Booking A Lake Erie Charter Trip: What To Ask And What To Expect

With the coming of spring, many anglers turn their thoughts toward planning for summertime walleye charters on Lake Erie. Many are seasoned veterans in the field of chartering fishing trips and have selected a captain (though years of trial and error) who fits their needs, fishing desires, and budget. However, given the ever increasing popularity of Lake Erie walleye, smallmouth bass and perch fishing, new charter clientele enter the fishery every year and know little of the process involved in selecting a charter captain.

Lake Erie’s charter boat industry has grown over the years from 34 charter captains during the 1970s to over 500 during 1983. Most captains are superb fish handlers, excellent anglers and have expert knowledge of the lake, weather and where to find fish. Most of them will also go to the limit to make your charter trip a rewarding and memorable experience. However, to avoid the occasional “bad apple,” here are a few things you should know and ask.

The Cost of a Charter—A Real Bargain. For the most part, we will limit discussion to walleye fishing charter boats which charter six passengers or less. During 1984, charters on Lake Erie will be $180 to $400+ with an average rate of $240 to $270. This sounds expensive but consider the costs which the captain must incur annually. Boat payments, summer dockage, winter storage, annual maintenance, repairs, insurance, advertising, fuel, electronic gear, fishing tackle, bait, ice, captain’s and mate wages, safety equipment, boat cleaning costs, and years of experience on Lake Erie all add up to quite a sum of money. Consider that a six passenger trip at $270 per day, which often includes bait, tackle and ice, will cost $45 per person. For an individual who wishes to make ten trips per year, the charter cost would be $450, which would not even begin to cover the cost of summer dockage for a boat. One hundred trips over a ten year period wouldn’t come close to purchasing a new boat capable of handling the lake’s unpredictable weather conditions. Looking at all factors and considering the experience of the captain in finding fish and doing all the work, a charter trip is truly a bargain.

Considerations in Selection of a Charter. The cost of a charter varies with the service provided and the costs realized by the captain. A full day of fishing, including tackle, boat, ice, breakfast, lunch, on board beverages and fish cleaned and packaged (an executive charter) may cost over $400. A bare bones, you-supply-everything, short distance, six-hour trip may cost as little as $180. The bottom line is that you get what you pay for—sometimes. The “sometimes” occurs when the proper questions are not asked when booking a charter. The following questions should be routine when booking a charter.

* Ask what the full cost of the trip will be including a guarantee deposit. Be sure to ask if the deposit is refundable or applicable to another trip should an unforeseen circumstance warrant cancellation.
* Check on the dock time—when you should be at the boat ready to go—and return time. Also be sure to ask if the trip is a full day (leaving early in the morning and returning mid to late evening) or a half day (such as 7 hours dock to dock leaving at 6 a.m. and returning at 1 p.m.). Half day charters are ideal for those who must return home early or who have another activity planned for the afternoon such as going to the beach or to Cedar Point. An angler expecting to spend the day fishing may be surprised or angry to find the boat headed home at 12 noon. Another consideration for half-day trips is that walleye (if that’s the species being pursued) seem to unpredictably “turn-on” and “turn-off” at different times of the day. You may not see much action until it’s almost time to return; yet, you may limit out in the first few hours. This brings up the next two considerations.
* Is the charter advertised as seven hours dock to dock or limit? Eight hours of fishing or limit? Full day of fishing? If you are only concerned with catching your limit of walleye and going right back, you need not worry. However, if your intent is to spend a day or half day fishing for the full time allotted, consider carefully the duration and/or “limit” clauses of the charter. Once a limit is acquired as stated in the ad by the captain, the boat may immediately return to the dock. This does happen so you need to consider what the intent of your trip is to be. If your party limits within a few hours, other species may be pursued in the remaining time (perch, white bass, smallmouth bass, freshwater drum).
* Many captains who run full day charters are willing to stay out longer if the fishing is slow or if everyone is having a good time. Be sure to ask if there is an additional charge for extra time.
* If you wish to have the opportunity to personally catch your fish and are an inexperienced walleye fisherman, let it be known to the captain and mate. It is the responsibility of the captain and mate to assist you in learning how to fish for and catch walleye. Some charter captains and mates are criticized for catching more than their personal limit and adding them to the limit of their passengers. Although their intention may be admirable by trying to assure that all of their clients leave with their limits, this is illegal and you have paid for the right to fish for your own limit of six fish. Keep in mind that the captain and mate can also fish and legally catch six walleye each. After six fish are caught, it is illegal to catch and keep another even if given to another person. If you didn’t limit out, the captain and mate can give some of their six fish to you to fill your limit. Remember that it is illegal to possess more than six walleyes per day within 1/4 mile of Lake Erie (refer to your fishing regulations).
* Don’t ask the captain to guarantee a limit catch. Limits depend upon the desire of the fish to strike, concentration or location of fish, weather, and the experience of the anglers. Charter captains
will provide you with every opportunity to catch fish, but they cannot perform miracles. After all, if fishing meant catching a fish every time you put your bait in the water, we wouldn’t call it fishing; we would call it catching.

