

# Lazy days on the Rideau Canal

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The Rideau Canal, with Canada's Parliament Buildings in the background. (Shutterstock)

KINGSTON -- The dawn quiet at Newboro Lock, between Kingston and Ottawa on the Rideau Canal, was broken by the irregular bark of distant gunfire, igniting the raucous cries of crows and competing with the chants of the chickadees and the creaking of the wooden pier. The waterway was built to counter an American invasion, and finally, 178 years after its completion, it seemed the fighting had started.

But we thanked the distant explosions for waking us to stumble out on deck and appreciate the horizontal yellow early morning light pushing through the brilliant green of the trees as our cube-shaped houseboat wallowed gently in the wake of other passing early risers.

In fact the only Canadian targets in American sights were geese, and the hunters were later seen happily consuming hearty maple-syrup-laden breakfasts at the Stirling Lodge Hotel, a short walk from the lock.

At its completion in 1832 the Rideau Canal was the most expensive construction project the British Empire had ever undertaken in any of its colonies. Lt.-Col. John By of the Royal Engineers arrived in 1826 to supervise construction, and 202 km of waterway, 47 locks, 52 dams, and six years later had managed a truly Olympic-scale overspend. At around £800,000, or roughly \$90 million at today's prices, the canal cost almost five times its original budget.

Conceived to secure supply routes and bring troops rapidly in case of an American invasion, the canal also proved to be the Empire's greatest white elephant. The invasion never came, and neither did a forecast boom to the Kingston economy.

Today those with their own craft can sail the canal's entire length, but we began a long weekend's exploration in the middle at small and sleepy Portland, where at Big Rideau Lake Boat Rentals we hired what some in sleeker vessels later described dismissively as a Winnebago with floats, or a house on an ice tray.

It was called Santa Maria, which was probably what experienced boaters said under their breath when watching our clumsy attempts to dock near their own craft.

The Santa Maria boasted every convenience, including beds, a bathroom with ashower, stove, microwave, CD player, barbecue, and even a fly-swatter. After a detailed and careful introduction to navigation, safety, and operation of the vessel's simple controls, we set out westwards along the south shore of Big Rideau Lake.

Lt.-Col. By would have been used to the constricted arterial waterways of Britain, only navigable by pencil-shaped narrowboats. But here he linked together existing and man-made lakes, providing large stretches of open water.

These give modern-day boaters plenty of room to manoeuvre, but also much more scope for getting lost, although our houseboat came laden with charts, and channel markers are numerous. But in surroundings of such beauty there was little need to hurry, and getting lost for a while was all part of the pleasure.

Our route snaked round tiny islands bristling with pines and looking exactly like toothbrush heads. Kingfishers dived from waterside trees, and occasionally holiday cottages peered out from the greenery. Prettier still were the narrow winding passages of true canal leading to the locks, but whereas nothing seemed to happen very quickly out on open water, here mild alarm set in at the need to manoeuvre the boat more precisely into a lock and next to other craft. The flat sides of the Santa Maria acted like sails often leading to multiple failed approaches before the vessel was safely tied up.

The locks themselves were slightly intimidating, with vast gates swinging ponderously on high towers of stone, the waters controlled by various mechanisms involving chains and pulleys, and much cranking and clanking, luckily all managed by lock-keepers rather than boaters themselves.

The keepers were also welcoming to those frankly reporting themselves as completely incompetent. They issued clear instructions and caught lines thrown to shore, helping to haul the boat snugly against the slimy walls of the broad lock basins. We looped lines fore and aft round rubber-coated cables running vertically up the lock walls, and used them to keep the boat to its side of the lock as the waters filling it surged round the basin.

The locks were the cause of some of By's overspend. He saw the originals planned were too small to cope with the then newly invented steamboat, and his own construction was both on a far larger scale and of a very high quality, so that much of the stonework and mechanisms in use today are original.

The canal's route was through wild territory thinly populated even now, although at lock stations neatly mown lawns, tubs of flowers, and benches next to the well-maintained original lock-masters' houses add an air of domesticity to spots that may still be a long drive down a dead-end track from any other habitation.

We continued west along the north shore of the Upper Rideau Lake to Westport, a small grid of quiet streets lined with clapboard houses whose big porches were home to rocking chairs and children's toys. Here there was the opportunity either to shop for supplies or to take the easier option of pan-fried pickerel fillet at a water-view table at the Cove Country Inn, before doubling back and swinging south to Newboro for the night.

The next day, gradually growing more confident in operating the boat, we worked south through Clear Lake, Indian Lake, and Opinicon Lake, to the prettiest point of all: The winding, narrow approach to the steeply dropping staircase of four locks at Jones Falls. We moored beneath a hammering woodpecker and scattered foraging squirrels as we walked down to the elegant Hotel Kenney, originally opened in 1877 and run by the same family ever since. We sat in front of a roaring log fire, dined well, and walked back through darkness for a night of utter peace.

The squat stone lock-masters house at Jones Falls is now a museum, having been more or less restored to its condition at construction in 1841. Kitchen, living room, and bedroom are all furnished with period items and seemed cosy. But with stone walls and metal roof to resist fire if under attack, the house was in fact far from comfortable. Loopholes for rifles had wooden blocks but no glass until one lock-master fitted it at his own expense.

The site was sufficiently remote that a smithy was also constructed to help maintain the locks' metal parts. It was now open again with a working blacksmith demonstrating the traditional skills involved, producing regular clang of metal on metal that drifted across the water.

The 19th century has bequeathed modern times an engineering marvel and watery playground that has now been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. And if the Rideau Canal now draws invaders in rather than helping to keep them out, everyone agrees the British money was well spent.

**MORE INFORMATION**

For details of travel to Ontario visit Ontario Tourism at [ontariotravel.net](http://ontariotravel.net). The website [rideau-info.com](http://rideau-info.com) details canal routes between Kingston and Ottawa, as well places to fish, bike and hike. Big Rideau Lake Boat Rentals of Portland has comfortable vessels of all sizes. Contact [bigrideaulakeboatrentals.com](http://bigrideaulakeboatrentals.com) or 613-272 2580.

Dining and accommodation options include Westport's Cove Country Inn ([coveinn.com](http://coveinn.com)), the Stirling Lodge at Newboro Lock ([stirlinglodge.com](http://stirlinglodge.com)), the Opinicon Resort Hotel at Chaffey's Lock ([theopiniconresorthotel.com](http://theopiniconresorthotel.com)), and the Hotel Kenney at Jones Falls ([hotelkenney.com](http://hotelkenney.com)).