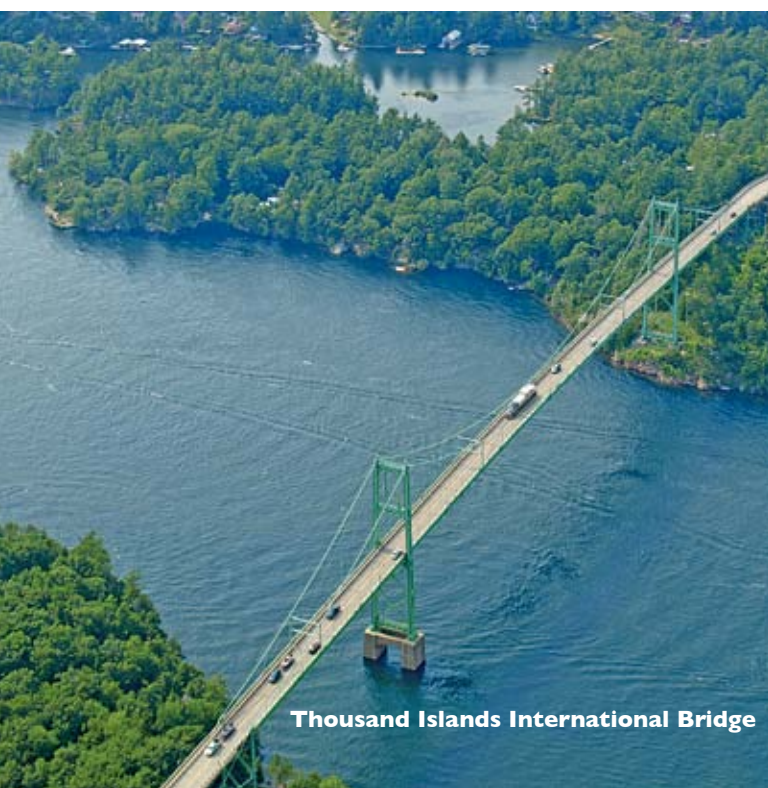


destinations

The Natural Beauty of the THOUSAND ISLANDS

Story by Josephine Matyas and Craig Jones
Photos by Josephine Matyas



Thousand Islands International Bridge



Thousand Islands National Park

Our summers are full. Craig's workdays as a musician are spent on stage, not behind the wheel of our Roadtrek 210. Most of our long distance trips take place in fall through spring, before the bandstand comes calling. That doesn't mean we don't yearn to load up our camper van and explore summertime destinations. Sometimes – when we crave a road trip fix – living in one of the most beautiful parts of Canada means we don't need to look much beyond our own backyard.

One of our favourites is an easy tour through the Thousand Islands region following a circle around the Ontario and New York state sides of the St. Lawrence River, with crossings at two international bridges. It's an RV-friendly driving route showcasing panoramas of natural beauty and glimpses into the opulent lifestyles of the Gilded Age. Scattered across the region are parks and waterways, islands with mid-Victorian mansions where the wealthy hobnobbed on their getaways from city life, small town theatre, cruise boat and helicopter tours, fishing and boating, museums, and historic sites. And there are campgrounds to suit every rig, from compact towables to Class As with all the bells and whistles. This 285 km route is one you could do in a day or putter about for a week, to really drink in the best of the parklands and the waterway.

The Thousand Islands have long drawn people to their magical shorelines. Originally this land was sacred to the Iroquois, who called it "The Garden of the Great Spirit." Later, American Loyalists displaced from the Eastern seaboard settled on the northern side, clearing forests to create farmland. And while the name may suggest a thousand islands, the tally is actually 1,864 (a patch of land must be above water 365 days a year and support a living tree to make the official count). Twenty-one islands make up Parks Canada's Thousand Islands National Park. (www.parkscanada.gc.ca/ti)

The geography is dominated by the Frontenac Arch Biosphere, a tree-blanketed, finger-like ridge of ancient granite that connects the rugged Canadian Shield to the Adirondack Mountains. This region has been recognized as a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve, and has been nicknamed the "ancient backbone of North America" (to the Mohawk it's "The Bones of the Mother"). Long ago, successive glaciers eroded the mountaintops, compressing the landscape before finally melting. Once-towering peaks are now knobby outcrops of land surrounded by water: the Thousand Islands.



Charleston Lake Provincial Park



Rockport

The Thousand Islands: Ontario

Long before roads, the St. Lawrence River was the highway to the interior wilderness. During the 1920s prohibition era, the maze of channels was a quick route for speedboats loaded with illegal hooch making quick runs from Canada to the United States. These days a popular (and legal) way to get on the water is aboard one of the scenic boat cruise tours leaving from Gananoque, Rockport or Ivy Lea — you can select from a variety of routes and tour lengths. Bring along identification (for stops at U.S. ports, a passport is required).

