



A Thousand Islands of Summer

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Escape to a place that is foreign, even mythical, yet right on America's doorstep.

My know-it-all neighbor across the street from my home in Texas assured me that there was no such place as the Thousand Islands. "It's a salad dressing," Gary said, nodding toward the creamy condiment I'd brought to his barbecue.

"Does anybody know where the Thousand Islands is?" I'd asked the group assembled in the backyard, asserting that it sounded like a mysterious wonderland worth checking out.

"You can't go there," Gary insisted, as if he were speaking to a five-year-old. I ran home, went online, and returned five minutes later holding up a printout. "Renowned as the freshwater-boating capital of the world," I read to the group, "the Thousand Islands is an archipelago that straddles the U.S.-Canada border in the St. Lawrence Seaway. And," I took a breath, "Thousand Island dressing is the only salad dressing that is named for a geographic location in North America." I waved my bottle of dressing for dramatic effect. "Great," Gary said. "Maybe you should move there."

I'm thinking of a suitable souvenir for Gary as my flight touches down in Syracuse, New York, where I rent a car to begin my trip to the Thousand Islands. I've been wanting to get away to somewhere foreign but not too distant and a place where, ideally, English is widely spoken. The Thousand Islands—like Atlantis or Shangri-La—seems foreign enough, even mythical, and right at America's doorstep. From Syracuse, I'll head north 98 miles to the Canadian border, ending up about 30 miles from where Lake Ontario empties into the St. Lawrence River, which flows east toward the Atlantic.

The international border zigzags through the Thousand Islands, never touching land, with New York state on one side and the Canadian province of Ontario on the other. Here, where a branch of the Canadian Shield runs south to meet the Adirondacks, lies the "Thousand Islands-Frontenac Arch" region—designated a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve in 2002.

The islands range from about 50 square miles to the size of a carport and, to be counted in the group, must stay above water 365 days a year and support at least one living tree. Considering that some 1,800 islands have made the cut, I've decided to limit my exploration to only the principal islands and riverside towns.

I'll start in Alexandria Bay, New York, and work my way west (upriver) to the bayside village of Clayton, continuing west along the U.S. shoreline to Cape Vincent, overlooking the lake. Then I'll hop a ferry across the bay to Kingston, Ontario, push east along the Canadian shoreline to Gananoque, Ontario, then hook up with the Thousands Islands International Bridge to cross back to the U.S. mainland, completing a whirlwind, clockwise tour of this 50-mile stretch of the St. Lawrence. Along the way I'll take in Wellesley and Grindstone (the two largest U.S. islands), Wolfe Island (in Canadian waters), and a dozen or so smaller isles. I'll try to cram in what a week off from work will allow and, I hope, not get lost any more than necessary.

Crystal clear water, vivid green forests, 90-degree sunshine, and streets swarming with pirates greet me at my first stop, Alexandria Bay, situated on the south bank of the St. Lawrence. The village (year-round population: 1,800) is in the throes of its annual, ten-day summer bacchanalia dedicated to legendary pirate Bill Johnston. In 1838, Johnston notoriously boarded, robbed, then sank a British riverboat within musket range of what's now a modern town known for its dive shops, upscale rod-and-tackle stores, and handsome, tree-lined neighborhoods. I have time before the pirate parade to board a sight-seeing boat departing for a scenic tour of Millionaire's Row.

During the late 19th century, movers and shakers of the Gilded Age flocked to the Thousand Islands, building grand hotels and summer vacation homes complete with docks for their hundred-foot steam yachts. Among this early group were George Pullman of railroad sleeping car fame; Henry Marcus Quackenbush, inventor of the double-hinged nutcracker *and* the Daisy Red Ryder BB gun; the Kellogg family, who brought us Frosted Flakes; and George Charles Boldt, proprietor of New York City's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. He commissioned a six-story, 120-room, Rhineland-style castle on Heart Island for his wife, Louise.

Five-acre Heart Island, not far from Alexandria Bay, got its name after George Boldt spent a king's ransom fashioning the island and docking facilities into the shape of a heart. We stop to tour Boldt Castle. Picture a medieval European castle upgraded with plate glass windows, wrap-around verandas, an indoor pool, an elevator, and a steam power station. Wistful Enya music emanating from the ballroom drifts out to the Italian gardens and children's playhouse. I'm reminded of the Taj Mahal, impressive yet tinged with sadness. Louise died unexpectedly in 1904 while the castle was under construction, putting hundreds of stonemasons and craftsmen out of work. George Boldt never stepped foot on Heart Island again. The tale brings a tear to my eye, which I hide behind a pair of sunglasses bought in the gift shop.

Back in Alexandria Bay for the parade, I see tractors towing wooden skiffs tarted up to resemble pirate ships, sea wenches singing bawdy sea chanteys, classic and not so classic cars, and the ubiquitous weekend Harley riders in love with the sound of their own motors. The highlight, for me, is the Brockville Infantry Company, a crack drill team decked out in 1860s-period uniforms, hailing from Brockville, Ontario, about 18 miles east of here, across the bay. The Canadians halt, load, then fire their muskets in unison, prompting involuntary screams from spectators. I'd like to help the revelers close down the pubs, but I've booked an early morning fishing trip in Clayton, New York, about 12 miles upriver. "Head down main street and turn when you see the kayaks," Captain Clay Ferguson tells me over the phone.

