



On Voyageur

CRUISING THE STORIED LOCKS OF THE RIDEAU CANAL BY JOSEPHINE MATYAS

IT'S JUST PAST NINE, and we are running right on time, with inches to spare. Five-and-a-half inches to be exact. That's the wiggle room afforded the *Kawartha Voyageur* once she's snugly slipped into any one of the 47 locks on the Rideau Canal. From my cabin window, I see the stone walls as we float upwards in the lock; then the white clapboard and the green trim of the lock-master's house comes into view.

Our boat is in the very spot where, almost 190 years earlier, Lt.-Col. John By peered through a surveyor's transit, jotting down calculations needed to build his masterpiece, the 202-kilometre Rideau Canal, Ontario's only UNESCO World Heritage Site, connecting Ottawa to Kingston. The gated chamber of a lock works like a set of balancing scales, raising or lowering water levels to allow boats to navigate around obstacles like waterfalls or rapids. On the Rideau Canal, vessels rise 85 metres from the Ottawa River to the summit of the canal at Westport and then descend 50 metres to Lake Ontario at Kingston.

With a size and design specifically built to go through the Rideau Canal, the *Kawartha Voyageur* clocks in at 38 metres in length but shrinks to 33 metres when the hydraulic bow is folded up to fit into the locks. Her three decks (two are connected by elevator) feature 23 sleeping cabins and a maximum of 45 passengers, all served by 13 staff members.

Marc Ackert, our captain for the five-day voyage, is a second-generation owner of Ontario Waterway Cruises, the company that operates the *Kawartha Voyageur*. He's followed in the footsteps of his father, a farmer who achieved

his dream of building a small cruise ship to travel along this historic inland waterway. "I've done more than 1,000 trips and in excess of 40,000 locks over 30 years," counts Ackert. These days, he and his brother, John (also a captain), share duties in the wheelhouse, guiding the craft through the system of locks, rivers and lakes. "What's so unique about this trip is how it's divided: two days on the upper river section and then two days on lakes. There's so much geographical diversity."

The sun is high in the sky as we glide south out of Long Island Locks where the hand-cut stones of the dam hold back 42 kilometres of river. The air is still and warm, the waters are calm. Several passengers climb up to the top sundeck to watch the world go by. Others sit in the second level lounge –

there's a jigsaw puzzle on the go, and the newshounds are savouring the day's papers.

Of course, the stakes were considerably higher when Col. By was charged with building the canal. After the War of 1812, it was clear that the St. Lawrence River – Britain's only supply route between Montreal and the Great Lakes – was vulnerable to attack. But by the late 1800s, the Rideau Canal had lost its military significance and, soon after, surrendered its commercial use to the expanding railway. Pleasure boating followed, and the canal blossomed as a recreational waterway.

The stonemasons who built the canal route stayed and built the historic villages along the Rideau – Merrickville, Burritts Rapids and Smiths Falls all flourished at the lock stations. Blockhouses and heritage buildings have been transformed into Parks Canada museums, telling the history of British North America and the building of the canal.

The *Kawartha Voyageur* always docks overnight at one of the lock stations, so we never miss scenery, and it creates the perfect opportunity for a late afternoon stroll. There's always something going on in the evening – a bocce tournament dockside, a film about Col. By, or an interpretive talk by a local naturalist. The meals are based on many Ackert family recipes and are served dining room-style, with a seat-where-you-please approach that encourages fellow passengers to trading stories of grandchildren, travels and careers. There are shopping stops and exploring local museums at Merrickville, Smiths Falls and Westport.

"Col. By was very consistent ... and I thank him," laughs Ackert. "I've been through a thousand times but I'm still amazed at how this place was built."

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