The small town of Gananoque – one of the gateways to the Thousand Islands – made a sensible starting point for us to load up on groceries, visit the local RV dealer and do a little sightseeing. From spring through fall, this town's Thousand Islands Playhouse offers top-notch theatre and concerts. The best part of the



Riverside town of Clayton



Kring Point State Park

Thousand Islands is getting out onto the St. Lawrence River, so at the town waterfront we rented kayaks from 1000 Islands Kayaking and explored some of the islands close to shore (we packed a picnic lunch and took along binoculars for a little birding). Just a few minutes north of town we hopped aboard a helicopter for a heart-stopping bird's-eye view of the islands. (www.1000islandstourism.com)

This is our backyard, so we knew enough to forego busy Highway 401 and hop onto the scenic eastbound Thousand Islands Parkway hugging the river's shoreline. About a half-hour north of the international bridge exit is the excellent Charleston

Lake Provincial Park – in the quieter fall camping season we found our choice of campsites. Charleston Lake is known for solitude, interpretive hiking trails, spectacular fall colours and a calm, deep lake that is excellent for fishing and boating. There's a mix of serviced and un-serviced sites and we opted for dry camping as our Roadtrek coach battery easily meets our basic needs on a day's charge (switching our interior lights over to LED bulbs has helped). There's nothing like falling asleep to the sound of a loon and waking in the morning to the tapping of a pileated woodpecker. (www.ontarioparks.com)

A little further along the Parkway, the Parks Canada Visitor Centre at Mallorytown Landing is an excellent spot to learn about Thousand Islands geology and ecology. At the tiny spit of land called Contemplation Point are two Parks Canada signature red Adirondack chairs – perfectly situated to gaze over the river. Just before the Thousand Islands Parkway ends – and merges with Highway 401 – is the new Skywood Eco Adventure, a treetop trekking, aerial games and zip lining course.

The centuries-old town of Brockville takes its name from Sir Isaac Brock – a British Army officer known for his heroics in the War of 1812 – and was the first incorporated city in Upper Canada. The new 27,000-sq ft Aquarium is a multimedia, interactive discovery centre built to explore the wonders of the Thousand Islands unique history, culture and ecosystems. There are shipwreck remains, touch tanks, rope courses that recreate climbing a ship's rigging, hands-on robotics and an underwater observation bubble. Brockville's newest attraction is the restoration of Canada's First Railway Tunnel – the historic tunnel was a major engineering accomplishment in its time, completed 21 years before construction on the Canadian Pacific Railway even began! (www.brockvilletourism.com)

The Thousand Islands: New York

We crossed to the United States over the Ogdensburg-Prescott International Bridge, a 2.4-km suspension span connecting Ontario and New York State. Once over we switched directions and began our journey west, staying on the excellent Great Lakes Seaway Trail, a National Scenic Byways signposted route. There were many pullout spots for a picnic or picture taking and many campgrounds – both private and state parks – along the riverside. This is War of 1812 country and we took time to read the plaques explaining the history of battles, shipwrecks and skirmishes.

The go-to destination for shopping, catching a cruise boat tour or dining out is the popular tourist hub of Alexandria Bay. It was a little too busy for our taste (a summertime shuttle takes visitors between a parking lot on the village edge and the James Street heart of downtown) but we did enjoy seeing the vintage-style Uncle Sam Boat Tours, the view of Boldt Castle and the retro signs on several downtown restaurants. (www.alexbay.org)

We pushed on to the west, overshooting the exit for the bridge back to Canada and spent a perfect afternoon in the tidy, beautiful riverside town of Clayton. Designed for strolling, Clayton is filled with handsome architecture along leafy side streets, and specialty shops like River Rat Cheese (excellent aged cheddars) and St. Lawrence Spirits Distillery, which produces craft spirits including un-aged 80-proof moonshine. Boaters are drawn to the town's docks and to the internationally recognized Antique Boat Museum, celebrating its 50th year in operation with exhibits on powerboat racing and a collection of more than 300 antique and classic boats. (www.1000islands-clayton.com)

The final crossing of our short journey was homeward over the Thousand Islands Bridge, five spans of bridge

covering 14 km with some of the prettiest views over the clusters of islands below. But halfway across, we couldn't resist a final night of camping at Wellesley Island State Park, on the island of the same name. This is one of our favourite campgrounds close to our hometown of Kingston. We love the park's Minna Anthony Commons Nature Center, with its seasonal butterfly house and miles of hiking trails, including one wheelchair-accessible trail. The large campground has 414 sites, many with hook-ups and some with direct water access. Like Ontario's provincial parks to the north, autumn is a quieter time and we had our choice of excellent sites. (www.nysparks.com)

Coming to the end of a road trip often fills us with mixed emotions – it's nice to be back home but we love our life on the road. Luckily for us, this Thousand Islands circle tour is close enough that anytime we feel the pull of the river and the road, we can pack up and be on our way. **RV**

Writer Josephine Matyas and writer/musician Craig Jones travel with their dog, Eleanor Rigby, in a Class B Roadtrek 210 Popular. Their upcoming book – a travel guide to the blues – will be published in early 2018. Learn more at www.travelswithrigby.com.

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