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Port Milwaukee celebrates completion of record-breaking 2026 cruise season

City welcomes nearly 20,000 passengers, marking significant growth in Milwaukee's Great Lakes cruise industry

MILWAUKEE – Port Milwaukee proudly closed its record-breaking 2026 cruise season on Saturday, October 31, welcoming nearly 20,000 passengers throughout the season, reflecting significant growth in Milwaukee's Great Lakes cruise industry.

The arrival of the *Viking Polaris* kicked off the 2026 Great Lakes cruising season in Milwaukee on April 23. The *American Patriot* marked the conclusion of the season on October 31.

Throughout the season, Port Milwaukee recorded 62 cruise ship calls between eight individual vessels, bringing 19,820 visitors from around the world to experience the City of Milwaukee and the Great Lakes region. In 2025, Milwaukee welcomed approximately 11,000 cruise passengers across 22 ship calls. Cruise lines welcomed to Port Milwaukee in 2026 include: American Cruise Lines, Pearl Seas, Ponant, Hapag Lloyd, Victory, and Viking.

"Milwaukee's 2026 cruise season was another exciting opportunity to showcase our city to visitors from around the world," **Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson** said. "Each ship docked along our shoreline brings visitors who support our local businesses and restaurants, and contributes to the vibrancy of our waterfront. I am grateful for the Port Milwaukee team and our cruise industry partners that make this possible. I look forward to building on this momentum in the 2027 season."

The 2026 season also marked an exciting milestone with the arrival of American Cruise Lines, which launched its Great Lakes itineraries through Port Milwaukee this year. The addition of American Cruise Lines further demonstrates the growing interest in Milwaukee as a destination and gateway to the Great Lakes.

This season included nine occasions with two simultaneous cruise visits, as well as three dates when three cruise ships were in the city concurrently. On May 17, both the *Viking Octantis* and *Viking Polaris* docked at the City Heavy Lift Dock. This was the first time these sister vessels

have shared a dock in Milwaukee, an operation which required extensive coordination between logistical, tourism, and safety partners.

“The 2026 season truly showed Port Milwaukee’s growing presence in the Great Lakes cruise industry,” **Port Milwaukee Director Benji Timm** said. “We are grateful to our cruise line partners, local tourism organizations, and community stakeholders who helped make this season a success. With continued interest in Milwaukee as a cruise destination and the upcoming opening of our new South Shore Cruise Dock, Port Milwaukee is well positioned to create more opportunities for visitors to experience our city.”

Port Milwaukee is also pleased to share that the construction of the new South Shore Cruise Dock remains on track and on budget for completion by the end of this year, with a formal opening celebration scheduled to coincide with the first cruise ship arrival of the 2027 season.

The new dock is designed to accommodate the largest cruise ships operating on the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Seaway System, positioning Milwaukee to welcome additional cruise activity and represents an important investment in Milwaukee’s waterfront.

Beyond infrastructure investments, several ongoing efforts remain underway to promote passenger cruise business in Milwaukee and throughout the Great Lakes. Visit Milwaukee, Great Lakes Shore Excursions, and various local stakeholders are proud partners in promoting cruising activity in the city, working together to elevate Milwaukee’s visibility as a destination and strengthen the region’s position in the growing international cruise market.

“This record-breaking season brought the world to Milwaukee, giving nearly 20,000 cruise visitors a chance to discover our incredible food, explore our neighborhoods, visit our cultural institutions and experience the hospitality that makes this city so memorable,” **Visit Milwaukee President and CEO Peggy Williams-Smith** said. “Those visits bring customers through the doors of our local businesses and introduce Milwaukee to new audiences around the globe. We’re so proud to work alongside Port Milwaukee and our tourism partners to keep that momentum growing.”

Additional data detailing the 2026 cruise season’s local economic impact will be released at a later date. The 2027 cruise season will officially kick off on May 8, 2027, with the arrival of *Viking Octantis* at Port Milwaukee’s new South Shore Cruise Dock, marking the start of another exciting season on the Great Lakes.