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More small ships to ply Great Lakes next summer

More options for cruising

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Here's some great news for lovers of the Great Lakes: Two small, high-end cruise ships - one new, the other newly refurbished - will make their debut next summer on the fresh-water waves of lakes Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan and Superior.

"It'll be a great summer," said Chris Conlin, owner of the Great Lakes Cruise Co., an Ann Arbor, Mich.-based travel agency that specializes in Great Lakes cruises. "We have lots of choices that we haven't had before."

Among the options:

The Clelia II, an all-suite ship with room for 100 passengers, will sail seven-day itineraries between Toronto and Duluth, Minn., starting in late June. Ports of call include Niagara Falls, Ontario (via the Welland Canal); Mackinac Island, Mich.; Houghton, in Michigan's Upper Peninsula; and Thunder Bay, Ontario. All sailings will offer educational themes, with speakers and seminars on topics from the lakes' geology to the War of 1812. A golf theme is scheduled for late August; CBS News journalist Bill Geist is the guest lecturer on the inaugural sailing.

The ship, built in 1990 for Renaissance Cruises (which went bankrupt in 2001), was most recently used as a private yacht. Travel Dynamics International, a small, high-end cruise company based in New York, purchased the ship early this year.

Seven-day itineraries start at \$5,595 and up per person.

The Pearl Mist, the still-under-construction inaugural ship from new company Pearl Seas Cruises, features 108 suites, all with private balconies. The ship will sail one 10-night and one 11-night cruise between Toronto and Chicago in June and July. Ports of call include Windsor, Ontario; Mackinac Island, Mich.; and Manitoulin Island, Ontario. Prices start at \$5,605 for the 10-night sailing.

The ship, which has experienced numerous construction delays and was supposed to begin sailing this year, should be ready by early 2009, according to company spokeswoman Laura Oncea. Pearl Seas will likely add more Great Lakes itineraries in 2010, she said, based on already brisk sales for next year.

A third small ship, the 100-passenger Grande Mariner - which was the only ship on the Great Lakes this summer - will continue to offer several six-night summer cruises in Lake Michigan in 2009, starting and ending in Chicago. Prices start at \$1,725 per person. The addition of the Clelia II and the Pearl Mist come a year after the Germany company Hapag-Lloyd Cruises pulled its popular Columbus from the Great Lakes, in part because of declining water levels. The 423-passenger ship, larger by far than other recent ships in the region, is now sailing in Europe (though a spokeswoman for the company doesn't rule out an eventual return to the Great Lakes).

The water levels, which have rebounded this year thanks to above-average rain and snowfall, shouldn't be a problem for the new ships, according to Conlin, because these boats are smaller and built for tight spaces

like the Welland Canal, which connects lakes Ontario and Erie.

"You want to be able to go through the locks and not lose lifeboats that are sticking out," joked Conlin.

Conlin expects the new cruises to appeal to mature, veteran travelers who are looking for new, safe, easy-to-reach destinations.

George Papagapitos, president of Travel Dynamics, called the Great Lakes one of the most overlooked and underestimated cruise destinations. "Half a century ago, the Great Lakes cruises were the prime destination for North Americans' holidays," said Papagapitos.

Conlin is particularly pleased that the Clelia II will sail all summer in the Great Lakes, unlike the Columbus and others that came in for just a few weeks in the early fall.

Also unlike the Columbus, which attracted a largely European clientele, the new ships likely will be filled with primarily Americans and Canadians, according to Conlin.

Oncea, with Pearl Seas, said many prospective passengers are sailors themselves, and already familiar with the Great Lakes. "The history and the culture of the region are unique," she said. "We are confident we will be very successful in this destination."

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