noaa.gov for your navigation software, or you can display current charts on line using the Waterway Explorer utility at waterwayguide.com. That free product also provides comprehensive anchorage and marina information, including fuel price reports. Be sure to discuss current conditions with the harbormaster before entering all but the busiest ports. An excellent free PC based chartplotter, viewer and planner is available at opencpn.org/. Install that software, then install free current downloaded NOAA charts using the included download tool.



Above all, plan at least one day of three for layovers waiting for calm seas. Waves tend to be of short frequency and very uncomfortable, not long rolling waves like the ocean. Due to the long fetch of the lake, waves can easily reach 10-15 feet or more with prolonged winds.

You will find good harbors every 20 miles or so around most of the lake, except for the Michigan Upper Peninsula, and most are harbors of refuge, meaning those harbors are obligated to make room for any boats when conditions are threatening. Anchorages are more plentiful on the Michigan side, as the western shore (Wisconsin and Illinois) has neither the inland lakes nor natural harbors that are so common on the eastern shore.

Prevailing winds here are from the west, pushing warmer surface water to the beaches of Michigan, so the surf is usually 5-10 degrees warmer there than on the western shore. The westerlies also cause more and higher waves on the eastern shore than the western shore, which can be quite flat for the first mile or so, even with a stiff westerly wind. Of course a Nor'easter (yes, we get them too) reverses the pattern and can make the western shore ugly for days. Both coasts have few hazards and deep water, so you can stay about a half-mile off shore (watch the charts!) to take advantage of its shelter and enjoy the scenery. An exception to this feature is at Racine, WI. The Racine Reef extends almost two miles offshore, with parts of the rocky reef as shallow as only a few feet; there is a reason they call this area Reefpoint. The reef is well marked by a 50 foot flashing light with horn mounted on a large concrete platform. Be sure to take the light to starboard when heading south, or stay to the west of "G1", the lighted can buoy marking the west end of the reef.

The best harbors of the Michigan side are in the northern half; most of the harbors on the eastern shore south of Ludington are attractive resort destinations with great anchoring and beaches. The ports on the western shore are quite different and are also worth exploring. Consider a cruise plan that crosses from Frankfort or Ludington to Sturgeon Bay, Manitowoc or Sheboygan with a relatively short trip (50-60 miles) so you can visit the best Wisconsin harbors including Milwaukee and Racine, making a comprehensive Lake Michigan experience.

Mackinac Island is your entry to the lake, and is so unique you will want to stop there. Reservations are sometimes tough to get, but there are frequent cancellations, so try calling a few days out, and even the same day as your hopeful arrival. Mackinaw City, with a newly opened expanded harbor and St. Ignace are good substitutes; both offer ferries to Mackinac Island. Most state and municipal harbors in Michigan can be reserved by calling 1-800-44-PARKS or on the web at midnrreservations.com.

Assuming your course takes you south through Grays Reef, make sure you do not depart if there are S or SW winds over 15 knots. If so, you will be greeted with high waves on your bow (thanks to the 300 mile fetch) as you leave the Straits of Mackinac through Grays Reef, and there's no port within 20 miles.

Beaver Island is a great stop to learn its unique history and visit the beaches on the island's western shore. Dock at the substantial Municipal Marina. Harbor Springs in Little Traverse Bay is a must stop. You'll find great anchorage, a splendid downtown, and the summer home for many of Detroit and Chicago's rich and famous. Petoskey, across the bay offers a larger, albeit more commercial downtown. Look for "Petoskey stones (fossils)" in the local stores and on the beaches. Charlevoix is even more attractive, loaded with fine restaurants and shops, and is where you'll find the rest of Chicago's rich and famous. Plan your passage into Round Lake from Lake Michigan with caution, the current may be strong and you may have to share the channel with the Beaver Island Ferry. You may not be able to get a slip in either Harbor Springs or Charlevoix, but anchorage is plentiful. Charlevoix has a modern newer floating dock system with 70 slips as well as 100 amp service for large yachts up to 250 feet. Extensive shore facilities provide a showplace resort experience. Northport is a nice port with good shopping and restaurants. A visit to Traverse City will find a newer marina, plentiful shops and restaurants.

Leland is a historic fishing village transformed into a tourist mecca complete with even more shops but also some good restaurants and Carlson's smokehouse; try the smoked fish sausage. The modern harbor was totally rebuilt five years ago with a total of 69 slips to 127 feet, all reserved for transients.

If you've seen enough shops for awhile, anchor at South Manitou Island, a National Seashore park. There is a 25 foot deep sandy shoal near shore in the center of the crescent shaped natural harbor. The island has plenty of trails for hiking to the old schoolhouse and the 1858 lighthouse, which is open for climbing the 117 steps to the top. The National Park Service installed a replica of the third-order Fresnel lens which is lighted from May to November. There are many wrecks close to shore, with three at or just below surface for snorkeling and diving. No pets are allowed on shore.

Make a stop at Frankfort for provisioning at the grocery across the street from the boat ramp just past the city park. Anchor just west of the ramp, dinghy to the ramp. Make sure you take a walk to the beach north of the inlet; it is representative of the great sandy beaches on the eastern shore. Jacobsen's is the marina of choice; featured are a swimming pool and boaters' lounge.

