

Luxurious cruises found on Great Lakes

BY NANCY SUNDSTROM

Special to the Record-Eagle

It wasn't all that long ago that residents and visitors alike saw a sight in West Grand Traverse Bay that they'd never seen before.

Word spread like wildfire, drawing many down to the shores of the pristine waters to take in the unusual presence that had come to town, seemingly overnight and out of nowhere.

That sight was a luxury expedition ship that was cruising the Great Lakes, and had chosen Traverse City as a port of call. The sight has become a more frequent one over the past seven years, especially in the fall, though it hasn't lost any of its "wow" factor.

"You have to admit that it's quite something to see ships like the Le Levant sitting out in our lakeshore," said Mike Norton of the Traverse City Convention & Visitors Bureau. "In 2004, there will be roughly six cruise ships on the Great Lakes between June and October, so it would seem that Traverse City would be a frequent stop for them."

In fact, the Le Levant, a 328-foot, French-built luxury yacht, will be making six stops in Traverse City over the coming months. Those dates are July 2, Sept. 13, 23 and 27, and Oct. 7 and 11.

Among its most notable features are two dining rooms, a fitness center, outdoor swimming pool, hair salon and meals served with complimentary wine.

The Columbus is an upscale, 423-passenger, 472-foot ship that is not only the largest of its kind to sail the Great Lakes, but is credited with being the vessel that really generated interest in having the region on an itinerary. Starting out in 1997, it

now runs nine- or 10-night cruises that take in Lakes Huron and Michigan, with stops in places such as Whitefish Point and Thunder Bay. It will visit Traverse City on Sept. 20. The Columbus offers two dining rooms, along with a fitness center, sauna and outdoor swimming pool.

The newest of the ships, the Orion is a high-tech, slim, 387-foot vessel designed to be able to slip in and out with ease through the narrow channels and locks of the Great Lakes. That is not its main appeal, however. The emphasis is on a new standard of luxury for Great Lakes cruising, and the Orion has received rave reviews from passengers who describe it with terms like "regal" and compare it to a "first class hotel." It has 24 large outside staterooms and 29 suites, each with a panoramic view, marble bathroom and a sitting room.

At this point, it isn't known if Traverse City will be a port of call for the Orion in 2004.



Great Lakes Cruise Company

The Columbus is one of many Great Lakes cruise ships that dock in West Grand Traverse Bay in season.

"We seem to be a good stop for ships that are taking the route between, say, Mackinaw City and Saugatuck," said Norton. "Our reputation as the Cherry Capital of the World and the scenery and attractions we offer here, from the vineyards to the casinos, are well-known to them and have a lot of appeal."

Other ships that tour the Great Lakes region, which also includes Canada, New York Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois, are the Nantucket Clipper, the Grande Mariner and

Niagara Prince. These three are slightly smaller than the others, but have fine reputations and usually are fully booked about one year in advance.

The Grand Mariner and Niagara Prince were doing cruises on the Great Lakes before the Columbus began drawing so much attention. This year, the two ships are offering trips into Lake Superior. The 183-foot Grande Mariner will offer a 10-night cruise between Chicago and Duluth, Minnesota, with stops at ports including Munising,

Marquette and Houghton. The ship will also do six-night cruises around Lake Michigan with stops in Holland, Manistee and Mackinac Island.

Prices on packages for Great Lakes cruises vary, and are based primarily on the amenities offered by the ship, the travel season and the length of the journey. In general, prices for the Orion start at about \$4,500 per person; a seven-night stay on Le Levant for the summer starts at about \$3,500; and an eight- to 10-day cruise for the 201-foot Nantucket Clipper typically begin around the \$2,140 mark.

Consult a local travel agent for information, or if you want to do research on the Internet, there are two primary Web sites to visit. One is www.cruisingthegreatlakes.com. While you can't book cruises directly through the site, it will provide detailed information. The toll-free number is (800) 319-9997.

Another site is www.greatlakescruising.com and its toll-free number is (888) 891-0203.

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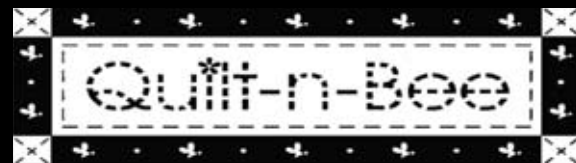
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