

BY MARY GOW
PHOTOS BY HING KUR

Moonlight Lady

Lake Champlain's newest luxury cruise ship embarks on its maiden voyage.

The sound of waves lapping against the hull; a boat's movement through and with the water; views of the natural and human-touched landscape: traveling on Lake Champlain gives different perspective than viewing it from terra firma. Whether paddling, sailing, motoring, or spending a few hours on a dinner cruise or sightseeing excursion, being on the water deepens our appreciation and awe of the country's sixth great lake.

After a long hiatus, overnight passenger cruising is back. Once again, one can travel in the style of the bygone steamship era, spending leisurely days on deck watching the Green Mountains and Adirondacks drift by, savoring fine food served in a lovely dining salon, and retiring to sleep in well-appointed staterooms.

With three decks, eight attractive staterooms, a spectacular Sky Deck dining room, and a cozy library lounge, the sixty-five foot long Moonlight Lady is like a casual but luxurious floating country inn. Staffed by a crew of six, she accommodates sixteen overnight guests on one, three, or six-night cruises. Burlington Harbor is her home port.

"There is a lot of history of moving people and commerce on the lake, but recently there wasn't anybody offering overnight cruises. I've had it in the back of my mind for a longtime," said Mike Shea, owner of the Moonlight Lady, about this new endeavor.

Shea is not only familiar with Lake Champlain's impressive maritime past, he has also had a significant role in its recent years. Shea founded Green Mountain Boat Lines in 1984, with the 149-passenger Spirit of Ethan Allen. His Spirit of Ethan Allen III, seating 424 passengers, is a popular floating restaurant and banquet hall that offers an array of dinner cruises and excursions.

The Moonlight Lady is in "the style of yachts in the 1920s — an inland waterway cruiser," said Shea. With her crisp lines and even row of large stateroom windows, she looks like a posh vessel of the early twentieth century, but she was built in 2001 and launched in 2002. In her first years she took guests on cruises of Virginia's Historic



Launching the cruise ship fulfills a longtime dream for owner Mike Shea.



Dismal Swamp Canal. Shea brought her to Burlington Harbor last summer.

Through the winter, the Moonlight Lady had a makeover. She was painted, re-carpeted, and wallpapered. Her oak paneling and brass trim were polished. Her eight staterooms, each with private W.C., got fresh looks in soft yellows and cornflower blues, and new comforts — like memory foam toppers and plush accessories. Each one was also named for a historic Lake Champlain vessel. Steamships are well represented, but naval craft and sailing canal schooners are there too. Ernie Haas prints of the namesake ships and boats adorn each stateroom.

The Moonlight Lady's biggest change was getting a magnificent new Sky Deck. Previously she had the pilot house and an open sun deck on top — her dining room was below. Views from the top deck are most expansive, so Shea redesigned it. The little pilot house was replaced with a spacious one, where guests can watch the captain at the helm and learn about navigating the lake.

Most of the deck was transformed into an airy dining salon and interactive kitchen theater. Now covered, the deck is enjoyable in all weather, enclosed with opening windows for views, summer light and breezes. The gourmet galley is arranged so guests can watch the chef at work or participate in culinary workshops.

"The cruise is such an amazing experience, how could we do anything less than have amazing food?" asked Marie Lathey, Director of Sales and Marketing. "Fresh food, local fresh fruit, local breads, local organic products — it is important to us that we stay true to our local ingredients."

For the cruises Shea looked for chefs "that have a love of the water, are good at what they do, and make it approachable," Lathey said. The kitchen's open design invites guests to discuss ingredients and technique with the chefs. Specialty cruises are in the works to offer cooking workshops on some Moonlight Lady getaways.

On one-night "Wine Cruises," guests taste and compare with Dellie Rex, known as the 'wine expert's wine expert,' " said Lathey. Author of *About Wine*, Rex teaches at the New England Culinary Institute.

"The concept is 'Wine 101: Food and wine pairing for the enthusiast,'" said Lathey. In an onboard workshop, participants sample an assortment of wines. Guided by Rex, first they observe different aspects of the wines without food, then they taste them with various foods — bitter endives, sweet chocolate, and more. Rex helps them identify characteristics of the wines and find combinations that are pleasing to their palates.

Beyond food, wine, and comfort, from these overnight cruises, "Guests will take away deeper levels of understanding [the] history and nature of Lake Champlain," said Shea. "We don't have whales or dolphins or glaciers. What we have is history and beauty, which is stunning."

To help guests learn about that history and nature, Shea is partnering with the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum (LCMM) in Vergennes. The museum, now in its twenty-second year, has a staff of interpreters with vast knowledge about the lake and its distant and recent history.

"There is a story everywhere you look on Lake Cham- ➤ 52



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With Burlington Harbor as her home port, the Moonlight Lady carries up to sixteen overnight guests on one, three, or six-night cruises between the Adirondacks and the Green Mountains.

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plain,” said Jeff Myers, LCMM Associate Director. LCMM interpreters, serving as guides on Moonlight Lady cruises, will share stories of the Champlain Sea and whales in Charlotte, Abenaki legends, the families who owned and worked the sailing canal schooners, and the lake’s military and commercial history.

Learning about Champlain’s past while on the lake gives unique perspective. Guests will get to know their state-room namesakes — travel part of their routes and discover where those ships rest today. On many cruises they will visit the site of the Revolutionary War Battle of Valcour Island, and get a greater sense of the enormity of Benedict Arnold’s achievement there. Beyond human history, the guides also know the life of the lake — its birds, fish, and ecosystems.

Cruising on Lake Champlain, LCMM’s Adam Cain pointed out, we see views that are “very very similar to what people would have seen one hundred years ago when they went on a cruise, except there are more trees now.” The Moonlight Lady “is continuing a tradition on Lake Champlain when people traveled by boat,” he noted.

Three durations of cruises are offered this summer on the Moonlight Lady. On the “Vermont,” an overnight jaunt, guests board at 10:00 am on Saturday and return Sunday morning. This getaway offers a taste of lake cruising with onboard lunch, dinner, and breakfast. Destinations vary, but Westport and Valcour Island are on many schedules.

Guests on “Lake Discovery Cruises” spend four days and three nights on board. Ports of call include Vergennes, Westport, and Valcour Island. At the Basin Harbor Club, guests visit the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum and may play tennis or use other club facilities. On Otter Creek, canoes and kayaks can be arranged for paddling. Several cruises coincide with performances at Westport’s Depot Theater. In the leisurely flow of on-board meals, sights, and soaking up the lake environment, on occasional swim calls, guests can take a refreshing dip.

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On the seven-day, six-night round trip "Discover Montreal Cruise," guests see the lake's international side. The boat passes where Samuel de Champlain was the first European to see this waterway 399 years ago. In the Richelieu Canal, guests lend a hand in the locks leading to the Saint Lawrence Seaway. The Montreal stop offers time in the picturesque old city as well as dining in exquisite restaurants.

As the Moonlight Lady sails her first summer on Lake Champlain, she is a welcome addition to New England's west coast.

Mary Gow writes history of science books for middle school students. She is a regular contributor to *The Times Argus* and is always fascinated by the remarkable people and places we find in our own communities.

For information about Moonlight Lady and Vermont Discovery Cruises: phone, 802-863-3350, vermontdiscoverycruises.com.

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