- Ask if such things as tackle, lures, bait, ice, etc., are provided with the trip.
- If you find that these things are provided, ask if there is an additional charge above and beyond the trip expense. It is not uncommon for an angler to be informed that rods, reels, and lures are provided only to find, upon reaching the dock with no equipment, that “provided” meant $5.00 per day for rod and reel and $15.00 for lures. If you are expected to provide your own bait, ask how many dozen per person and then bring one extra dozen. Don’t try to cut costs on bait. Bring healthy, fresh nightcrawlers, NOT redworms or dugworms. Ask the captain for recommended lures, lure color and lure weight, and plan on a selection. If unfamiliar with appropriate tackle, ask for recommended rod/reel sizes and line weight. Heavy ocean gear with 30 lb. test line will assure you of a fishless day. Make plenty of ice at home if you must provide it. A full cooler of walleye during the summer can lose quality rapidly if not iced properly.

- Be sure the boat has working toilet facilities which you are allowed to use. This is mandatory equipment for a charter vessel.
- Ask if a cooler, separate from the fish cooler, will be available for your lunches and beverages. Also ask if alcohol is permitted and if glass or aluminum cans are allowed.

- Make sure the captain has a valid U.S. Coast Guard license as well as a current Ohio guide’s license. Ask for certification numbers if in doubt; these licenses are for your protection against unqualified individuals.

- Make arrangements for contact with the captain the evening prior to the charter to check on current or forecasted weather conditions. Don’t be disappointed if weather cancels your trip; make arrangements immediately to reschedule or for return of deposit.

- Upon arrival at the boat, the responsible captain should show you where life jackets are stored and how to put them on. One Coast Guard approved life jacket is required for each individual. Make sure that children’s life jackets are provided for children less than 90 lbs. You should be instructed in the operation of the marine toilet facilities and general operation of the vessel in the event that something happens to the captain (unless a mate is present). If these things are not done, request they be done for your safety.

What the Captain Expects From You. The following items may be requested of you by the captain to make your trip more pleasant and to protect his investment. Consider the following for your charter:

- Bring a large cooler to take your fish home. Consolidate your lunches and beverages in a small cooler for the boat unless a cooler is already provided.

- Bring only a small pocket-size tackle box with necessary weight-forward spinners, Lindy-type drift rigs, and crankbaits for trolling and consolidate only the necessary gear for your party into one tackle box. Six tackle boxes filled with unnecessary gear will only aid in cluttering the boat.

- Wear only soft-soled shoes aboard.

- If you are prone to seasickness or don’t know if you get seasick, take the appropriate medication one hour before departure. Avoid greasy foods for dinner the evening before and for breakfast that morning.

- Bring suntan lotion, head protection (cap), towel, rain gear, and protective clothing in a small, easily stored bag. Don’t forget sunglasses.

- Make sure your tackle is in good condition and that your fishing line is not old. One of the most frequent causes for line break on a large walleye is old line.

- Be at dockside at or before the given departure time; tardiness in departure takes away from your fishing time.

- If you decide not to go, please notify the captain as to the circumstances the evening before, if possible. Don’t leave him sitting dockside all day waiting. Your deposit doesn’t cover the costs of a lost trip.

