

Diver and captain  
Jitka Hanakova inside  
the cargo hold of  
the schooner-barge  
EMBA, built in 1890,  
Lake Michigan

# North America's Great Lakes

— A Haven for Wreck Divers

Text by Steve Lewis  
Photos by Becky Kagan Schott

**There are other areas of the world with well-preserved shipwrecks, but the Great Lakes of North America have the monopoly on sheer mass, variety and relative ease of access. Very few known dive-able wrecks are much more than a few hours' boat ride from a decent restaurant, a chain hotel or a decent-sized town. Isle Royale, in Lake Superior, is a notable exception, but most wreck dive sites in the Great Lakes do not demand an expedition set up to reach.**

I had lived in North America for a few years before I gave the Great Lakes much thought. In fact, for more than a year in the early 1980s, I lived within walking distance of Lake Ontario, and my regular jogging route took me from a Toronto townhouse at King and Bathurst, along Lakeshore

Boulevard within sight, sound and smell of the lake to High Park and back.

During that time as a lake-sider, my father visited me. He had lived

in England for most of his life, near or on the ocean for a great part of it. He walked with me along my jogging route, and at a point where a pebble beach joins the

walkway to the lake, he walked to the water, dipped in his hand and put it to his lips.

I was about to explain the potential for E. coli infection, but

that would have destroyed his groove and his astonishment that Lake Ontario—as with the rest of the Great Lakes—are bodies of fresh water.

## Wreck diving

At some point though, probably around the late 1980s or 1990, a friend asked if I was interested in wreck diving. I think I may have





Satellite map of Great Lakes (left); Diver at propeller of the car ferry, Milwaukee (far left), with train truck under it

## Great Lakes

or more on the surface.

This makes for some potentially extraordinary

pre- and post-dive preparations. In summer, wicking underwear and alacrity when dressing and deriving are essential.

### Additional attractions

The Great Lakes also have some really interesting “side-bar destinations” worth visiting. At the eastern-most end of Lake Ontario, all the water collected from Lake Superior on down to the Laurentian Shield continues its journey to the sea via the St. Lawrence River, and on its way, travels through one of the most beautiful areas in the Great Lakes Basin—the

Thousand Islands. For my money, this place is a must-see.

Also, Lake Huron, always billed as one Great Lake, is, in reality, two. At the eastern side of the lake, divided into two by a long limestone escarpment, is Georgian Bay. Beautiful and relatively unspoiled still. Make the effort to see it if you can. ■

*Steve Lewis is a British diver, instructor, dive industry consultant and author based in Canada. He teaches and lectures at home and abroad. His main focus is on dive safety and to make each of us aware of the things that will make us better divers than we are now. His latest book, Staying Alive: Risk Management Techniques for Advanced Scuba Diving, is available through Amazon. For more information, visit [Techdivertraining.org](http://Techdivertraining.org) or [CCRCave.training](http://CCRCave.training).*

said something about getting enough of cold water growing up in England—and probably punctuated my refusal to participate with a few carefully chosen expletives and descriptions of shrinking body parts.

However, eventually I did go wreck diving in the Great Lakes, and fell in love with what I saw.

### Shipwrecks

The Great Lakes were the main highway for getting raw materials, manufactured goods, people, animals, food, and the general detritus of civilization and transporting humanity from point A to Point B. And traveling that highway were not cars of course but ships—wind-driven, steam-driven, diesel-driven, even solar-powered ships. And ships sink.

They hit things, weather happens, they get old and their pumps are either not strong enough or they fail. And occasionally, one group of people throw explosives and heavy bits of metal at ships

belonging to other groups of people. (It is also worth noting that the wrecks in the Great Lakes include dive sites not covered by the parameters of shipwrecks: planes, sunken villages, et al.)

### Accessibility

I was asked once why I preferred diving the *Empress of Ireland* (Okay, NOT quiet in the Great Lakes, but in the outflow from them: the St. Lawrence River) to diving the *Andrea Doria* (100 nautical miles off Long Island, New York). I explained that I can log two relaxed dives on the *Empress*, get back to my room, shower, shave, change into grown-up's clothes and take my date to a nice lobster dinner with a chilled French wine in the evening, then spend the night with her rather than a bunch of smelly divers. That to me, is one of the bonuses of Great Lakes diving.

