

“The Mini-Loop”

An Inland 1000 Mile Cruise - Part II

Story and photos by Tab Hauser

Lake Ontario to the Thousand Islands

We woke the next day to clear skies, realizing that we were beginning the "vacation portion" of our voyage. With a third check on the weather and after talking to some fisherman, we fueled up and set a course for Kingston, Ontario. The "sea of Lake Ontario" is nothing to be taken for granted, especially on the eastern portion, where we were to cross. If winds kick up a day or two from the west, the waves can be quite rough. Our 50-mile crossing took just under three hours. We slowed a bit so the two-footers coming at 45 degrees would not bang us around too much.

Seeing land on the Canadian side, as well as the calmer water the last hour was a welcome relief. Clearing Canadian Customs is as simple as using a designated phone at the dock with your passports and boat registration in hand. After a few standard questions we were given an entree number. Kingston is a pretty city with a lot of history. We only stopped for lunch and ice cream because we were anxious to get settled into the 1000 Islands, which start there. My suggestion if you go there would be to stay a night or at least take the trolley historical tour.

From Kingston we continued east past the large fort and Cedar Island, with its prominent tower that helped protect the fort across the way. After this we decided to take the Bateau Channel north, making our way to Aubrey Island. What first-timers need to know is that the waters can be really tricky. One minute you are in 90 feet of water and the next minute, if you are not careful, you are on a reef. Grounding here is not an uncommon experience. The same when approaching the islands. One side can have a shoal immediately up from the depths while another side can be very deep.

When we decided to take the scenic Bateau Channel, Maureen took over driving while I stared at the GPS and navigated. First-timers here cannot be too careful. At Aubrey and the other nearby park islands, we found all the docks taken. We circled the area carefully and saw a dozen boats at anchor in a protected area between Bostwick from the south and Lindsey Island from the east. There was further protection from the west by a few petite-sized islands. To get there we looked at the chart plotter, confirmed we had enough water and crawled between two islands. Again the key is caution until you know the place. We set the anchor, threw on our bathing suits and jumped overboard, realizing how great it was to be back where we had honeymooned 30 years early.

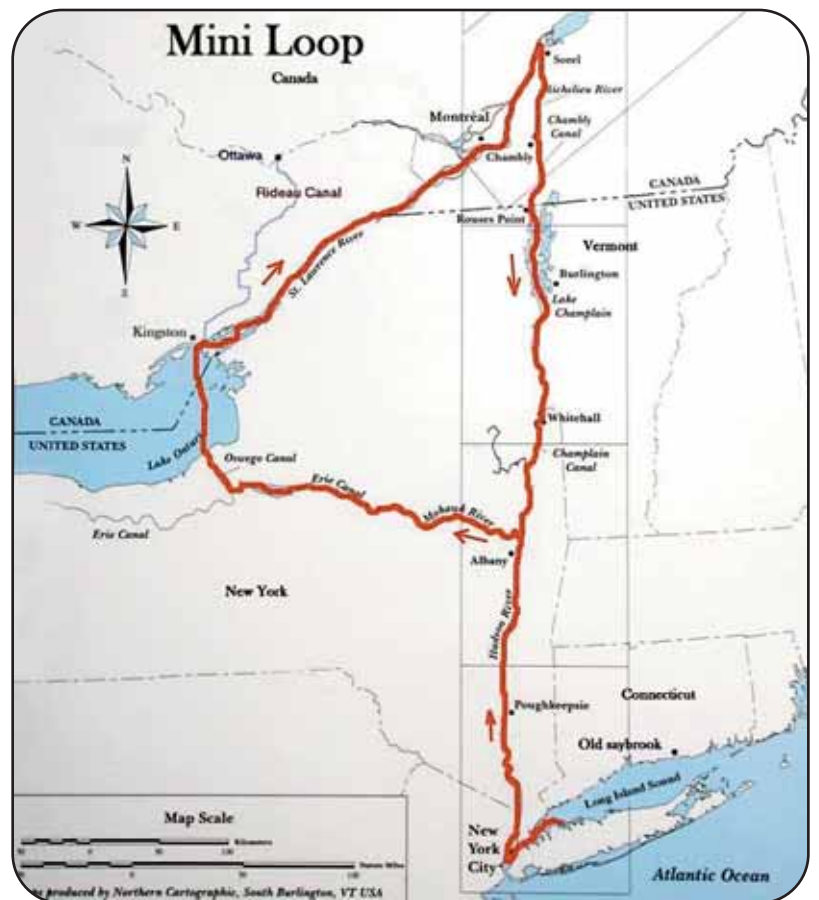
It is not every day one can take his or her boat directly to the theater, but that is exactly what we did the

following evening at the 1000 Islands Playhouse. Our next port, Gananoque, was 20 minutes down a narrow strait with mainland on our port and islands dotted alongside our starboard. Here with our advanced reservations and a \$25 dock fee, we tied up at the back of the playhouse and stayed the night after the performance. The show we saw, "Lend Me a Tenor", was hysterical. The bonus of bringing our boat was no waiting time for the restrooms during intermission and having our own onboard bar.