- If alcoholic beverages are permitted don’t abuse the privilege. Intoxication seldom appreciated by the captain and other party members. If you plan to go fishing to get drunk, do everyone a favor and stay at home.

- Abusive action or language to other boats fishing in the same area reflect back to the captain and must be reprimanded. Remember that his name is on the side of his boat.

- Most charter boats have trash cans for paper, cans, old line, etc. They are there for a purpose; let’s help keep Lake Erie clean.

- Respect the captain’s word as law on his vessel.

- The legal limit for walleye is six. You may catch and keep six. Let your fellow anglers catch their own fish; don’t earn the title of “fish hog.”

- Limit catches of walleye are the exception and not the rule. Never expect a limit nor expect the captain to produce one for you. Remember, you are going fishing not catching.

- Most captains expect to be paid upon returning to the dock.

- Tipping the captain or mate for a good trip depends upon the feelings of your fellow anglers and their budgets. Although customary, it is not necessary.

Knowing the above tips and asking the right questions can help you enjoy your Lake Erie charter trip.

—David O. Kelch
Where To Find Salmon In The Summer

Salmon and steelhead are caught off of Lake Erie’s central basin beaches, piers and river mouths in the fall. In the winter, these fish are caught near hot water discharges from power plants and in the spring, they are caught in the rivers and streams of the central basin. This leads to the question of where to find the salmonids in the summer.

Current research on the movements of Lake Erie salmon and trout in Ohio waters is virtually nonexistent. However, recent research on the movement of these fish has been conducted in the New York and Pennsylvania waters of Lake Erie and in Lake Ontario. When this is combined with central basin water quality data and fishermen reports we can begin to speculate on the possible locations of salmonids in the central basin in the summer. This can in turn help potential salmon fishermen plan their central basin salmonid fishing trip.

The western basin of Lake Erie is too warm to support salmonids in the summer. Summer storms mix the shallow western basin waters. This basin does not stratify into a warm upper layer and a cool bottom layer as does the central basin.

The central basin (averaging 60 feet deep) is too deep to be completely mixed by storms. Beginning in May and lasting until September, three distinct layers of water form in the central basin. The warmer surface layer floats on the denser bottom layer—much like oil floats on water. This top layer is called the epilimnion. The thermocline is the narrow band of water separating the epilimnion from the hypolimnion, or bottom layer. The thermocline is a zone of rapid temperature change. In a sense, the thermocline is the only physical “structure” to be found in the open waters of the central basin. Some modern electronic fish finders can actually identify the thermocline.

New York Sea Grant researchers have found that Lake Ontario salmonids have strong orientation to the thermocline. Lake trout were found most often at the bottom and below the thermocline. Brown trout were most often found in the thermocline and Chinook salmon were most often located at or above the thermocline. In the spring, steelhead were found close to shore until the lake temperature exceeded 50 degrees F. At this water temperature the steelhead dispersed into the open waters of Lake Ontario.

Lake Ontario lake trout preferred temperatures of 43 to 55 degrees F. Brown trout preferred a mean temperature of 55 degrees F and Chinook salmon preferred 57 to 63 degrees F. Steelhead were widely dispersed in waters of 50 to 65 degrees F.

Temperatures for salmonids, as shown below, are found in the hypolimnion of Lake Erie’s central basin in the summer. However, oxygen levels in some parts of the central basin hypolimnion may be too low in August and September to support salmonids. In spite of this, anglers reported catching trophy size salmon and steelhead several miles off Cleveland and Fairport Harbor in August 1983.

Because Lake Trout are extremely rare and Ohio stocks only coho, steelhead and brown trout, anglers would do well to fish in the hypolimnion during July and in the vicinity of the thermocline during August through September. If your boat is equipped with an electronic fish locator and downriggers, a more effective method is simply to locate the large schools of bait fish, look for the salmonids and set the downrigger at the corresponding depth.

If central basin water quality continues to improve, deepwater offshore fishing for salmonids will increase in the future. The development of this fishery in July, August, September and October will provide an economic stimulus to the region and offer new business opportunities for the Lake Erie charter industry.

