

One in a Thousand

By Linda Fasteson For The Sun Chronicle
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Get an unparalleled panoramic view 400 feet above the St. Lawrence River's Thousand Islands region from the Thousand Islands Skydeck in Ontario, Canada. (Photo by Roger Fasteson)

Get a taste for history and culture in islands region of Canada

Ever feel like you wanted to step back to the Gilded Age - a glamorous time of majestic steamboats, luxurious hotels, grand railways and opulent mansions?

In Ontario, just over the border in Canada, you can discover the richness in culture and beauty in nature that drew tycoons and explorers alike to the Thousand Island region at the head of the St. Lawrence River and foot of Lake Ontario.

Read on to get a taste of the area that includes parts of New York State, and even contributed to the culinary world in giving Thousand Island salad dressing its name.

Kingston

A great place to begin your trip north is in the port city of Kingston, known as Limestone City for the stately 19th century architecture built

from its own quarries. This gateway to the region, located at the head of the St. Lawrence River and at the foot of Great Lakes, provided the route to riches - a treasure sought by expanding empires.



The Stone Arch Dam in Jones Falls was the tallest in the world when it was built in 1832. (Photo by Roger Fasteson)

Known to the Iroquois as "Manatoana," or "garden of the great spirit," and located midway between Toronto and Montreal, it was the capital of the United Province of Canada from 1841-44 and became the site of a French fort, a fur trading post, a United Empire Loyalist settlement and British garrison town.

Today, Kingston is a hub of higher education, military and penal institutions, and tourism, aptly befitting its motto: "Where History and Innovation Thrive."

In the 1830s, the British replaced a fort from the War of 1812 with Fort Henry, which is now a top attraction.

Built from 1832 to 1837, the four distinctive Martello towers were designed to defend the trade routes between the Rideau Canal, St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario that were of utmost importance to the region. The historic towers along with the Rideau Canal, make Kingston a UNESCO World Heritage destination.

The easiest way to get an overview is aboard the Confederation Tour Trolley. Tickets are available at the visitor information center in the converted railway station across from City Hall (\$13.50 plus tax, \$11.50 seniors. Add \$3 for hop-on, hop-off service). The tour includes a ride through downtown Kingston, Queen's University and the Royal Military College of Canada, which is at the former site of the Royal Navy Dockyards. It also passes Fort Henry National Historical Site and Bellevue House, home of Sir John A. MacDonald, Canada's first Prime Minister, stopping for those who want to explore these sights and reboard later.

Downtown Kingston's attractions are easily explored on foot and at little or no cost.

Take a free tour Canada's award-winning Penitentiary Museum, which is housed in the limestone manor of a former warden. Named "Best of the Road" by Rand McNally, it showcases gruesome old punishments, escape tools, contraband and other artifacts, as well as putting a

contemporary emphasis on rehabilitation.

With artifacts and archives, the Marine Museum of the Great Lakes is built on a site where shipbuilding began in 1790. Just outside is the 3,000-ton Great Lakes icebreaker Alexander Henry, an example of ship technology from post-World War II to the 1970s.

The longest-running public market in North America is a great place to find baked goods, crafts, and maple products, as well as see the the impressive bright red uniform and hear the bellowing voice of world champion Town Crier Chris Whyman. Incidentally, there is also a he beer named for him at the nearby Kingston Brew Pub. There's an antiques market on Sundays, and on summer Thursdays, free movies at dusk. You can also catch the fireworks finale to the Sunset Ceremony at Fort Henry on Wednesday nights in July and August.

Take a free tour of the landmark City Hall, one of the city's architectural gems, built in 1844 of Kingston limestone in a style befitting the first capital of Canada.



Try the beer at the Kingston Brew Pub named for Town Crier Chris Whyman, who is in his 25th year in the position. (Photo by Roger Fasteson)

Explore the historic campus of Queen's University, one of the top educational institutions in Canada. It was established by Royal Charter of Queen Victoria in 1841, 26 years before the Canadian Confederation.

Take the free ferry from Kingston for a 20-minute ride to Wolfe Island, the first and largest of the Thousand Islands, easily identified by its wind turbines. This natural barrier between Canada and the United States divides Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River, and overlooks the "Gateway to the Seaway."

Shop for coffee, cheddar cheese and chocolates in authentic Victorian decor at Cooke's Fine Foods and Coffee on Brock Street.

Like to sail? Kingston has some of the best freshwater sailing in the world and was home to the sailing events of the 1976 Olympics. Divers are drawn here for the shipwrecks.

Eating and staying in Kingston

To fully experience the city, try one or more of downtown's unique Historic Inns Kingston. Two of the best are on Sydenham Street in the historic Old Stones district.

The Rosemount Inn, a 1850s Tuscan-style villa originally built for a dry-goods business owner, has period antiques, verandas, arched leaded windows overlooking the gardens, and an on-site spa. An elegant breakfast is served in the dining room, complete with coffee from Cooke's and Michel Cluizel chocolate.

The Hochelaga Inn is a French Victorian mansion built for a relative of Sir John MacDonald. Rooms are spacious and well-appointed, some with fireplaces and whirlpool tubs. The breakfast buffet may be enjoyed in the dining room, porches or lovely gardens. Twenty-four hour coffee and tea and friendly front desk service make this a favorite.

Top spots for dinner include Chez Piggy and Chien Noir, both within walking distance of Sydenham Street.

