



The Americas

Locks, docks and messing about

Chris Cordina uncovers the key to travelling the limestone-lined canals of Canada's Rideau region.

James Stewart would have been at home walking down this Main Street, whistling and waving to folks on his way to work in the family hardware store. It's Westport, Canada. And it's "Small Town" North America, with cute shops, churches and parks. Westport, population 700, is on the shores of Upper Rideau Lake. And there are more towns just like it dotted along the Rideau Canal, a 202-kilometre chain of lakes, locks and channels linking the former garrison town of Kingston, at the head of Lake Ontario, with the national capital, Ottawa.

If time is not of the essence and you fancy a few days messing about on water in beautiful surroundings, you can tour by houseboat. If speed is your style, the Rideau can be roamed by powerboat or cruiser. Birdlife abounds, big fish dart about in the shallows and log cabins, basic and grand, dot the banks. Deer, beaver and moose sightings are not uncommon.

We travelled by houseboat and had a pair of loons – mates who operate Two Loons Tours – as guides. They knew when to impart knowledge and love of canal and country and when to let their guests soak up the serenity on their own.

The canal towns of Westport, Merrickville, Perth and the larger Kingston are full of art-and-craft galleries, jewellery and antiques stores and little shops with names such as Cedar Bridge Ice-Cream and Candy Store. In Merrickville, some shopkeepers leave their wares on the footpath overnight.

Shops selling imported coffees, teas, cheeses and delicacies are a popular destination for daytrippers from Toronto and Ottawa. At Cooke's Fine Foods and Coffee in Kingston, Tasmania's King Island brie is a top-seller.

The pretty towns have pretty little department stores, where you can buy a canoe similar to those paddled by Algonquin Indians in this neck of the woods for centuries, books on finding (and keeping) the right spouse, backscratchers, bright-checked shirts and dresses, peanut brittle or pen knives.

There are ghosts in these parts, too. In Kingston, the Original Haunted Walk runs for 90 minutes, dropping in at old hotels, hidden burial grounds, grave-robbing sites and official hanging places of times past. And there are ghost tours of Fort Henry, built at the mouth of the St Lawrence River in 1812. It is well worth a day tour if you like water views with a cannon-firing

military experience.

Homely looking restaurants are regulation, as are B&Bs, pubs, lodges and boutique hotels, such as Merrickville's Sam Jakes Inn and Westport's Foley House. There are more parks than petrol stations, with brooks, bridges and massive maple, pine, oak and chestnut trees. Squirrels and chipmunks scurry about and you'll see the odd woodpecker.

Proud townsfolk say that when fishing – something thousands of anglers visit the Rideau for every year – the big ones rarely get away. Fish-rearing ponds established by the Canadian Government 50 years ago have left the waters teeming with bass, perch and pike.

Fishing lodges – such as Shangri-La at Jones Falls – camping and golf holidays, hiking, mountain-bike riding and canal cruising have made travel as important to the Rideau region as its cornfields and maple-syrup farms. At Wheelers Maple Products, in Lanark County, if you don't fancy maple syrup on pancakes you might try it in a sausage.

The Rideau Canal recently became a World Heritage site. One of the great engineering feats of the 19th century, it was conceived in the wake of Britain's 1812-1815 war against the US for control of Upper Canada. The aim was to provide safe passage for troops and supplies and to connect Montreal to the shipyards of Kingston. The waterway rises and falls 80 metres in some sections and was built by thousands of workers who cut limestone and felled oak for the canal's 47 locks.

All but a few of the locks are still operated with the original winches and the condition of the locks' metre-thick limestone walls is testimony to the workmanship of Scottish stonemasons. By the mid-19th century, with the worry of war gone, the Rideau had become a commercial artery. It continued in this role until 1959, when it was superseded by the St Lawrence Seaway and rail networks.

Today, holidaymakers ply the canal. One-way travel time from Kingston to Ottawa is about three days by powerboat, six by houseboat and 10 or more days for canoeists. There are 24 lock stations – the former homes of lockmasters – and most have dock and picnic facilities and little museums.

The writer was a guest of Canadian Tourism Australia.