—Frank Lichtkoppler

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A Strategy To Export Salmonids And Import Dollars In Northeastern Ohio

Recreational sportfishing may be conceived of as an export industry to be developed in Northeastern Ohio’s Lake Erie region. Non-local sportfishing dollars can be attracted to the region (imported) and trophy-sized sportfish exported. Presently, in the central basin of Lake Erie, this is not occurring to any great extent.

The central basin sport fishery of Lake Erie is primarily a locally oriented fishery at present. A 1982 survey of central basin sport anglers show that they spend about $16.00 per person per day in contrast to $47.00 per person per day in the western basin of Lake Erie as shown by a 1981 survey of western basin anglers. While the central basin fishery does keep local money in the area, it does not attract a large number of non-local sport anglers as does the western basin walleye fishery.

One major reason the central basin area has not attracted large numbers of non-local anglers is that there has not been fishing of quality comparable to that of the western basin. The central basin lacks the reef structure which is a major reason for the most successful fishery of the western basin, the walleye fishery. However, steelhead, coho, salmon and brown trout provide the potential for a central basin fishery which is attractive to non-local anglers.

Development of the central basin salmonid fishery into an export fishery attractive to non-local anglers may require the attainment of several goals including salmonid population enhancement, habitat improvement, improvement of boat and shoreline access, promotion and information on the fishery, and marine-related business development. Research into the economic, biological and environmental impacts of the central basin’s potential export fishery is also needed to ensure the maximum wise utilization of Lake Erie’s recreational resources.

A more in-depth discussion of this export fishery concept can be found in Sea Grant Technical Summary, OHSU-TS-8, “A Strategy to Export Salmonids and Import Dollars in Northeastern Ohio.” This report is available from your local Sea Grant Extension Agent or by contacting Betty Janeves, Communicator, Ohio Sea Grant Program, 484 West Twelfth Avenue, Columbus, Ohio 43210. The cost of the technical summary is $1.00 by mail or $.50 if picked up at the Sea Grant office.

—Frank Lichtkoppler
Lake Erie Impact Area Will Be Smaller in 1984

Many of you will recall that last year members of the Northwest Ohio Sea Grant Advisory Committee were instrumental in cooling down one of Lake Erie’s hottest controversies—the use of the well-known western basin reef area as an artillery test range. Most fishermen had been under the impression that the large artillery range, Impact Area II which covered most of the reefs, was closed to them at least 3 days per week. However, upon meeting with CW4 Dennis St. Clair, Camp Perry Facilities Manager, the Sea Grant Advisory Committee learned that this was a misconception and that the area had been closed on only 5 days in 1982. They immediately initiated an educational program with the assistance of Mr. St. Clair to notify area newspapers and radio stations regarding the weekly status of the firing range. The effort was very successful at reducing the tension which existed, and the range was used on only 8 occasions in 1983.

This year, according to Mr. St. Clair, fishermen will be pleased to learn that many of the fishing reefs which have long been enclosed in the Lake Erie Impact Area will now be outside of the new range boundaries.

As explained by Mr. St. Clair, "A modified Impact Area II for 1984 will be identified by a series of 14 buoys. The buoys will be numbered II-1 through II-14 from west to east and will be placed on a west to east line approximately two and one half miles south of U.S. CG buoys A, B, and C. The area north of this line of buoys will be safe for mariners during periods of modified Impact Area II use."

The reefs which will now fall outside of the firing zone are Niagara Reef, Little Pickerel Reef, Cone Reef, Big Pickerel Reef, Crane Reef and most of Flat Rock Reef. The accompanying diagram shows the placement of the new line of buoys.

Although the complete firing schedule for 1984 is not yet available, Sea Grant Extension will continue its program of notifying newspapers, magazines, radio and TV stations of the firing schedule on a weekly basis. Firing schedules can also be obtained by contacting Camp Perry Range Safety at (419) 635-2233 or on VHF marine channel 16.