Next morning I'm aboard Ferguson's vintage 1951 Chris-Craft Day Cruiser Hard Top, 27 feet of polished mahogany powered by a 440-cubic-inch Chrysler V-8 engine. We're motoring through a sport fishing paradise, home to black bass, northern pike, walleye, and the muskellunge, or muskie, a prehistoric-looking creature weighing up to 70 pounds, with a mouthful of needlelike teeth.

"You don't fish for muskies," Ferguson says. "You hunt them."

Ferguson is a second-generation fishing guide with 44 years of experience. Back in the day, he tells me, wealthy families would arrive in the Thousand Islands by steam train with mounds of luggage that would be loaded into skiffs and rowed to their respective summer homes. In 1938, a new bridge connected the two countries, and more and more tourists began arriving by car. Ferguson's hometown of Clayton, the geographic center of the region, gradually switched from lumber and shipbuilding to tourism—diving, kayaking, waveboarding, sailing, skiing, and riding motorized personal watercraft—has increased.

We're drifting between Grindstone and Wellesley Islands on the U.S. side. "Some of my childhood buddies, farm boys, used to live on these islands," the captain says, but today, the dairy farms are long gone. Some 39 percent of eight-square-mile Grindstone Island is protected by the Thousand Islands Land Trust. Visitors can hike and camp at the two state parks—Canoe Point and Picnic Point—on the northeast corner of the island, accessible only by boat. Wellesley Island, covering 15 square miles, has two parks and three golf-course country clubs—and is accessible by rental car.

Maybe I should've booked a tee time instead of gone fishing. The highlight of our chartered trip is the shore dinner, a guide-prepared meal that's supposed to feature the client's catch of the day, which, in my case, poses a problem. So far, fishing neophyte that I am, I've caught nothing, despite several instances in which the captain hooked me a whopper and handed me the line.

"Don't stop reeling!" the captain booms. "Jeez, that was another 18- or 20-inch pike you just lost."

He pulls out his secret weapon, a red-and-white-striped, daredevil spoon lure. (Evidently, if you can't land a northern pike with this lure, you may as well take up knitting.) An agonizing hour later I say, "Can't we just eat the fish you caught?" In short order the captain is standing before a blazing wood fire at Picnic Point preparing a made-from-scratch meal unlike any I've ever had.

"Here ya go," he says, handing me the appetizer, a hot, deep-fried fatback and onion sandwich on white bread. "More cholesterol than ten sticks of butter, and I only use raw *Vidalia* onions from Georgia," he boasts, as he throws our specially breaded northern pike into an iron skillet of flaming fatback grease.

The main course includes boiled salt potatoes, steamed corn on the cob, local curd cheese, thick slices of Italian bread, and a freshly tossed garden salad with, you guessed it, Thousand Island dressing, original recipe, as in *the* original recipe, the one Sophia LaLonde dreamed up in Clayton back in the early 1900s. LaLonde was the wife of a local fishing guide who, according to legend, first served the dressing to clients during their shore dinner. Eventually, George Boldt got a taste, added the dressing to the menu at the Waldorf, and the rest, as they say, is salad bar history. (Talk to someone in Alexandria Bay, however, and you get a different version of the legend.)

Dessert today is French toast with cream and thick maple syrup, washed down with flame-brewed cowboy coffee fortified with raw eggs, crushed shells and all. The feast is capped off by a double shot of Jack Daniels to aid digestion and to allow our arteries to function long enough to haul the leftovers and solid iron cookware back down to the boat. I give it five stars.

With Captain Ferguson playing harmonica and singing along with CD music, we enjoy a leisurely cruise to the spacious dock of the Antique Boat Museum in Clayton. The museum's waterfront campus covers 4.5 acres of public program space; extensive archival holdings; and most impressive, a collection of more than 320 antique and classic pleasure boats ranging from eight-foot St. Lawrence skiffs to the 106-foot *La Duchesse*, the fully restored, Gilded-Age houseboat built for hotelier George Boldt.

The museum's "Quest For Speed" exhibit chronicles the 80-plus-year history of powerboat racing, a sport defined by high horsepower and near-suicidal speeds. I'd no idea that race boats built around here were approaching speeds of a hundred miles an hour in 1929. At the main exhibit hall, I meet Robyn Lewis, membership coordinator. She shows me the *Suwanee*, a 1909, custom-built racing launch more than 31 feet long and only four feet wide, crafted in swooping lines with a white cedar hull and mahogany decks and ribbed with red elm. It reminds me of a war canoe, with motor.

"Man, I'd like to have known the daredevil who bombed around in this thing," I say.

"Let's call him," Lewis says.

Tall, slim Bob Cox, 92, bought *Suwanee* from its original owner in 1955 and donated it to the museum in 1996. At the moment, he's working the throttle of the *Split*, his current 28-foot race boat (another classic), as we power away from the museum's dock for a sunny afternoon tour of the islands.

