

Booking A Lake Erie Charter Fishing Trip

What Questions To Ask and What You Should Expect

Lake Erie offers some of the best angling opportunities in the United States, and the Ohio Charter boat fishing industry can provide anglers with safe, productive, and memorable experiences. This fact sheet will help experienced as well as new clientele charter a trip and increase their satisfaction while on the water.

The lake has changed

Fishing on Lake Erie has changed from the 1980s, when fish were caught from June through August using a weight-forward spinner. Other times

of the year and other fishing methods have become productive, too, even though you can still book a drift/cast walleye charter, still no doubt the most popular trip in western Lake Erie.

Many changes have taken place in Lake Erie with fish populations, exotic invaders such as the zebra mussel and the spiny water flea, increased water clarity, and

You can now book a charter just after ice-out to jig for pre-spawn walleye, in April to cast lead-head jigs for spawning walleye near the reefs and near-shore areas, or

during post-spawn time to pursue the walleye by drifting and casting. If you desire warmer weather, you can secure a trolling or drift/cast trip in the summer months. In the late fall, you can fish when walleyes are putting on the "feed bag" in preparation for the winter months. You may want to fish for walleye and smallmouth bass during the same trip, or you can take a charter strictly for



Charter fishing on Lake Erie can be a wonderful experience. Be prepared to ask the Captain plenty of questions. You'll enjoy the trip all the more if you're familiar with and comfortable with the ways of the Captain.

changes in productivity levels (the food web). Anglers too have changed and are willing to try angling at different times of the year using different techniques.

smallmouth.

Pre-spawn and spawn angling didn't become popular until the late 1980s and the concept of late fall nearshore and night angling for walleyes is still catching on.

Trolling, used by some during the '80s is now common lakewide.

Do you like the idea of trolling using a variety of methods, such as planer boards, dipsy divers, and downriggers? Or are casting and jigging more to your liking? Would you like to experience the deep water angling found in central Lake Erie waters, or do you prefer the shallower, island-studded western basin?

It's your choice. Trips can be planned for a specific time of year, using a specific fishing method, and for a particular fish species. All methods have their time and place, just as different seasons of the year result in different sized and numbers of fish caught and different kinds of satisfaction gained by the angler. The choices are many and trips need to be thought out carefully.

The choice of captains is yours, too. Many anglers have found it takes years of trial to find a charter captain who best meets their needs, desires, and budget. Lake Erie's charterboat industry has grown from less than 50 captains during the 1970s, to over 1,000 today. Most captains are superior boat operators, excellent anglers, and have a good knowledge of the lake, weather, and where to find fish. Most will also go the extra nautical mile to make your experience memorable. However, to avoid the occasional bad charter, you need to know what to ask and expect of a Lake Erie charter captain.

Questions to ask

What is the full cost of the trip?

Is there a deposit? Is it refundable or applicable to another trip should an unforeseen circumstance warrant cancellation? How far in advance do you need to call to change a reserved date without forfeiting your deposit? What is included in the cost: bait, ice, tackle, fish cleaning?

If you reserve a sleeping room at a hotel, cabin, or condo, ask if their deposit is refundable if you should need to cancel the trip for whatever reason, including bad weather.

When does the charter begin and end?

When should you be at the boat ready to go? When do you return? Most charters are run on a "dock-to-dock" basis. If the trip is eight hours, dock to dock, don't expect eight hours of fishing. Most captains will spend a little extra time fishing if you are close to catching your limit or you haven't been successful. Be sure to determine before you go whether there will be a charge if extra time is provided by the captain.

To avoid any surprises, ask if the captain runs more than one trip a day. Let's say your charter is 6 am to 1pm, dock-to-dock. Fishing is slow, but starts to pick up around noon. When you ask the captain the cost of a few more hours, he states that he has another trip in the afternoon and needs to leave in ten minutes. This isn't what you want to hear, now that the walleye have started to bite.

Make arrangements to contact the captain a day or two before

the trip to check on forecasted weather conditions and to confirm the time you are to be at the dock. If you have a delay or need to cancel at the last minute, call the captain or the marina immediately. Don't leave them sitting at the dock all day waiting for you. Your deposit will not cover the cost of a lost charter. By calling if you need to cancel the captain is free to pick up a walk-on trip or spend the day another way.

Is the charter for hours on the boat or for catching your fish limit? Consider carefully the trip duration clause, such as "eight hours, dock-to-dock, or limit." If your intention is to spend eight hours on the water, you may be disappointed when, after catching your limit of walleye in four hours, the captain heads back to the dock. If your desire is to hire a captain for eight hours on the water, be sure to state that request when booking your charter. Regardless of what you're fishing for, there are always other species of fish to catch if you "limit out" early. You may even want to take a side trip to the islands or grab a bite to eat down in the Cleveland flats. Discuss it with the captain before reserving the charter date.

