



# CROSSING LAKE MICHIGAN ON THE CAR FERRY S.S. BADGER

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LAKE MICHIGAN CAR FERRY  
SERVICE, INC.

BY LARRY AND CAROL STEPHENSON

Back in the summer of 2011, as my wife Carol and I were planning our trip to Wisconsin for a family reunion, we decided to scrap the drive around Lake Michigan and instead, treat ourselves to a ride across the lake on the car ferry *S.S. Badger* from Ludington, Michigan, to Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

We had not been on the *Badger* before, but had previously crossed the lake on the newer, faster ferry, *Lake Express*, from Muskegon to Milwaukee. The 410-foot *Badger* makes one round trip between Ludington and Manitowoc daily. The 60-mile trip takes about four hours, leaving Ludington at 9:00 a.m. eastern standard time and arriving in Manitowoc at noon central standard time. On the



Captain Hobbs, the *Badger's* Senior Captain, "Hurricane" Hobbs

morning of our scheduled departure, September 8, the first thing I did, as a boater myself, was check the marine weather forecast for the day. The forecast was predicting winds out of the north and seas building from six to ten feet in the northern half of the lake, and 11 to 15 feet in the southern half. Our route would take us east to west about halfway up the lake, which runs in a north-south direction.

The *Badger* was constructed in 1952 at the shipyards in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad Company.

Its primary purpose was to transport railroad freight cars, but it also provided room for passenger cars and passengers. It was named for the University of Wisconsin mascot, Bucky Badger. According to the brochures available onboard, she is both the largest and last coal-fired steamship in operation in North America, powered by a mechanical system designated as an engineering landmark. She went into service in 1953 during the golden era for ferries transporting railroad cars on the Great Lakes, traveling from Ludington to the Wisconsin ports of Manitowoc, Milwaukee and Kewaunee. In 1964

the *Badger* was taken to a shipyard where she was made 18 feet taller so that she could accommodate some of the newer double-deck freight cars. By the mid-1970s the railroads concluded that the Lake Michigan ferry operations were no longer economical to operate. Higher operating costs coupled with more efficient rail routes had rendered the rail car ferries obsolete. Many of the older ships were retired or sold for scrap.

In July 1983 the remaining three ships of the Chesapeake and Ohio fleet were sold to a group of investors led by a Ludington hotel owner. Their company was known as Michigan-Wisconsin Transportation Company (M-WT). The company ran into financial difficulties related to its freight hauling contracts, the last lake crossing of the railroad ferry service was on November 16, 1990, when the *Badger* made its final crossing that season. In 1992, however, retired Michigan businessman Charles Conrad saved the *Badger* by forming a new company with his own money—the Lake Michigan Car ferry Service Inc. The *Badger* was thoroughly refurbished to cater to the tourist trade. The ship was outfitted to carry passengers, autos, trucks and buses.

The *Badger* was originally built to operate in all types of weather, 365 days a year. In fact it was built to be rugged enough to serve as its own icebreaker during the winter months. Despite all this reassurance, 11 months earlier, Past GPYC Commodore Jim Ramsey and I had been on the 1,000-foot ore freighter *Stewart J. Cort*, running down bound on Lake Michigan with winds out of the north in 8-foot seas, when we caught sight of the *Badger* crossing from Manitowoc to Ludington. She was clearly rocking and rolling with the 8-foot waves crashing off of her beam. The *Badger's* captain was an acquaintance of our captain, Tom McMullen, and contacted him to remark that he was not having a good day. "I've got a boatload of unhappy customers today," he said, "many seasick." McMullen asked when the *Badger* would go out of service for the season. "Tomorrow; tomorrow's our last run. Can't come soon enough for me," was his reply.

With those memories of the *Badger* fresh in my

# S.S. Badger

The Badger taking on motor vehicles.



LENGTH .....	410' 6"
WIDTH .....	59' 6"
HEIGHT .....	106' 9" (7 stories)
WEIGHT .....	6,650 tons displaced
PROPELLERS .....	two cast steel 4-blade propellers, 13' 10" in diameter
ENGINES .....	two Skinner Unaflow four-cylinder steam engines rated at 3,500 hp each at 125 rpm
AVERAGE SPEED.....	18 mph (15.6 knots)
NUMBER OF CREW PER TRIP ....	50 (approx.)
NUMBER OF STATEROOMS.....	40
CAPACITY.....	600 passengers; 180 automobiles, tour buses, RVs, motorcycles and commercial trucks
CROSSINGS PER SEASON .....	416 (approx.)
SEASON .....	mid May through mid October

Information contained in the Crossings 2011 put out by the Lake Michigan Car ferry Service.

mind, I decided to bring along some remedies for treating seasickness. In fact, they were the same remedies I had brought with me on two previous freighter trips: the 1,500-mile trip aboard the *Stewart J. Cort*, preceded by a 1,000-mile voyage on the 1,000-foot *James R. Barker* in November 2009. At the time, I thought I had enough medicine for Commodore Ramsey, myself and maybe half the crew, but as it turned out, the seas were benign both trips and neither of us required medication. The remedies included Transderm Scop (Scopolamine), a patch that is placed behind one ear to prevent motion sickness, and Motion Eaze, which a pharmacist had recommended as an effective treatment for motion sickness, containing a concoction of various natural ingredients. A drop of that liquid is placed on a finger and then rubbed into the skin behind each ear. Finally, I had brought along what are known as Sea Bands, elastic wristbands that are supposed to ease travel sickness. After boarding the *Badger* and finding a place to sit, we each put a patch behind one ear and rubbed the Motion Eaze behind both ears for good

measure. But when I took the wristbands out of the package, I discovered that two wristbands were required per person—i.e., one on each wrist. Since we only had two bands for both of us, my ever-noble wife Carol suggested I use the wristbands and she would use a fourth remedy she had brought along, ginger snap cookies. We had previously been introduced to the ginger snap solution by our friends and fellow GPYC boaters Bob and Karen Joslyn aboard their yacht *Interlude*. The four of us had made a successful crossing of Lake Michigan in rough waters, munching all the way with no mishaps. So what we had here was something of an experiment in the making. Would the Sea Bands outshine the ginger snaps? Time and the crossing would tell.

