



Sit Back and Relax

Boat tours offer a splashy way to soak up the stunning fall colors of Michigan's water wonderland

By Dianna Stampfler

There's something magical about drifting along a scenic waterway under a canopy of branches adorned with colorful leaves on a fall day in Michigan. That adventure became a dream come true for Capt. Jason Rollings, who launched Cruise Leelanau in late 2020.

An artist by trade, Rollings made his first visit to Leland, west of Traverse City, after graduating from high school in Brighton. There, he helped his parents build a summer home.

"I was hooked," he says. "I went away to college (studying fine art at Ringling College of Art and Design in Florida) and tried Chicago for a while, but Leelanau always calls me back." In addition to skippering the 21-foot Duffy electric cruiser named A Lake Trick, Rollings designs and crafts custom furniture and functional

art from reclaimed materials.

While his 2014 vessel is relatively new, its design is based on the type of coal-fired steam or diesel engine launches that operated around Michigan rivers and lakes — including Lake Leelanau, from Cedar to Leland — at the turn of the 20th century.

"After seeing pictures of these old boats 15 or so years ago, I thought what a cool and fun thing it would be to restore one and take people on tours," says Rollings, who received his captain's license from the U.S. Captain's Training school in Traverse City.

"It was actually my uncle, Jeff Rollings, who told me about the Duffy boats as an alternative to the old vessels. He loved my idea of doing lake tours, so he became my silent partner. I credit him with helping me make this dream a reality."

Fall delivers a different experience along the Leland River and Lake Leelanau, thanks to less boat traffic, cooler temperatures, and a spectrum of color amplified by the reflections on the water. With its electric motor, A Lake Trick leaves so little wake it barely creates a ripple effect in the water as it moves up and down the river.

"I had a larger group that came out on a particularly chilly day, and they brought blankets and had what they called their 'slumber party on the lake.' They've scheduled again this year and plan on making it an annual trip," Rollings relays. "There's no better compliment than to see people have a great time and come back again."

While Rollings says he shares some area history with passengers, it's not what one would consider a guided tour. "It's definitely more of a sit-back-and-enjoy type of trip," he says. From May through October (weather permitting), Rollings motors the eight-passenger boat along the Leland River — formerly known as the Carp River — into north Lake Leelanau, while guests relax and take in the natural surroundings.

"We toured with Jason last fall for our anniversary," says Chuck Valleau, of Suttons Bay. "Colors were near peak for the quiet, sunset tour. The river is lovely, and

while there was a south wind that kept us from venturing far into the lake, Jason skillfully toured us along shore in the protected corner of north Lake Leelanau."

Whether celebrating a special occasion or just enjoying the day, every excursion aboard A Lake Trick is a memorable one. Rollings says guests are invited — even encouraged — to turn the trip into a floating dinner party by picking up appetizers, take-out meals, and/or desserts at one of the downtown eateries, along with a bottle or two of wine from nearby Verterra Winery (or one of the nearly 20 other wineries along the Leelanau Peninsula Wine Trail).

Cruise Leelanau operates from the dock next to the Bluebird Restaurant and Tavern in downtown Leland, across M-22 from historic Fishtown and Lake Michigan. Trips take about 90 minutes, cost \$50 per person, and run on a seasonal schedule. Small dogs are allowed on the trips, although guests are asked to bring a blanket or mat for them to lay on, to protect the boat's vinyl seats.

River Rambling

Sternwheel paddleboats offer another enjoyable river cruising experience, reminiscent of Mississippi River excursions.

- The double-decker red, white, and blue-painted AuSable River Queen is the only such boat operating in northern Michigan, traversing the waters of the famed Au Sable River's Foote Basin along the River Road National Scenic Byway near Oscoda. A heated lower deck, snack bar, and live music on weekends make this a popular Iosco County destination not far from Lake Huron. Trips last about two hours.

- The Star of Saugatuck paddleboat offers trips along the Kalamazoo River, and down the Lake Michigan shore.

- Along the Grand River — the longest river in Michigan, at

This page: The Detroit Princess paddlewheeler (left) explores the sights along the Detroit River. The Grand Lady Riverboat (right) cruises the Grand River from Jenison.

Opposite page: Jason Rollings' Cruise Leelanau tours local lakes and rivers from its home base in Leland.

CRUISE LEELEANAU AND GRAND LADY PHOTOS BY LISA BAIRD. DETROIT PRINCESS PHOTO COURTESY OF DETROIT PRINCESS





252 miles — several sternwheel excursion options are available, including The Grand Lady Riverboat in Jenison (with two identical stern paddlewheels), The Michigan Princess Riverboat in Lansing (a replica of a 19th century steamboat), and The Grand Princess Riverboat in Grand Ledge.

- Paddlewheel boats also operate in Frankenmuth, on the Frankenmuth River (Bavarian Belle Riverboat), and in Detroit, along the Detroit River (Detroit Princess),

where passengers enjoy views of the Ambassador Bridge and the Detroit and Windsor, Ontario, skylines.

Setting Sail

For those seeking a fall sailing experience, the tall shis Appledore in Bay City and Manitou in Traverse City fit the bill.

- Autumn color tours aboard the 85-foot Appledore — complete with warm apple cider and fresh donuts — transport passengers from downtown Bay City up the Saginaw River toward Lake Huron's Saginaw Bay, at the tip of Michigan's thumb.

- The Manitou offers windjammer trips throughout September

and early October in Grand Traverse Bay, aboard a 114-foot replica of an 1800s "coasting" cargo schooner. Overnight capacity for these three- and four-day trips is 24 passengers in 12 double cabins.

Big-Lake Thrills

A handful of boating options out on the Great Lakes are also available into the fall season, weather permitting.

- In Munising, Pictured Rocks Cruises offers unparalleled trips on Lake Superior, just as it has for more than 50 years. Visitors cruise past Grand Island and its 1868 East Channel Lighthouse, and out along the towering sandstone cliffs the area is named after (Pictured Rocks became the first National Lakeshore in the U.S. in 1966). The Classic Cruise, Spray Falls Cruise, and Sunset Spray Falls Cruise are all offered until mid-October.

- In the Straits of Mackinac, the Ugly Anne takes passengers under the five-mile-long Mackinac Bridge aboard a onetime lobster boat purchased from a shipyard in Maine. Aboard the Mackinaw City & Mackinac Bridge History Cruise, guests learn the history of the shipwrecks found deep in the chilly waters where Lake Michigan and Lake Huron converge.

- Sip and Sail fun awaits passengers who can sign up for everything from Sunset to History to Craft Beer cruises aboard the Isle Royale Queen III as it plies the Straits of Mackinac.

"The advantages of boating in the fall are many," says Nicki Polan, executive director of the Michigan Boating Industries Association. "Fall offers amazing displays of color, and the treeline reflection on the water doubles the view. Also, the angle of the sun at that time of year creates a glistening on the water that's magical. The cool air paired with the warm sun is my favorite." ≈



Above: The tall ship Manitou plies Lake Michigan's Grand Traverse Bay.

Right: Ugly Anne cruises from Mackinaw City take passengers under the Mackinac Bridge.

