

SCHOONER CHARLEY OFFERS UNIQUE SAILING TOURS OF THE TWIN PORTS



If you have a nose for adventure, take a step back in time to the early to mid-1800s aboard the schooner Charley. Moored at Loon's Foot Landing, Charley is a stone's throw away from Old Town Superior, home to the area's earliest settlers, and far from the heavily traveled Duluth tourist locales. The 60-foot steel-hulled schooner is owned and operated by Schooner Charley, a family enterprise of Matt and Liv Nesheim.

The idea to operate charter sailing tours in Superior took a long time to ger-

minate for Matt, but as evidenced by the strong interest in the recent Festival of Sail, there's a lot of enthusiasm for "tall ship" sailing craft.

"I got an interest in sailing about 15 to 20 years ago. I worked at a camp for people with disabilities called Courage North, near Bemidji. I ended up rehabbing some of their old boats and started to teach sailing. That put me on a course, no pun intended," he laughs, "where after college I ended up working on a tall ship called Clearwater, out on the Hudson River. I later had a se-

ries of nonprofit jobs that had to do with water and sailing and boats that landed me in Grand Marais. I'm from Duluth originally so wanted to be back on the big lake. I worked for North House Folk School, and they have a steel schooner a lot like the one we now own, called Hjordis, the green sailboat in Grand Marais with the red and tan sails. It's very iconic. I managed that boat for about 10 years, and thought the business model would be replicable in Duluth, which does not have that same kind of iconic boat. They've got the Vista boats, but those don't end up in a lot of paintings."

Moored beneath the massive shell of the former Northern Pacific ore dock, reaching Charley is akin to entering through a time capsule to an era when sailing craft dominated the Great Lakes. Working on a schooner in the 1800s was hard, but there was no more an adventurous life to be had than that of a deck hand on a sailing ship hauling cargo across the lower Great Lakes.

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— MATT NESHEIM, CAPTAIN - SCHOONER CHARLEY



Schooner Charley owners Liv and Matt Nesheim

It was a life often fraught with peril in an era of no aids to navigation, no detailed charts and few harbors to call at, let alone to seek shelter in. From the very early 1800s until the end of the century, the schooner was the backbone of the movement of cargo on the lower Great Lakes, and later, on Lake Superior after the canal at Sault Ste. Marie opened in 1855. At the height of their importance there were close to 1,800 schooners at work on the lakes, some reaching more than 500 feet in overall length.

Loon's Foot Landing is located behind the QuikTrip on Highway 2/53, next to the public boat launch near the mouth of the Nemadji River. Driving into the gravel parking lot places you smack dab in the middle of a boat yard, chaotic with cranes and boats, and a few salty mariners to boot.

"We meet you in the parking lot, and then we walk you down the middle of the ore dock," says captain Matt Nesheim. "I always call it a cathedral. This ore dock was built in the early 20th century and then expanded in the 1930s. It feels like the flying buttresses of a cathedral, and we walk you right down the middle of it and out onto our boat. It's a cool entrance experience. We're trying to tap into a little bit of the early industrial Duluth Superior Twin Ports history on our sails."

CHARTERED SAILS

Schooner Charley tours offer chartered sails and private charters for up to six guests every weekend during the summer season.

"On your tour, we give a safety talk on the boat, and then Liv and I will untie

as people are getting settled, and we head out. At the start of the 2.5 hour sail you get to basically tour the 80-foot-high ore dock from the water where you pass an old historic tug on the way out."

Once Charley rounds the corner, one of the first things you'll see is the old Great Northern (BN-SF) ore docks where the famed steamship Edmund Fitzgerald loaded before their fatal final trip.



"From there, we usually will either put up the sails right away and sail out of the Superior entry, or, depending on the wind, we might motor all the way out through the entry and put the sails up out in the big lake. That's when Liv gets the passengers involved, if they want to help. It takes two people to raise a sail, so, if we've got six people, depending on their abilities, two people can put up one sail, two people can put up another."

Matt and Liv promise to not shanghai anyone with above average skills.

As to be expected, Lake Superior has the final say on whether Charley will go out on the big lake, but Matt and Liv stay on top of the local marine forecasts and make adjustments accordingly.





PHOTO COURTESY OF SCHOONER CHARLEY

"Occasionally we don't go on the big lake, but one of the advantages of the Duluth Superior harbor is you've got the Park Point sandbar so we're able to sail in more conditions than you can in Grand Marais. When there is heavy surf, with waves crashing the beach, we don't want to be in that. We can have a controlled sail in the harbor without getting bounced around on the big lake...people are pretty copacetic with staying in the inner harbor if we have to, but generally speaking, we go out on the big lake. It's all about managing expectations," concludes Matt."

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The best part about being in Superior is not having to go through the Duluth Aerial Lift Bridge. "The Lift Bridge takes an incredible amount of time because it's a long chute. It's incredibly bouncy and wavy, there is a lot of current, and you have to time it with the bridge."

In contrast, going out of the Superior entry is delightful. "It's easy, it's wide, it has the iconic Superior lighthouse and piers."

THE SHIP

As noted, the schooner Charley is a steel-hulled schooner designed by naval architect Thomas Colvin Pipistrelle and built by Daniel Stoner in Indiana and launched as Journey in 1985. The schooner spent many years on the lower lakes, including several decades as part of a Christian-based sailing group out of Sandusky, Ohio, before being sold in 2017 and put ashore in Knife River.

After sitting ashore in Knife River, Matt and Liv purchased the 28-ton schooner in 2019. Now in their fifth summer of sailing, the couple spent the first year getting the boat ready for its return to the water. Giving

a nod to local north shore history they renamed it Charley, after one of the old schooners operated by the Wieland brothers of Beaver Bay that would go up and down the North Shore prior to the America.

The primary demographic for schooner Charley are recently retired, or close to retired adults, or groups of adults where friends can gather for a Friday evening sail, have some snacks and cocktails and a good time.

"You can book the whole boat, or, if it's just two of you, you can just get two tickets," adds Liv. "We've had it where it's been three different couples and that's pretty fun because it's three couples that have never met each other before. That can be kind of dynamic. Adult groups tend to have the most fun." Nesheim says they are also looking to tap into the intergenerational




PHOTO COURTESY OF SCHOONER CHARLEY

market; adult children with their parents bringing them out on the water.

"I've always enjoyed sailing," says Matt. "It's silent transportation and it can be really thrilling. I like driving anything and everything, but being at the helm of a boat is really appealing to me."

Matt's sailing and life partner Liv looks forward to every weekend when they can be on the water.

"The great part about this business is that we get to be out sailing every weekend, if the weather is good. We get a lot of use out of that boat, which I don't think a lot of boat owners can say. There is something pretty spectacular about the moment when you shut the engine off, especially if there's like a nice breeze and you're just cruising along; that's a pretty special moment."

Contact Schooner Charley to book your Lake Superior sailing adventure, schoonercharley.com. 



Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.