—it-Fred Snyder

Fremont Sea Grant Extension Office Relocates

On February 1, 1984 the doors opened at the Ohio Sea Grant Extension's new office, located near Port Clinton at Camp Perry. Formerly situated at 1401 Walter Avenue, Fremont, the new Northwest District Sea Grant Extension Office will make Sea Grant services more accessible to people living along the western basin of Lake Erie. District Sea Grant Specialist Fred L. Snyder is assigned to the new office and can be reached at:

Ohio Sea Grant Extension
Building 3, Room 12
Camp Perry
Port Clinton, OH 43452
Phone (419)635-4417

New Publications:

Guide to Fishing in Central Lake Erie

The purpose of this guide is to provide fishermen with useful information on the physical and biological nature of central Lake Erie. Through a more complete understanding of the lake's characteristics and how it functions, your fishing experience can be more successful and enjoyable.

The cost of "Guide to Fishing in Central Lake Erie" is $2.00 by mail or $1.00 if picked up at the Sea Grant Office.

Ohio Sea Grant Program
College of Biological Sciences
484 West 12th Avenue
Columbus, Ohio 43210-1292
Make checks payable to:
The Ohio State University
Fish “Warm Up” to Davis-Besse Power Plant

Can Lake Erie fish survive the heated water being discharged by the Davis-Besse Nuclear Power Plant? It seems so. In fact, they seem to prefer the warmer water when given a choice according to Ohio State University researchers Dr. Jeffrey Reutter and Dr. Charles E. Herdendorf of the Center for Lake Erie Research. What happens to these fish when there is a sudden change in water temperature, however, is another matter—it can be fatal.

Thermal pollution is a subject of concern in the building of any power plant. Any increase in the temperature of an aquatic system may cause ecological changes, but they need not be disastrous. Regulation of the amount of heat added can greatly reduce potential ecological dangers. Some waters are able to dissipate thermal discharge better than others depending on mixing by winds and currents.

The Davis-Besse plant utilizes lake water to cool steam from the turbines. The water is then returned to the lake 11 degrees celsius (20°F) warmer than ambient lake temperatures. It is discharged from a pipe located about 300 meters offshore. The affected area covers approximately two hectares. From 1971 to 1975, before Davis-Besse went into operation, Ohio State University conducted experiments to determine the effects of this heated water on Lake Erie fish.

Over 2,000 fish representing 24 local species were studied in a laboratory setting. Fish were collected from each season. Water temperatures were controlled and fish were allowed to swim from the normal lake temperature for each season to increasingly hotter water (as much as 28 degrees celsius above normal lake temperature).

Fish were also tested for heat shock (the effect of swimming into the heated discharge) by being placed in water 11 degrees celsius above normal lake temperature. As soon as the fish lost its swimming ability, it was placed back into normal water temperature and observed. This was done to simulate a fish losing swimming ability and being forced into cooler water by the discharge current.

To determine the effect of cold shock (a fish swimming out of the warm effluent after residing there), fish were kept in warm water for 24 hours and then placed in water with ambient lake temperature and observed.

The results of these carefully controlled experiments showed that in all seasons, but especially fall, winter and spring, fish preferred the warmer water.

Ninety-two percent of the fish survived the heat shock test when returned to normal lake water. Fish would have an even higher survival rate in the lake because the amount of time spent in the heated discharge would be less than that in the experiment. As one might expect, cold shock stress was greater at this time of year. If the power plant should shut down, many of the fish residing in the plume would probably die.

It is evident that the discharge of heated water into Lake Erie will have little negative effect on the fishery as long as the plant does not discharge water warmer than 11 degrees celsius and remains in operation during the winter months.

Based on the results of these experiments, researchers recommend that power plants maintain a discharge temperature of 11 degrees celsius or less and do not shut down for semi-annual refueling during the winter months, but refuel in the spring and fall when any negative effects would be minimal.

—Sandy Herdendorf

FCC, Coast Guard May Act On VHF Radio Abuse

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the U.S. Coast Guard may soon initiate efforts to crack down on VHF radio abuse, according to the National Marine Manufacturers Association. The FCC has identified three major problems at large harbors across the country. These include a marked increase in the use of profanity on the air, non-use of identifying call signs and an increase in the number of unauthorized land-based stations using improper frequencies reserved for vessels and other users.