We boarded about one hour before the 9:00 a.m. departure. After applying our anti-sickness remedies for the expected rough crossing, Carol settled into a lounge chair to read a book while I went exploring. I found that the ship is set up with wifi, and one can even rent an iPad relatively inexpensively during the crossing. There is free enter-



miles per hour instead of knots) and our course was about 280°. The seas began to build, and by 11:00 a.m. looking northward, the lake was pretty much all whitecaps, with the waves at five to seven feet. The *Badger* was rolling and pitching, but it was still not that difficult to walk around the lounges or out on deck, where many passengers were sunning themselves in chaise lounge chairs. I noticed that many of the passengers were wearing Green Bay Packer hats, jackets, shirts and/or jerseys. I didn't think too much of it at the time, because the wearing of the green and cheddar is fairly typical as you travel around Wisconsin, which was our destination. But then I began to notice others were wearing similar gear with black and gold New Orleans Saints logos. Of course—it was the opening game of the NFL season and the Packers were hosting the Saints at 7:30 p.m. that very evening at Lambeau Field! Green Bay is about 40 miles from the *Badger's* destination, Manitowoc.

For the remaining portion of our cruise the seas remained at about five to seven feet out of the north. It was comforting to note that no one onboard was visibly suffering from seasickness. Moreover, the lines at the buffet counter seemed to indicate that these seas were not adversely affecting passengers' appetites. In addition to alcohol being served at the food stations on both main passenger deck levels, there was also a separate bar area where mixed drinks could be purchased.

Our captain was Dean Hobbs, whom crew members referred to as "Hurricane Hobbs." Captain Hobbs had no trouble entering Manitowoc Harbor despite the wind and waves, or turning the *Badger* around and backing it into its docking area. According to one of the brochures aboard, "... the S.S. *Badger* saves about three-and-a-half hours of travel time (and the frustration of congested highways) compared to the 411-mile drive from Manitowoc to Ludington, via Chicago." Our car had been conveniently driven for us onto the ferry, and when we arrived in Manitowoc, it was taken off the ship to a parking area by an employee of the Lake Michigan Car Ferry Service.

Carol and I agreed that our first crossing on the S.S. *Badger* was a most

enjoyable experience, and we are eager to make the trip again. As for the experiment with the seasickness remedies, we weren't sure if any of them truly worked because, in point of fact, they probably weren't really needed on that day. Neither of us ever felt sick and no one else aboard appeared to, either. As it turns out, the *Badger* only cancels a round trip about once a year because of sea conditions that are judged to be capable of causing severe passenger discomfort.

For more information go to [www.ssbadger.com](http://www.ssbadger.com)

Recommended reading: Images of America: *S.S. Badger: The Lake Michigan Car Ferry*, by Arthur P. Chavez, Arcadia Publishing, Charleston, South Carolina, 2003. ■

Photograph by Boatnerd



## Lake Express

(Alternate car ferry to the *Badger*)

Operates between Muskegon, Michigan and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, about 75 miles distance

LENGTH..... 192 feet, catamaran  
(two parallel hulls)

WIDTH ..... 57'

HULL DEPTH ..... 8'

WEIGHT..... 148 tons

SPEED..... 40 mph (34 knots)

ENGINES ..... 4 diesel engines  
developing  
3,500 hp each

NUMBER OF PASSENGERS..... 248

NUMBER OF  
PASSENGER VEHICLES ..... 46, plus  
12 motorcycles

WENT INTO SERVICE..... June 1, 2004

SEASON..... mid May through  
end of October

*LAKE EXPRESS* makes two to three round trips per day depending on the time season. Each one way crossing takes about 2 hours.

Trips are canceled for passenger comfort, typically when the waves are seven feet or greater, which is uncommon during the summer months but more likely in the spring and late fall.

For more information go to [www.lake-express.com](http://www.lake-express.com)

tainment onboard, including a number of TV-equipped lounges as well as an almost continuous bingo game. There are outside deck areas, snack bars, a buffet-style dining area and 40 state-rooms that can be reserved for an extra charge. There is a video arcade, a children's playroom, a ship's store, a quiet room, which also serves as a museum, and a free movie lounge. As I walked around the deck, I noted five 60-person self-propelled lifeboats, which were reassuring to me as departure neared.

A Coast Guard boat escorted us out into the lake, which is likely standard operating procedure these days with larger passenger ships. We passed the Coast Guard station and the lighthouse as we left the harbor. The seas were running one to two feet out of the north, a reassuring sign. Looking northward, I could see Big Sable Point, which was probably giving us some protection from the seas out of the north. There was a large GPS screen mounted on the wall in one of the main lounges showing the *Badger's* position, speed and bearing. Our speed was approximately 16 mph (Great Lakes ships typically measure their speed in