

## Locks, docks and one cozy houseboat

**On the eve of the Rideau Canal's 175th birthday, ADAM BISBY cruises down Canada's latest World Heritage contender -- and finds that crossing the Narrows can be an extreme sport**

ADAM BISBY, *Globe and Mail* (Copyright)

AUGUST 23, 2006

I have never climbed Kilimanjaro. I have yet to hike the Inca Trail. But one of my recent travel experiences may end up topping them all: Last month, I successfully navigated the Narrows Lock on Eastern Ontario's Rideau Canal -- at the helm of a houseboat.

It was no mean feat. On board the 40-foot-long SMR Cataraqi were six of my closest relatives: my wife, parents, sister, brother and sister-in-law. On shore, meanwhile, several dozen locals were seated on lawn chairs and beer coolers, intent on admiring the waterway's many fine vessels, and teasing neophytes on rented houseboats. And it didn't help that beyond the fundamentals of thrust and steering, I had no idea what I was doing. Needless to say, the pressure was on.

My run-in with the Narrows took place during a three-day, 40-odd-kilometre houseboat jaunt between the towns of Smiths Falls and Westport. The family reunion was intended to celebrate my father's birthday -- after all, a canal that's turning 175 next year seemed a fitting destination for a man who was about to hit 60. Other selling points: None of us had been houseboating before, my dad loves anything that floats, and Smiths Falls was a convenient base for all of us. Last but not least, I wanted to see for myself why this 202-kilometre-long waterway is vying for World Heritage Site status, with UNESCO officials slated to visit the area next month.

We met on a sunny Thursday afternoon at the main dock of Waterway Get-A-Way Houseboat Vacations, where four similar craft bobbed next to a small wharf. Jim Barber, the company's jovial "boarding instructor," gave us a speedy but thorough tour of the vessel's amenities and safety features, and demonstrated techniques for launching and docking. We then took a short spin upstream, testing the limits of the boat's speed (around 15 kilometres and hour) and manoeuvrability (like a blue whale on wheels).



On further inspection, our vessel seemed spacious enough for lounging, but a bit cramped for sleeping. The flat roof, bow and stern decks offered ample sunbathing territory, and the bathroom, kitchen and dining room were comfortable and well-equipped. But the compact double bunks, fold-down couchette and dining-table-cum-twin-bed made the "sleeps six-to-eight" premise appear hopeful at best.

Luckily, we had packed a dome tent, which was quickly erected on the roof. With our beds squared away, we headed into "Chocolate Town Canada" for dinner at a suggested Chinese restaurant. (As we later discovered, the recommendation was for Smiths Falls' *other* Chinese restaurant. At Lotus House, the server's zeal for efficiency -- confirmed when she yelled "You will order now!" -- paved the way for a meal that was diplomatically described by my dad as "adequate." Next time I'm in Smith's Falls, I plan to dine at its famed Hershey Chocolate Shoppe.)

We were the only houseboaters departing the following morning, so the bay was peaceful and the water flat as glass. Above us, the occupants of a man-made osprey nest stretched their wings, so we followed suit by firing up the good ship Cataraqi's 50-horsepower, high-thrust outboard and pulling cautiously onto the Rideau Canal.

Sporting his new knock-off captain's hat, my dad immediately manned the top-side helm as we cruised west along the winding waterway leading to Poonamalie Lock. With mist rising off the bull-rushes and the Doors' *The End* stuck in my head, I half expected to see Dou Long bridge up ahead.

Whether it was the complete lack of other boats, the windless morning or his innate seamanship, the birthday

boy's first lock passage went off without a ripple. As we pulled away from Poonamalie and glided up an impressively-excavated channel towards Lower Rideau Lake, my dad grinned as only a recent retiree can.

Cruising along narrow channels and passing through locks was pleasant enough, but the houseboat truly came into its own on open water. As we motored across Lower and Big Rideau lakes, we stopped from time to time, throwing anchors, and then ourselves, overboard. We read novels and trashy magazines as we chugged along. We played Scrabble. With deep lake waters below and hot sun above, it was all quite effortless.

As the dinner hour approached -- and the back-deck barbecue and marinating steaks became hard to ignore -- we anchored the *Cataraqui* in a sheltered bay south of Colonel By Island (owned by Parks Canada and named after the Rideau Canal's chief architect). My outdoorsy parents were tempted by the walking trails on shore, but after a long day of doing very little the rest of us were craving a well-deserved aperitif: Strawberry daiquiris.

Trouble was, without hook-ups we were limited to 12-volt battery power, not nearly enough to run the blender I had smuggled aboard. But in a show of camaraderie that typified our lake-cruising experience, a group of Quebecois boaters on a nearby dock let us plug into their small generator, and my brother and I transported the fruity drinks back to the houseboat via canoe. There was much rejoicing.