The Thousand Islands

The Thousand Islands - so named because there are over 1,800 of them within a 50 mile area of one of the world's largest rivers - are the glacier-flattened tops of a chain of mountains that link Ontario's Canadian Shield to New York State's Adirondacks.

During the Golden Era of steamboats, private rail cars and grand hotels, tens of thousands of visitors a year were drawn to the natural beauty of this summer resort. Employment opportunities abounded servicing the homes, hotels and tourist activities.

The area was a playground of the rich and famous - people like the Astors, Helena Rubenstein, Irving Berlin, Mary Pickford and railroad sleeper car designer George M. Pullman, who entertained President Ulysses Grant and General William Tecumseh Sherman.

Many of the turn-of-the-century elite bought their own islands and built extravagant summer homes to flaunt their social status, creating an area along the river known as Millionaires' Row. A Rhine-style castle complex with 24 spires and 120 rooms was built by hotel magnate George C. Boldt on an island he reshaped and named Heart for his wife, who died before its completion.

Rail and automobile travel were eventually replaced by cruise ships docking in the islands. In 1981, Bob Clark launched a ship designed to recapture the gracious ambience of steamboating. The family-run St. Lawrence Cruise Line's Canadian Empress is a composite of 1908 vessel design with modern amenities and offers a leisurely way to experience the area's historical and natural attractions.

The shallow draft of the ship allows it to get close to the points of interest and natural beauty of this archipelago. There are shaded outdoor observation decks forward and aft and a sundeck for relaxing, stargazing, kite flying, or a lively game of shuffleboard or checkers. A park warden makes onboard presentations about St. Lawrence Islands National Park of Canada and the wildlife that can be sighted.

Among the shore excursions included in the St. Lawrence Cruise Line tour are:

The Heritage Center of the Thousand Islands, which was built in Gananoque, Gateway to the Thousand Islands, in grand Victorian cottage style. It is a good place to start for an appreciation of how the islands were formed and of life here through the ages. A film of the love story that inspired Boldt Castle is shown.

Fort Wellington, with ramparts of earth strong enough to withstand the impact of cannon balls, was originally built during the War of 1812 to defend the St. Lawrence River shipping route between Montreal and Kingston against attack by the United States. It was rebuilt and expanded in the 1830s during border tensions of the Upper Canada Rebellion.

Fulford Place is an eclectic and opulent 35-room Edwardian mansion with original furnishings. It was built by Sen. George Taylor Fulford, who made millions promoting patent medicines throughout the British Empire, most notably Pink Pills for Pale People. Guests included prime ministers and princes. The Italian gardens were designed by the Olmstead Brothers of Brookline. Fulford died soon after the home's completion following a traffic accident in West Newton.

One of Canada's oldest Loyalist cities, Brockville, is named for the popular Gen. Sir Isaac Brock, killed by an American sharpshooter months after successfully defeating American invaders. With clear water and old shipwrecks, Brockville offers some of the world's best freshwater diving. The Canadian Empress docks here overnight, in time for a starlit evening stroll along the riverfront walkway.

The Thousand Islands Skydeck's high-speed elevator opens to an unparalleled panoramic view 400-feet above the St. Lawrence.

The Rideau Canal

The Rideau Canal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was built from 1826 to 1832 by Irish immigrant laborers, Scottish stonemasons and French Canadian woodcutters, and supervised by England's Lieutenant Colonel John By of the Royal Engineers. This slack-water canal dug by connecting the lakes and rivers between Kingston and Ottawa is now a recreational waterway perfect for paddling on a kayak or canoe, picnicking on its banks and hiking surrounding trails.

With 47 locks and 24 lock stations, it is one of the few in the world built for military strategic reasons. This supply route for inland garrisons in the event of American invasion was one of the first canals to be designed for steam-powered boats, and is North America's oldest continuously operating waterway. Most of the lock stations and hand-cranked locks remain much as they were at its inception. By driving you can visit the quaint and historic villages, farm stands, antique shops and artists' studios along the canal:

Merrickville is known for its boutiques, glass blowing studios and galleries. Not-to-be-missed are Rowland Leather Works and Mrs. McGarrigle's for her award-winning maple mustard.

In Smith's Falls, midway along the canal, a five-story stone 19th century mill building houses the artifacts and exhibits of the Rideau Canal Museum.

The dam in Jones Falls was the tallest in the world when it was built in 1832. Parks Canada walkways have interpretive plaques that lead to a blacksmith shop, guard house and views of boats passing through four locks. It's especially lovely during autumn season. Stop for lunch at the historic Hotel Kenney, a favorite fishing lodge of President Taft.

Traveling through history across our Northern border gives a new perspective on both American and Canadian history. Discover the pathways of those who shaped North America, find renewal in some of the best of the past and be refreshed as you simply sit back and enjoy the view.

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If you go

By car, the trip from Boston to Kingston is approximately 450 miles and takes about 8 hours to complete. By air, Air Canada offers a direct flight from Boston to Ottawa that takes an hour and thirty-five minutes. Once in Canada, VIA rail travels from Ottawa to Kingston in less than 2 1/2 hours. A direct driving route between the two cities is about 120 miles, and also takes about 2 1/2 hours.

Kingston Visitor Information Centre

209 Ontario St., 613-544-2725; kingstoncanada.com; kingstonchamber.on.ca

The Thousand Island International Tourism Council; visit1000islands.com

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