Make sure the charter fits your mode of angling. As previously stated, changes with Lake Erie have altered the way we fish. If you book a pre-spawn walleye charter but expect to be casting weight-forward spinners, you are in for a surprise. Likewise, you may be surprised to find the captain geared up to troll for walleye during a July charter when you expect to drift-and-cast. The point

is, all methods of angling can be productive during the right time and place, but it may not be the type of angling your party expects. Discuss your preferences with the captain and determine if the charter captain's method or time of year fit your needs and desires.

If you or members of your party are not experienced anglers, make this known at the time you book your trip. It should be the responsibility of the captain and crew to teach you proper angling methods, and this service should be part of the charter. After all, you didn't charter a cruise, you chartered a fishing trip.

Some captains and mates are criticized for catching more than their personal limit during a charter to 'help' their clientele fill the cooler. Because a boat limit – and not a personal limit – is enforced on Lake Erie, this is entirely legal. They are entitled to fish and to catch their limit, yet you have paid for the right to catch and keep your own fish. If this concerns you, discuss it with the captain before you send a deposit. According to many surveys of charter clientele conducted by Ohio Sea Grant, the experience of being on the lake and having an enjoyable time with friends and/or family is more important than a limit catch. Give some thought to what you really expect from your day on the lake and what is truly important to you and your party.

If your party does limit out, and the captain and mate offer theirs to you, refer to your fishing regulations. It is illegal to possess more than your daily limit within ¼ mile

of the lake, except at your motel, camp or cottage.

Don't ask for a guaranteed limit Catch The number of fish caught will depend on a variety of factors, including the desire of the fish to bite, weather conditions, concentration and location of fish, availability of natural food, water temperature, and your degree of ability with rod and reel.

If you feel you need to catch the limit to justify the cost of a charter, just check out the price of walleye and perch fillets at the local fish market. Your share of six-person charter costs much more than if you were to buy your fish at the fish market and stay home.

Charter captains will provide you with every possible opportunity to catch fish. Even though they would like your business in the future, they cannot make fish bite. And if fishing meant catching a fish with every cast or limiting out during every trip, it wouldn't be called fishing, it would be called catching.

What should you bring? Ask what is provided with the base cost of the charter. Generally, on six-person charters, bait, rods and reels, lures, and ice are provided. Always specifically ask if there is an additional cost for these items. On occasion, anglers arrive at the dock to find that "provided" really means "available for an additional fee."

If you are expected to provide your own tackle such as a head boat charter, and are unsure of the appropriate items to bring, ask. As

the lake changes, so do the fishing techniques. What you may use on a pre-spawn or spawn walleye charter will be dramatically different from what lures would be productive during June or July.

Always bring more bait than you think you'll need. Bait is generally provided on six-passenger charters, and is not used on trolling charters. A head boat trip will require you to have your own bait. Again, ask if you are unsure of the appropriate bait to purchase.

Ask if a separate cooler, besides the fish cooler, will be available for storage of beverages and lunches. If not, consolidate all of the party's food and beverages in one small cooler. Don't forget to bring another cooler that you will leave in your car to ice your fish down for the ride home.

Ask about the crew and boat. With the increase in chartering on Lake Erie, there are individuals who run charters without the required licenses. Many of these individuals are not qualified to operate a charter vessel, their boats may not be equipped with mandatory safety gear, and they may know very little about fishing on Lake Erie. Ask to see the captain's valid U.S. Coast Guard and Ohio guide licenses if in doubt. They are for your protection against unqualified individuals.

When you arrive at the boat, the responsible captain will show you where life jackets are stored; one Coast Guard-approved life jacket is required for each individual. If you have young children, make sure children's life jackets, approved for

weights of less than 90 pounds, are on board. You should also be instructed in the general operation of the the boat and/or marine radio in the event something happens to the captain (unless a first mate is present).

Be sure the boat has a working marine toilet that you are permitted to use.

What is expected from you

An enjoyable charter trip relies not only on what the captain and crew provide for you, but also on how you interact with them. The following suggestions should be considered to ensure a good experience for you and the captain and crew, to help protect their investment, and to make their jobs easier.

Consolidate tackle if you are asked to bring your own, or if you prefer to use some of your favorite lures. A small tackle container can easily fit into your boat bag. You may want to combine tackle for your party of six into one tackle box. The point is to not clutter the boat with unnecessary gear. If you bring your own rod and reel, make sure they are in good shape, with a new line, and that they are adequate for the species for which you are fishing.

Take precautions against motion sickness if you are prone to it. Check with your family physician for medication to suit your needs. Some over-the-counter medications can cause drowsiness, may interact with prescription medications, or could aggravate a health condition. Avoid greasy foods the

evening prior to and the morning of your charter. Avoid alcoholic beverages before and during the charter. Seasickness has ruined many charters for unsuspecting individuals. Remember, the water doesn't need to be rough to produce motion sickness. A calm day with a slight roll to the water is all it takes.

If you are in doubt at all about whether you may become seasick, follow the above precautions and take medication.