The next morning, we rolled out of bed -- and straight into the lake -- before cruising away from Colonel By Island and uneventfully passing through the Narrows Lock. Our second full day on the water had a purpose: reaching the picturesque town of Westport, the highest point on the Rideau Canal system.

After 36 boat-bound hours, stretching our legs on Westport's country craft-laden streets provided a welcome change. Lunch on the patio at Remy's pub, overlooking Upper Rideau Lake, was equally agreeable, as were the "road-trip-worthy" Cedar Bridge milkshakes my brother had been touting since the trip's early planning stages.

The hot July afternoon soon drew us back onto the boat and into the middle of the lake, where we jumped off the roof and cavorted with our indispensable candy-striped pool noodles. And it wasn't long before we found another sheltered bay in which to dine, swim and eventually sleep.

Our final day on the water unfolded much like its predecessors -- with one notable exception. When I said that I "successfully" navigated the Narrows, I meant that I succeeded in not sinking the *Cataraqui*, killing or maiming any passengers or bystanders, or seriously damaging the historic lock.

I expertly manoeuvred the houseboat up to the Narrows' pre-entry dock, nodding casually to the fellow boaters who caught our lines and roped us to mooring cleats. The lock opened, several boats cruised past, it all seemed to be going like clockwork. My family seemed content, and I had docked the boat with Peter Blake-like skill. The *Cataraqui*'s fore and aft boat hooks -- wielded nervously during our previous lock passages -- hardly seemed necessary.

It was as we pulled up to the side of the lock that I made a fatal mistake. Thinking we were already roped to dry land, and showboating just a bit, I turned off the motor. But no lines had been fastened yet, and the vessel picked up a surprising head of steam when buffeted by a sudden tailwind.

With no rudder and a dead engine, we drifted at alarming speed toward the closed lock gate. I spun the wheel. Nothing. I turned the ignition key. The engine sputtered and stalled. My dad, captain's hat now askew, lunged across the helm's console à la officer Sulu in *Star Trek* in an effort to regain control.

By now, several lock staff were on the gate with boat hooks pointed at our bow. On shore, the aforementioned bystanders laughed, booed, cheered and yelled not-so-helpful suggestions. Above the din, one command rang out: "For the love of God, put her in full reverse!"

At what felt like the last possible second, the engine sputtered to life, and I immediately did as I was told. But by this time, we were floating diagonally in the middle of the lock, and putting "her" in full reverse brought us nearly parallel with the lock gates. For a few seconds, it looked as if we might get wedged in. But after much

pulling of ropes, pushing with boat hooks and nervous revving of the motor, we finally came to rest.

I walked out of the cabin onto the foredeck to a smattering of sarcastic applause, waved to the crowd, and slumped into a deck chair. Needless to say, another daiquiri would have come in handy.

A few minutes later, as we motored out of the lock -- with my dad back at the helm -- I asked a lock staffer if my debacle was the worst he'd seen this year.

"No," came the answer.

"But how does it rank?" I pursued.

"Well," he replied, boat hook still at the ready, "maybe two this year were worse."

Exploring the scenic and historic Rideau Canal on a houseboat with my family: \$1,000. The third-worst passage of the Narrows Lock in 2006: Priceless.

## **Pack your bags**

### **GETTING THERE**

The main wharf for Waterway Get-A-Way is in Smiths Falls, a 3½-hour drive northeast of Toronto. The town can also be reached by bus and rail.

### **RIDEAU CANAL HOUSEBOATS**

**Waterway Get-A-Way Houseboat Vacations:** 1-800-280-9390; <http://www.waterwaygetaway.com>.

Three-day "weekend" rental rates start at \$900 for a 36-foot boat. Weekly rates start at \$1,395. Gas fill-up and sewage removal costs around \$100.

### **WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK**

**Remy's pub:** 45 Main St., Westport, Ont.; 613-273-8182. Well-executed pub grub and a perfect patio.

#### **Cedar Bridge ice cream:**

20 Main St., Westport; 613-273-2841. "Road trip worthy milkshakes" live up to their billing.

**Lotus House:** 12 Main St. W.; 613-283-2777. This greasy Chinese eatery is well-meaning, but best avoided.

### **RECOMMENDED READING**

*Rideau Waterway* (second edition); by Robert Legget, University of Toronto Press, 1986.**MORE INFORMATION**

#### **Friends of the Rideau:**

<http://www.rideaufriends.com>.

**Rideau Canal National Historic Site of Canada:** [www.pc.gc.ca/lhn-nhs/on/rideau/index\\_e.asp](http://www.pc.gc.ca/lhn-nhs/on/rideau/index_e.asp).