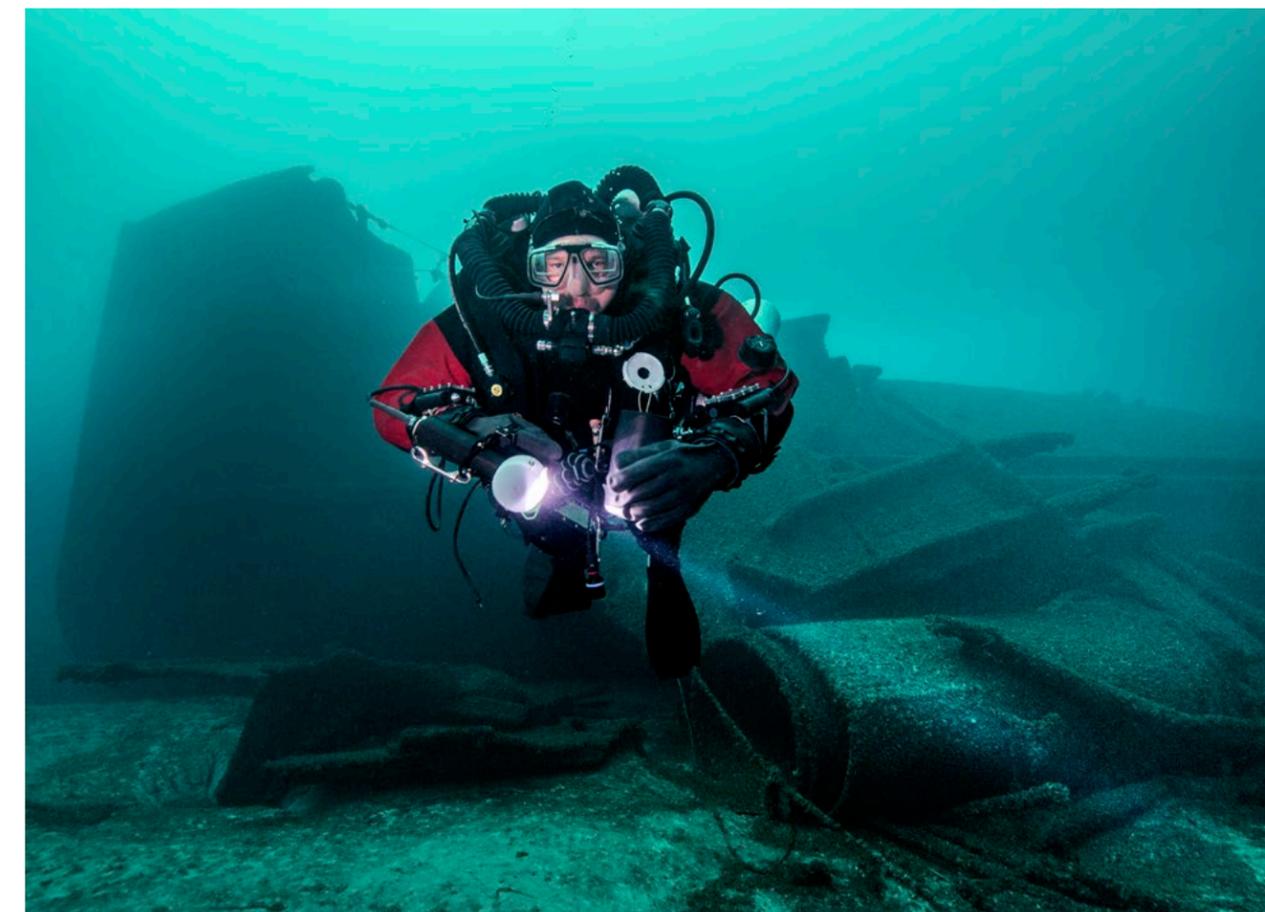
You will get a feel for the types of wrecks waiting in the Great Lakes from the articles in this issue, but please con-

sider that the guesstimate of the number of wrecks in the Great Lakes touches 10,000. So, it is somewhat redundant to tell readers that there are wrecks for all tastes, all certification levels and every season.

### Conditions

Which brings us to a waypoint... seasons. The temperature of the water where most of the spectacular Great Lakes wrecks rest is a constant 4°C (39°F). If you recall from science classes, at this temperature water reaches its maximum density and sinks. Any colder, it begins to float, and when cold enough, turns into ice. So, for several months of winter, diving the Great Lakes is supremely challenging.

Of course, if water gets warmer than 4°C (39°F), it also floats, so that in the summer, this means that in large areas of the Great Lakes, time spent above the thermocline can be bloody heart-warming: 4°C (39°F) at depth and 22°C (72°F)



Diver on car ferry in Lake Michigan