Dress properly for the day. In a small boat bag, pack sunglasses, sunscreen, insect repellent, head protection (cap), towel, rain jacket, and other protective clothing adequate for the weather. For early spring or late fall charters, gloves, a wool cap, and a warm jacket may be necessary. Shoes with soft soles are required; they keep you from slipping on a wet deck and protect the boat's finish.

Be on time for your charter. By arriving well before your charter departs, you can load your gear, purchase forgotten items from the marina store, and take care of those "last minute" things that always seem to cause delays. Being on time will put both you and the captain at ease. Being tardy in your arrival can take away from your fishing time, because the captain and crew may have other things to do after your charter and may need to return on schedule.

Don't abuse the alcohol privilege if the captain allows alcoholic beverages to be brought onboard. Nobody likes an intoxicated individual; if you plan to get drunk

while fishing, do everyone a favor and stay home.

The U.S. Coast Guard enforces a zero tolerance for drugs of any type on a charter vessel. If illegal drugs are found on a charter vessel, the boat may be forfeited, and time in a correctional facility is a reality.

Conduct yourself responsibly while on board. Abusive actions and language may not be appreciated by others and can reflect badly on the captain. Remember, the captain's name is generally painted on the side of the vessel.

Don't throw any trash overboard. Charter vessels have trash cans on board for a purpose. Please help keep Lake Erie clean.

Respect the captain's word as law. View the charter boat as the captain's home, and treat it with the same respect. If the captain asks you to do or not do something, there is a good reason for the request.

Promptly pay the balance for your trip fee upon return to the dock unless a prior arrangement has been made. If you have been provided with all the services you agreed to, it's your responsibility to settle your account. If you or members of your party have a concern about something that happened during the charter, discuss it with the captain privately and in an adult manner.

Tipping the captain and crew is customary if you feel they did their best to provide you with a good trip. Chartering is a service

industry. A few extra dollars is a nice way to show your appreciation to a captain and mate with good personalities, senses of humor and honest efforts to show you a good time.

Plan your charter well in advance. Prime dates (weekends) and certain times of the year fill up fast. Many individuals will book charters a year in advance to secure a specific date with a favorite captain. If you verbally commit to a date, send a deposit to clinch your deal. Don't expect a captain to hold a prime date for you without a deposit; chartering is a business, not a hobby.

What can you fish for?

Walleye charters are the most popular on Lake Erie, and can be booked anytime from ice-out until –mid-to-late November. Some captains are even offering November and December nearshore or shoreline night walleye trips. Many charters in the central basin offer the opportunity of catching steelhead (lake-run rainbow trout) while trolling the depths for walleye. Smallmouth bass charters are very popular and can be booked generally from May through October lakewide. The success rate has been exceptionally good for bass anglers during the '90s, with many captains offering a combined walleye/smallmouth charter. Yellow perch charters are most popular during the fall months, although you may be able to book a spring nearshore perch trip during the spawning season. Combinations trips for yellow perch and smallmouth are also increasing in popularity.

Don't forget the one-on-one charter adventures, specifically, ice fishing trips in western Lake Erie during the winter, and steelhead fishing trips to the rivers and tributaries of the central basin during the fall and winter months. Not everyone offering these trips is a licensed captain, because these trips do not require a boat; but an Ohio guide's license is required to provide these services.

Many charter captains also offer specialty trips, such as moonlight cruises to the islands, or trips to the famed "Cleveland Flats," or to the Cleveland Indians ball games. Other captains may offer snorkeling and/or scuba diving trips. Be sure to ask your captain about other Lake Erie adventures they may offer.

Chartering is a bargain

Owning your own boat is a rewarding experience; you are the captain and have the option of fishing when and where you want, scuba diving, snorkeling or swimming, overnight trips, exploring, water skiing, or simply going for a leisurely cruise with the family. Yet, for many people, owning a boat is not an option for a variety of reasons. And trying to justify owning a boat with the dollar value of the fish you expect to catch in a season is a lesson in bad economics.

During 1994, Ohio Sea Grant conducted a research survey of the Ohio charter fishing industry. It was found that the average charter operator had to make more than 41 trips per year just to break even.

Since capital costs of boat ownership are similar for a private individual owning a 27-foot vessel, you would need to make at least 41 trips to financially justify owning a boat rather than chartering!

Consider your cost of ten-six-passenger walleye charters in Lake Erie to be divided among you and five friends. Your share of these ten charters wouldn't come close to the cost of docking a 25-foot boat at a Lake Erie marina for one season. And we haven't mentioned the value of experience gained in boat handling and angling that can be provided by a charter captain.

Granted, owning your own boat has many personal advantages and rewards that are difficult to place a dollar value on. Economically speaking, however, the cost of Lake Erie fishing charter is truly a real bargain. (For those interested in more information on the costs of owning and operating a charter business, contact the Ohio Sea Grant College Program for additional fact sheets and research publications).

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Lists of Lake Erie Fishing charters can be found easily on the world wide web.

Visit www.walleye.com and you'll find three such charter directories, one for each of Lake Eries distinct basins; Western, Central and Eastern.