We left Gananoque in a light drizzle with an undetermined next location. While the 1000 Islands are vast looking on the chart, you can get from one grouping of islands to the next in less than 30 minutes. That day we cruised by a few of the park's islands, but again the docks were all taken. We decided to grab a mooring in a small cove next to Leek Island. We enjoyed two things there. One was that the place was designated a "quiet island", meaning no generators or engines are allowed to run, so the only thing we heard were fish jumping and the sound of a loud great blue heron that perched itself 50 feet from us. The other bonus was that when the breeze changed, our stern section was 50 feet from the shore, looking into the woods. We felt like we were camping in luxury.

After a leisurely day at anchor we were off to the charming town of Clayton, on the United States side of the 1000 Islands, to visit the annual Antique Boat Show and Auction. We arrived in Clayton as guests of the boat show and stayed at the village dock near the museum. The first order of business when arriving from Canada was to obtain an entrée number, which we did by going to the U.S. Customs video phone on the dock, giving our vessel and passport numbers and answering a few standard questions. In Clayton we walked to the end of town, strolling through the few souvenir shops and hitting the mini-farmers market at the end of town, complete with complimentary tastings of local wine. That night we strolled through the town, but the place is very quiet after 9 p.m. There is an old theater there that has shows and concerts if you wish entertainment.

The next day we visited the Clayton Antique Boat Museum, an annual highlight. That year many of the region's antique owners as well as owners from as far away as Florida and Minnesota came to show or sell their boats. Owning one of these is a labor of love if you wish to keep it original. We also saw the museum's impressive display of antique boats, including the "Gilded Age" houseboat that was once owned by George Boldt, builder of



Mini-Loop course map.

Heart Island Castle. There is also an impressive display of outboard engines, old photos and other items dealing with boating from years past.

That afternoon we stopped at the above-mentioned Boldt Castle, the number one tourist attraction. Construction for Boldt Castle, or Heart Island as it is known, started in 1900 and continued for four years. This fairytale 120-room, 6-story castle was built with tremendous detail, even redesigning the island into a heart shape. Then one day a telegram was sent to the island commanding all employees to stop work due to the sudden death of Boldt's wife. He could not live in the place without her and for the next 77 years the castle fell victim to nature and vandals.

We had visited Heart Island thirty years before. While the outside looked good, we could only imagine what the place would have looked like. We were quite surprised to see the 1000 Island Bridge Authority had restored the first two floors to their full splendor. On our first trip we saw a semi-gutted castle with graffiti, open walls and holes. On this trip the first two floors, complete with grand marble staircase, were befitting the "Gilded Age." We were pleased that people could see the difference between the restored floors and those above. One should see the large boat and caretaker house across from the island.

From Heart Island we crossed the channel to Alexandria Bay. While Clayton rolls up the streets after dinner, Alexandria, or A-Bay as it is called, likes to party, with bars and restaurants featuring music and shops that stay open later. Coming back to Alexandria was a bit nostalgic as we docked at the village pier and went to the same restaurant for dinner as we did 30 years earlier. There is a market nearby, with limited selection, and a good marine store opposite the village pier.

We left Alexandria and headed 30 minutes downriver to Dark Island, or Joldt Island as it is on some charts. Our plan was to tour the Singer Castle. Getting there on

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1000 Island - just room enough - foreground, with Boldt Castle boat house behind

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this day was a little more exciting since it was the annual poker run and "go fast" boats were strutting their stuff. The captains screamed through narrow channels not only watching out for pleasure boats but also maneuvering around the many 700 foot-long lake freighters (lakers) that go up and down the main channel.

By late morning we arrived at Singer Castle, constructed in 1902 and inspired by the novel Woodstock written in 1832 by Sir Walter Scott. After a short film we were taken to most of the 28 rooms and towers of this very imposing medieval castle. While we liked the grandeur of Boldt Castle the day before, we thought Singer Castle was more livable and in fact had been lived in by the heirs to the former Singer Sewing Machine President Fredrick Gilbert Bourne until 1960s. The tour was very informative and we learned how Mr. Bourne had installed secret stairways and walkways so the servants could get about without interfering with the family or the butlers could view the dinner table from a picture that could be lowered discretely to see if anything was needed.