"I used to race this thing from Fort Lauderdale to Nassau in the Bahamas," Cox shouts over the roar of the engine. "But my doctors put a stop to that silliness."

I ask Cox to take me to Zavikon Island, actually a pair of tiny islands connected by a footbridge touted by tour guides as the shortest international bridge in the world.

"That's a big fat lie they've been telling tourists since the 1880s," Cox says, pulling out his laminated charts to show me that both islands are clearly in Canadian waters. I glance at the map then look up at the gigantic lake freighter that's at twelve o'clock and closing. The pilothouse on this monster looks to be about 15 stories above the water when Cox nudges the wheel a few degrees to starboard, and the freighter glides past for what seems like a full minute. Cox drops me back on the dock of the Antique Boat Museum and points *Split* toward open water. I watch as his rooster tail disappears into the sunset.

Back in the rental car, I head west along the scenic Great Lakes Seaway Trail, which parallels the shoreline, to Cape Vincent, where the St. Lawrence River meets the open waters of Lake Ontario. The historical district in this picturesque village has some outstanding examples of colonial architecture, including my ideal of the dream home. The front yards alone take my breath away.

From Cape Vincent I take Horne's ferry into Canadian waters to Wolfe Island, which, at 48 square miles, is the largest of the Thousand Islands. The border checkpoint resembles a whitewashed bait shack with the Canadian flag snapping proudly in the wind. I answer a few perfunctory questions ("Are you carrying any weapons, firearms, ammunition?") and am on my way. But as I pull out of customs, I miss the turn for the ferry to Kingston and embark on an unintended tour of the island, until I run out of road at the water's edge on the easternmost point of land. That's when I know I'm lost on Wolfe Island (sounds like a Hardy Boys adventure). No matter. I like it here. The 1,400 or so island residents enjoy rolling farmland and meadows, plenty of acreage between homes, the occasional jogger or cyclist, and a blissful air of remoteness. For visitors, there are B&Bs, inns, and nature tours. Besides, I'm not lost. I can see Canada just across the bay.

I get directions from a kid on a mountain bike and drive to Marysville, on the north side of the island, where I catch the next ferry to Kingston. Canada's first capital and now part of Ontario's only UNESCO World Heritage site, Kingston was originally a naval port strategically located at the convergence of the St. Lawrence and Lake Ontario. Fort Henry, a 19th-century British fortress, overlooks Kingston's busy downtown waterfront. I beat a classic Studebaker to the last available parking space and join the cosmopolitan crowd gathering among the flowers and fountains of Confederation Park as a live band sets up on stage. I catch snippets of conversation in a dozen languages, including some guy speaking Brooklynese as he jaywalks across four lanes of traffic: "Hey, can't yooz sees I'm walkin' over he-yeah!"

Judging by the number of art galleries and restaurants in the downtown area, the nightlife in Kingston warrants further study. But I've grown accustomed to the smaller river villages, where the focus is on the water. Kingston, population 117,000, is just too, well, sophisticated. I feel like a river rat out of its element here. I surrender my prime parking space, head east toward the 1,000 Islands Scenic Parkway (the Canadian version of the Seaway Trail), and follow the road signs to Gananoque, which proclaim that it's "a destination that's safe, friendly, and good." That's a reasonable characterization of the Thousand Islands in general, though the Canadian side seems slightly more relaxed and less commercial, with less traffic, than its U.S. counterpart.

Saturday night action in "G-Town" (I mispronounced "gan-an-ock-way" so badly the locals offered an abbreviation) is centered around Stonewater Irish Eatery and Pub. I order Guinness and poutine—jumbo French fries buried in white cheese curd, topped with beef gravy, and served molten hot in a casserole dish with a side of vinegar. "Heart attack on a plate," the waitress says. I have to raise my fork several feet above my head to get the cheese to behave, but the dish is delicious. Now I'm ready to go shovel snow or fall on the couch to watch some hockey.

I know why the well-heeled of yesteryear picked the Thousand Islands for their exclusive playground: They couldn't find a more ideal place to spend their summer vacation. Fortunately, you no longer have to be rich to have the Thousand Islands experience. The brochures of things to do and sights to see overflowing from my rental car are proof of that. My whirlwind tour of multiple islands, it turns out, was highly unusual. A fishing guide explained that most folks pick a favorite spot—be it vacation home, summer rental, or campsite—that they return to year after year, and that this can go on for generations. Eventually, I did find mine. I won't say where, but it involves my idea of a dream home overlooking a tranquil stretch of water.

So far, I'd managed to avoid buying souvenirs. That changed the following morning when I entered Island Memories Restaurant and found myself surrounded by an acre of tchotchkes. The place had it all, including the perfect souvenir for my geographically challenged neighbor, Gary—a Thousand Islands-themed cookout gift set: tablecloth, place mats, chef's apron, and matching grill mitt. I can't wait to crash Gary's next BBQ and present him with this thoughtful souvenir from the islands that don't exist. And I hope I have an audience.

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