The two federal agencies will soon collaborate in determining ways to reduce misuse of the radio system. Although conviction rates are low, FCC fines for misuse of the airwaves range between $100 and $500. Charter boat captains and other VHF radio users may wish to make sure that all their FCC paperwork is in order and to review operational “do’s and don’ts” before spring. The FCC also encourages self-policing, so don’t hesitate to call an improper transmission to the attention of the perpetrator. Remember that you must carry on board your operator’s permit and ship’s station license and you must know the FCC rules (Part 83).

—Fred L. Snyder

OEAGLS Go International

The curriculum materials entitled Oceanic Education Activities for Great Lakes Schools (OEAGLS), developed by the Ohio Sea Grant Education Program, have long been recognized for their usefulness and adaptability all over the United States. Now an opportunity has arisen to extend their use beyond our borders to the Caribbean island of Barbados.

As part of a USAID Title XII program, the OSU Division of Environmental Education is conducting workshops in science and social studies for Barbados teachers. Dr. Rosanne Fortner, Coordinator of the Ohio Sea Grant Education Program, will accompany this year’s teaching team for a workshop on April 26. The focus of this year’s workshop will be materials and methods for including environmental education in social studies curriculum. Dr. Fortner will be using adaptations of the “Yellow Perch in Lake Erie” game and the “Shipping: The World Connection” activity with local data.

The design of OEAGLS allows for ease in infusing such topics, and the island environment offers much in terms of aquatic applications for environmental concepts. Dr. Fortner stated, “We see this opportunity as an important one for extending the importance and visibility of Ohio’s Education Program to developing Caribbean nations.”

For further information on the OEAGLS Program, contact your nearest Sea Grant Agent or Sea Grant Education Office at Ramseyer Hall, 29 West Woodruff, Columbus, Ohio 43210.
Determining Passenger Load, Weight Capacity, and Horsepower

Most boats today will have a capacity label showing the maximum number of passengers, equipment load, and horsepower attached inside the hull. Yet many times an older vessel may either be purchased without this information label or heavy equipment or gear may be permanently mounted on the vessel resulting in the need for new capacity data. If no capacity plate is attached, it becames necessary to calculate load and horsepower maximums for safety. This can easily be accomplished by using two easy calculations with the following data: maximum length, maximum width, transom height, steering style (remote or direct), and bottom shape (V-hull or flat). It must be remembered that capacity labels and the following calculation methods are both for calm water situations since safe capacity decreases in rough water. It is also wise to never overload a boat beyond calculated or plate capacities. Any loads placed into a boat should be distributed evenly and kept low in the bottom of the vessel.

Passenger Load and Weight Capacity. The following formulas are for determining load and weight capacity when capacity information is not available.

Passenger Load or PL = Overall length x Maximum Width divided by 15. Length and width in feet and pounds; round off to nearest whole number.

Weight Capacity or WC = PL x 141 + 32, where WC is in pounds.

Example: Passenger load and weight capacity for a boat 18.6 feet long and 7 feet wide.

PL = 19 x 7 divided by 15 = 9 passengers
WC = 9 x 141 + 32 = 1,301 pounds
weight capacity

Power Factors and Horsepower Ratings for Outboard Motors Only. The power factor is obtained by multiplying the length in feet by the transom width in feet. The horsepower listing below is the maximum for the corresponding power factor ranges.

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Example: A boat 13.25 feet long with a transom width of 3.75 feet has a PF value of approximately 50. Your calculation would be 13.25 times 3.75 equals 49.7. The above table indicates a maximum horsepower of 15.

If the power factor exceeds 52 in the above table and the transom height is greater than or equal to 20 inches and steering is remote, horsepower is calculated as 2F minus 90 (round to nearest multiple of 5) where F = length in feet x width in feet. If the transom height is less than 20 inches or the steering is direct, then the horsepower equals 0.8F minus 25 (round to nearest multiple of 5).

Example: A boat of 17.5 feet in length, transom width of 5.1 feet and transom height of 20 inches and remote steering yields an F value of 17.5 x 5.1 which equals approximately 89, for which the maximum horsepower = 2 x 89 - 90 or 90 horsepower.

—David O. Kelch