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# 2026 Great Lakes cruise ship tourism produces $310 million of economic impact for region

*More cruise ships and new ports of call fuel continued growth for Great Lakes*

(DETROIT, MI) – State and local tourism officials joined leaders from Cruise the Great Lakes in celebrating the Great Lakes cruise ship season's record-breaking year that brought $310 million (US) of economic impact to large and small regional destinations in 2026. That figure surpassed the projected $300m, as did the total number of passengers (25,000 vs. 23,000) and port visits (880 vs. 800).

The announcement was made at a special media briefing on Thursday, Oct. 22, at the Waterview Lofts event center at Detroit/Wayne County Port Authority's downtown headquarters, near where American Cruise Line's 130-passenger *American Patriot* ship was docked.

"Simply put, 2026 was another record-breaking year for cruising in the Great Lakes region, with almost 95% of all itineraries sold out," **said Sally Davis Berry, Tourism Director, Cruise the Great Lakes.** "We are delivering more passengers, port visits, and economic impact at large and small regional destinations. And more passengers and port visits mean higher shoreside spending."

Detroit has long supported the Cruise the Great Lakes initiative and was honored to host the media briefing at the Detroit/Wayne County Port Authority.

"Years ago, the naysayers said our building and dock would never see more than a handful of cruise ships," **said John Jamian, Director of Port Operations, Detroit/Wayne County Port Authority at the press event**. "Today, with the American Cruise Lines *Patriot* at our dock, we're

closing out a record season with 70 cruise ship visits. We're now managing three docks to meet growing demand, bringing thousands of tourists to Detroit and strengthening our regional tourism economy. It's proof that Port Detroit has become an important destination on the Great Lakes cruise itinerary, and we're just getting started."

Berry, who leads the Cruise the Great Lakes, a program of the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers Conference, kicked off her remarks by highlighting one important change to the group's annual "season ending" announcement.

She noted a change in how the organization will provide its annual forecast data. In the past, it used its October media briefing to reflect on the current season and share next year's forecast. However, because of ongoing demand for cruise itineraries, many cruise lines are adding new itineraries through March. To ensure the group provides the most accurate data, Cruise the Great Lakes will now hold off on issuing its forecast until its annual meeting each Spring, which, in 2027, will be held April 5-7 in Ann Arbor.

For example, at a Green Bay media briefing last October, Berry announced that the group's research estimated a total economic impact of over $300 million (US) across the region in 2026. By March 2026, that figure had increased to $310 million. The same is true for passengers and port visits.

"We've found that the data we share in October is outdated by the time the following cruise season begins the following Spring," **added Berry**. "We believe the most appropriate time to announce the forecast is closer to the season start so we are more confident with our data."

Berry then shared the 2026 data and broke down how the numbers are calculated, including:

**Economic impact**

The economic impact of Great Lakes cruising exceeded $310 million (US) in 2026, a 25% increase from 2025. More passengers, more port visits, higher shoreside spending, and a rising price premium for Great Lakes cruises are critical drivers of this growth. The ongoing expansion of Great Lakes cruising continues to bring significant economic benefits to port communities of all sizes throughout the region.

**Cruise Lines and Ships**

American Cruise Lines entered the market in 2026 with its American-based port-of-call itineraries. The cruise line has announced plans to increase port visits in the coming years.

In total, seven cruise lines operated 10 ships on the Great Lakes in 2026.

**Passenger visits**

In 2026, Great Lakes cruises welcomed over 25,000 individual passengers, a 5% increase from 2025. The cruise lines made more than 880 port visits, nearly 15% higher than last year. Total cruise passenger visits across the region totaled 180,000, up nearly 15% from 2025.

Berry also noted that another growth indicator for 2026 comes from all the major announcements across the region this year. She highlighted the following at the media briefing:

- Rochester, New York, welcoming cruise ships after a 7-year hiatus.
- Buffalo welcoming cruise ships.
- New York Governor Kathy Hochul announcing Buffalo's Outer Harbor cruise ship terminal construction with an expected 2028 opening.
- Erie, Pennsylvania, announcing that Victory Cruise Lines will make visits starting in 2028.
- Ludington, Michigan, is evaluating cruise ship docking options for cruise lines.
- Milwaukee is nearing completion of its South Shore Dock, with an expected opening in May 2027.
- Toronto is announcing a feasibility study on a new cruise ship terminal in its Central Business District.

"The 2026 Great Lakes cruising season exceeded expectations in terms of passenger numbers, destinations visited, and economic impact, and our early projections for 2027 indicate another record-breaking season," **said Wisconsin Tourism Secretary and Cruise the Great Lakes Chair Anne Sayers**. "All of this underscores the appeal of the Great Lakes and its diverse offerings. We are excited that Cruise the Great Lakes can help bring more people to the region and generate meaningful economic benefits for local businesses."

"Cruising is an important and growing part of Detroit's tourism economy, complementing our conventions, sporting events and leisure travel while introducing new visitors to everything our destination has to offer**," said Claude Molinari, President & CEO, Visit Detroit**. "Every port call creates an opportunity to support local restaurants, attractions, retailers and hospitality businesses, while encouraging travelers to spend more time exploring the Detroit region."

“American has had a remarkable first season cruising the Great Lakes,” **said Charles B. Robertson, President & CEO, American Cruise Lines.** “This was the first time that a premium, domestic product has ever been offered on the Great Lakes, and it was clearly popular. With ten ships under construction, you can expect more from us in the years to come. We are honored to partner with Cruise the Great Lakes and appreciate the warm welcome from ports around the region. We look forward to continued growth on the Lakes and cruising here for many years to come.”

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