> TRIP NOTES

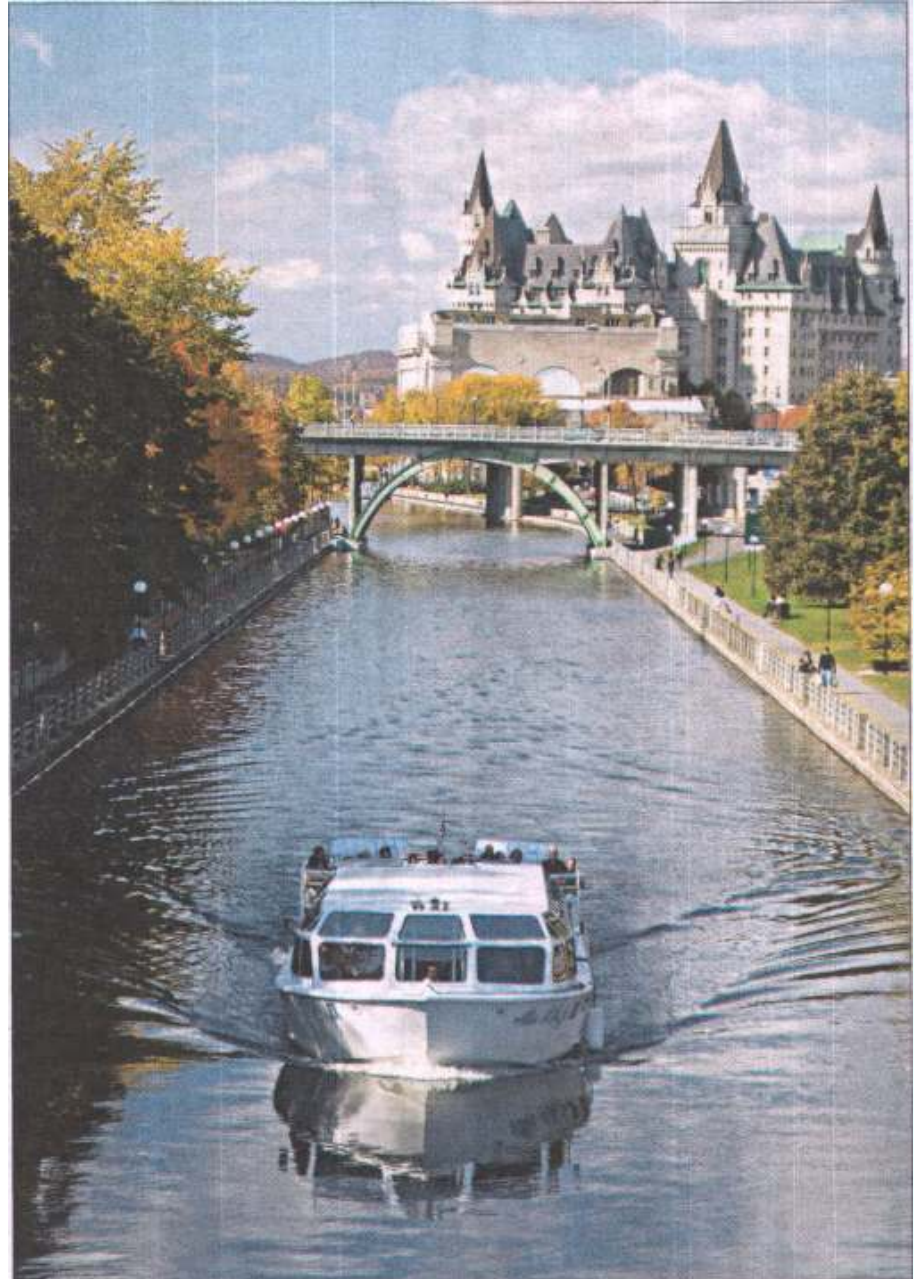
■ **Getting there** Qantas flies from Sydney to Los Angeles daily, with connecting American Airlines flights to Toronto. Phone 131 313, see qantas.com.au. The train from Toronto to Kingston costs \$C84 (\$105) one way. See viarail.com.

■ **Staying there** Waterway Get-A-Way houseboats sleep six to eight and cost from \$C900 for three days. See waterwaygetaway.com. The Shangri-La Lodge, Jones Falls, costs from \$116 a day. See shangri.ca.

■ **When to go** The canal is open mid-May to late October; the 300-kilometre Rideau Trail, which traces the canal's route, is open year-round for hiking and cross-country skiing.

■ **Tours** For Two Loons guides, email billwhiteway@sympatico.ca. Fort Henry costs \$C10-\$C13. See forthenry.com. Wheelers Maple Products Pancake House and Sugar Camp is a 90-minute drive from Kingston. See wheelersmaple.com.

■ **Tip** Buy a Canada-Australia phone card from a newsagent - \$C5 for a 110-minute card, \$10 for 220 minutes. You have to dial a mile of numbers but you'll phone home for the cost of a local call. See canada.travel.



Channel surfing ... a cruiser motors on the Rideau Canal.

Photo: Getty Images