

Great Lakes

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The Great Lakes, also called the Great Lakes of North America, are a series of large interconnected freshwater lakes spanning the Canada–United States border. The five lakes are Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario (though hydrologically, Michigan and Huron are a single body of water, joined at the Straits of Mackinac). The Great Lakes Waterway enables modern travel and shipping by water among the lakes. The lakes connect ultimately to the Atlantic Ocean via the Saint Lawrence River as their primary drainage outflow. The lakes are also connected to the Mississippi River basin through the Illinois Waterway. The Great Lakes are the largest group of freshwater lakes on Earth by total area and the second-largest by total volume. They contain 21% of the world's surface fresh water by volume. The total surface is 94,250 square miles (244,106 km²), and the total volume (measured at the low water datum) is 5,439 cubic miles (22,671 km³), slightly less than the volume of Lake Baikal (5,666 cu mi or 23,615 km³, 22–23% of the world's surface fresh water). Because of their sea-like characteristics, such as rolling waves, sustained winds, strong currents, great depths, and distant horizons, the five Great Lakes have long been called inland seas. Depending on how it is measured, by surface area, either Lake Superior or Lake Michigan–Huron is the second-largest lake in the world and the largest freshwater lake. Lake Michigan is the largest lake, by surface area, that is entirely within one country, the United States. The Great Lakes began to form at the end of the Last Glacial Period around 14,000 years ago, as retreating ice sheets exposed the basins they had carved into the land, which then filled with meltwater. The lakes have been a major source for transportation, migration, trade, and fishing, serving as a habitat to many aquatic species in a region with much biodiversity. The surrounding region is called the Great Lakes region, which includes the Great Lakes megalopolis. Major cities within the region include, on the American side, from east to west, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, and Milwaukee; and, on the Canadian side, Toronto, Mississauga and Hamilton.