

## Great Ways to go with the flow

Our writers set of off on three very different river cruises.

Here, Rodney Bolt casts off in Canada

The Sunday Telegraph – Travel 24<sup>th</sup> February 2008



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When my parents took me to restaurants as a child, my first course was always that ubiquitous starter of the 1970s, prawn cocktail. Much of the allure lay in the gorgeously pink Thousand Island Dressing, which I imagined came from the Caribbean or some storybook spot in the Pacific. The colour, the tang, the name, spoke to me of exotic, faraway places in the sun.

My childhood illusions were shattered last year with the discovery that Thousand Island Dressing is Canadian. Or at least the isles in question are scattered through the St Lawrence River, just where Lake Ontario feeds into it on the border with the US. The blow was softened a little by the fact that this information came to light on a delightfully sedate lake cruise - a journey packed with pleasant culinary surprises.

Some days before my Thousand Island awakening, I had taken the train from Toronto to meet the Georgian Clipper at Kingston, on the northern shores of Lake Ontario.

Despite some rather crass modern waterside development, Kingston has a genteel, 19th-century charm, with elegant public buildings in red-brick or limestone - here a Baroque-style dome, there a neo-Gothic steeple - and streets of attractive old villas. I'd booked in to the Frontenac Club Inn, a former gentleman's club, its bedrooms individually decorated with period furniture. The Georgian Clipper was due to leave at lunchtime next day.

Just 13 passengers gathered on the quayside - three couples from the US, the others from Canada, including perky octogenarian Phyllis and her friend Kay, who were on a nostalgia trip. The last time they had been to the Islands was as Girl Guides, on a very rough-and-ready camping holiday in the 1930s. This time they opted for a little more luxury.

We had five days' cruising ahead of us, first on Lake Ontario and up the St Lawrence, then doubling back to Kingston again. The Clipper is a small boat, and though using the showers was a little like trying to wash yourself in an upright coffin, the cabins were comfortable and cosy, and the crew cheery and attentive.

"Think of this as your own private yacht," said Captain John. He was right. The cruise had a very personal touch. Mention a favourite breakfast cereal or bottle of wine, and as if by magic it was there the next time you looked. Express an aversion to broccoli, and it was never on your plate again. What's more, as we were to discover, meals were prepared by a very good chef.

Our passage took us westwards first, across the northern tip of the lake and up an inlet, past magnificent mansions with lawns dipping gently to the shoreline. We docked in a placid yacht mole, amid ducks and herons, just as the setting sun added streaks of pink to trees mirrored in the perfectly still water.

This was Picton, a town visited in 1894 - a plaque on the quayside proclaimed - by Salvation Army founder William Booth, who had preached in the local church, his theme "On Darkest England and the Way Out".

Next day we took to land, for an excursion through pumpkin meadows and cornfields dotted with red barns, to Bloomfield. Many of the village's pretty wooden cottages and 19th-century red-brick buildings housed antiques shops and galleries. And a famous chocolate shop.

Comfortably laden with hand-made truffles and choc-dipped ginger, it was back on the minibus for Waupoos (the town's odd name comes from the local aboriginal word for "rabbit"). Pumpkins and corn gave way to forests and apple orchards - and then grape vines.

For the past seven years, Ed Neuser and his wife Rita Kaimans have been battling sub-zero winters and short summers to establish the Waupoos Winery on the banks of Lake Ontario in what is better known as cider country. In 2007 they were rewarded with official recognition as an international wine region.

We sipped wines, looking out over the lake - so large that it disappears over the horizon, and creates a microclimate along the shore that makes vine-growing feasible, if an ongoing battle. A peppery red Gamay Noir met with particular approval, and, assured that there were plenty of bottles on board, we headed back to the boat.

The Georgian Clipper's spacious sundeck proved the perfect spot to recline the next day as we sailed, eastward now, into the St Lawrence and through the Thousand Islands.

More than 1,800 of them crowd the river on the 80-mile stretch between Picton and Brockville - some large enough to house small communities with schools, others barely bigger than a rocky platform with a jetty, a deck and an umbrella. They are the remnants of an ancient mountain chain.

To our left, the Canadian side of the river was rocky, with tufts of forest growing from chunky grey cliffs - the last outcrop of the Canadian Shield. The American side to our right stretched flat and sandy. Both shores - and the islands - are something of a millionaires' summer playground.

After a night in Brockville (a Loyalist town with some stately Victorian architecture), and another in the more rumbustious Gananoque, we wound our way slowly back through channels and narrows to Kingston. Phyllis and Kay pointed out the island from which, 70 years earlier, they'd had to row to shore and then walk an hour to the nearest shop.

A local expert came aboard to tell us of wildlife - eels that are nearly extinct, foreign zebra mussels that are invading the lakes. And I lazily reflected on five relaxing days of picture-book scenery and culinary indulgence. Even if Thousand Island Dressing will never be quite the same again.

## **Essentials**

### **Getting there**

St Lawrence Cruise Lines (001 613 549 8091; [www.stlawrencecruiselines.com](http://www.stlawrencecruiselines.com)) has a variety of cruises in the Thousand Islands region on the Canadian Empress, a replica 19th-century river steamboat (with 66 passengers, making it larger than the Georgian Clipper, which is being refitted this year). Options include a three-day cruise starting and finishing in Kingston, and passing through the Thousand Islands. Prices range from £507 to £1,390, depending on cruise duration and the time of year.

Air Canada (0871 220 1111; [www.aircanada.co.uk](http://www.aircanada.co.uk)) offers flights from Heathrow to Toronto from about £474 return. Trains with VIA Rail Canada ([www.viarail.ca](http://www.viarail.ca)) from

Toronto to Kingston take two hours and 20 minutes. There are about six services daily, and tickets start at £58 return.

### **Staying there**

The Frontenac Club Inn (001 613 547 6167; [www.frontenacclub.com](http://www.frontenacclub.com)) in Kingston has doubles with breakfast from £86.