Visitors to Manistee will find a modern municipal marina building on the Riverwalk. Use caution docking, currents can be swift and you may be sharing the channel with a freighter.

Moving south, most of the harbors feature inland lakes with old manufacturing towns reincarnated as vacation havens. The beaches are excellent, the dunes breathtaking. We especially like South Haven and Saugatuck, both of which offer many restaurants, art shops and galleries. Diesel should be reasonable in Grand Haven, where you will also find a unique "Dancing Waters" light show every night across the river from the municipal marina. If you can, get there for the Coast Guard Festival during the last week of July, but you will need reservations.

An option for those with about an extra week is a diversion into Green Bay, primarily visiting the ports on Sturgeon Bay and then northward to the splendid small harbors of Door County. Further north a visit to Washington Island and the Upper Peninsula are worthy stops. Fayette State Park on the Garden Peninsula is the site of a reconstructed iron ore smelting town and factory which offers a view of life there in the late 1800's. There is a 450 foot visitors' dock and there is good protected anchorage. Avoid stopping at ports on the eastern side of Door County, safe passage in this area can be tricky.

There is a very different look to the Wisconsin-Illinois side. Most of the docks are newer floating docks compared to Michigan's aging fixed dock systems (although several have been rebuilt). Manitowoc offers the USS Cobia, the best restoration of a WWII sub we've seen anywhere and also the best maritime museum (affiliated with the Smithsonian) on the Great Lakes. Sheboygan is one of the most pleasant towns, featuring good restaurants, especially Trattoria Stefano. Try the prime rib at the Port Hotel in Port Washington, where you may also find the cheapest diesel on the Lake. Also check McKinley Harbor in Milwaukee; these two harbors are generally competitive. In any event, make sure you have enough fuel before entering Illinois; those pirates from Springfield charge road use tax on marine fuel. The Port Washington Municipal Marina has floating docks as well as some wall ties, all with power.

Grocery stores near marinas are scarce in Wisconsin and Illinois and require a cab ride in most ports, but there is a great meat market, Bernie's, in Port Washington and Ewig Brothers smoked fish. The eclectic Milwaukee Public Market near the Riverwalk in Milwaukee is worth a dinghy ride from McKinley Harbor in Milwaukee. Check out the art museum on the Milwaukee shorefront, designed by Santiago Calatrava. Lakeshore State Park is a harbor within the harbor just south of the museum, in front of the fairgrounds. Anchoring is good within this harbor, which also has 20 floating dock slips with electric but no water or restrooms. Discovery World, a technology themed interactive museum targeting kids is also within this harbor, and has a few free side-to-day docks. There is likely to be a festival of some kind in progress, they are frequent. You can also take a short cruise up the Milwaukee River (bridges will open) to tie up for dinner at several excellent riverfront restaurants.

Reefpoint Marina is the marina of choice in Racine with 900 slips, a pool with spas and a nice on-site restaurant and fun outdoor bar overlooking the lake. The city offers plenty of restaurants that you can walk to, especially Casablanca for Mexican, Salute's for Italian and a number of taverns with live music. There's also the Johnson Art Museum, a growing number of art galleries and gift shops, and Uncorkt, a pleasant wine shop with a tasting room and occasional live music. Dover Flag two blocks from Reefpoint has a full stock of charts and guides for your trip. A few eateries on the Root River offer dinghy tie-up. Try breakfast at the Racine Yacht Club on Sundays or dinner on Fridays; they may also have a transient slip available. A farmers' market on Saturday, art fairs at the Festival Grounds and street musicians downtown on First Fridays round out the experience. Racine has been noted for maintaining one of the 10 cleanest beaches in the US; it is a large, sandy summer playground. Reefpoint is our home port, look for and visit us (the blue trawler *Sans Souci*) on Dock E-12.

Northpoint is the first Illinois marina, a huge marina with a free pump-out but, with a mile-long walk to town (with a West Marine), not much else except a restaurant and a marine service shop. A proposed \$2 million renovation will add a swimming pool, picnic area and updated maintenance. You can catch a Metra train to Chicago, about a mile walk from the marina. Waukegan is a good Boat/US marina with a partially floating dock system but has little to offer within walking distance except the Metra/Amtrak train station. Larsen Marine offers full yacht services, and a complete marine and parts store.

Finally, Chicago! There's an 18-mile bike path along the entire waterfront to get you just about anywhere. Choose Belmont Harbor for restaurants, Cubs baseball, the Lincoln Park Zoo and a dog beach. Burnham Harbor is closest to the museums and aquarium. DuSable Harbor is closest to the Loop, shopping, Navy Pier and the entrance to the Chicago River lock. Reservations are necessary, best way is to call or fax any of the dozen city marinas. Bring money, slips are not cheap.

A ride through the city on the Chicago River is a spectacular 45 minutes from the Chicago Lock if you can get low enough to clear the bridges (19' to the Amtrak Bridge which is 11'). Turn around when you see that bridge, you've seen the best of downtown by then, go back to your marina and enjoy the city.