One nice thing about this castle is that if you wish to splurge and have the place to yourself, the royal suite is available to rent and you will be the only guests. You get dinner and breakfast, but best of all you get the island



“Miracle” in foreground with Old Montreal behind Port D’Escale.

to yourself after 4 p.m. when the last tour boat leaves. (There is a caretaker on the grounds in case you have a problem). You also get a behind-scenes tour going through the secret staircases. When we left the castle, we set course for Rockport, 20 minutes west on the Canadian side.

Down The St. Lawrence to Montreal

Two mornings later we woke to an overcast day, with rain forecasted for the following day as well, so we

regrettably decided to head to Montreal a day earlier than planned. Our goal was to get as far down river and through as many commercial locks as possible and make Montreal for dinner the following day. After Brockville the river ran straight and narrow for many miles. The ride was scenic, passing a tall, rigged ship and a few freighters along the way. We then came upon our first of seven commercial locks near Montreal that would lower us 211 feet. These locks were built for the large freighters and they get priority. Since it was Sunday, traffic was light, but at the Snell Lock in Massena a report came over the radio of a squall, so with threatening skies we regrettably made tracks to get off the river and down at Marina 2000 in Cornwall.

We woke up on Monday, August 8 to our 30th anniversary. We had made reservations at a special French place for dinner in the old town of Montreal, and by all accounts the trip should not have taken more than 4 or 5 hours. While this was a special day for us, it was the worst day of our journey. The ride down river started pleasantly enough. In some areas it was narrow and in others so wide and full of islands you could not tell where the banks were on one side.

Our problems started when a lift bridge let a freighter through but had us wait an hour when for less

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than a minute we could have been through. That delayed us an hour, burning fuel because we had to keep running our engine just to stay in place due to the current. We then arrived at a lock where we had to wait over 3 hours. It was after the second freighter that I got on the phone and complained that there were 7 boats waiting in the blazing heat to enter. After that polite exchange of words they stopped a freighter and let us in.

"Locking" here is unlike anything we did in the N.Y. State Canal system. Because the lock is so wide and there are so many small boats, the authority here requires boats to raft up. Being the largest boat in the small waiting fleet, we usually had 3 other boats tied to us in the lock while we held onto the lines. One problem we had was once we made it through the locks, we would pass the freighters, only to wait again at the next lock, which turned out to be nearly two hours each time. We finally got to the St. Lambert Lock just outside Montreal at dusk with a 1 1/2 hour wait, leaving it in total darkness. Exiting the lock into the narrow channel, we found our eyes not adjusted. What we saw was a tall, raised railroad bridge, but what we did not see until it was 200 yards off our bow was one large freighter making its way slowly towards us because it blended so well into the background. We cleared the freighter by 30 feet on one side and the bridge wall by another 20 feet. Fortunately these freighters crawl at 1 to 2 knots getting into



St. Lawrence Seaway commercial locks where pleasure boats must raft when locking.

the lock.

The other interesting aspect of this special night was entering the Port of Montreal in the dark. There is not a lot of ambient light from the city on the wide river, so you really need to keep your eyes peeled on the chart and have someone else keep watch for the lights of another boat. Once out of the lock channel, a 150 degree turn to port is required around a marker that splits the rapids from the calm channel. We knew about the rapids from the charts and other boaters, but you do not see it in the dark

and as soon as you make the turn, the boat starts to shake. We were at 70% throttle and doing 12 knots when we should have been doing 20.

After several minutes in fast current you get to the docks, built on an angle to stop the current. The calm water and well-lit area were a welcomed relief. At 10:15 p.m., exhausted from the long day and a little shaken up by the nighttime entrance to the city, we were really happy to be there. While we lost the reservation for our special dinner that night, being a few minutes from Cartier Square in old Montreal gave us plenty of other good food choices that late in the evening. Thank goodness for European-style dining.

Port D'escal in Old Montreal is one of the better places in a big city to dock a boat. The location is excellent and you are minutes from top restaurants, historic sites, walking tours and shops. The docks are protected in calm water and on three sides by high walls. On top of this the fee is only \$2.22 per foot, electric and taxes included. We took advantage of this rate by leaving the boat 2 nights and renting a car to drive to Quebec City. We stayed another 2 nights there when we got back to enjoy this city's charm and food. In Montreal we wandered the old section, took a walking tour, and ate amazing food in the old section as well as the trendy area in St. Laurent.

Look for Part III in the January issue.



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