



The Best of Both Worlds

Ontario's Niagara-on-the-Lake offers visiting boaters a wealth of attractions, not to mention the advantage of plying Lake Ontario and the Niagara River.

BY MARK STEVENS

IT'S EARLY IN THE MORNING, and cats' paws crisscross the surface of the Niagara River, ruffled by wind that whispers in the towering oaks and maples on shore. Those trees shade gracious homes nearly two centuries old; they shelter cobblestone streets where history lives on.

Weather lurks above the horizon line, but for now the rain holds off as skipper Tony Chisholm turns a 24-foot Pursuit appropriately named *Pursuit of Happiness* to port toward Lake Ontario.

We pass the white lighthouse at the Niagara-on-the-Lake Sailing Club dock, the rustic clapboard clubhouse. We glide past the palisades of Fort George where, high overhead, the red-white-and-blue Union Jack flag flutters and flaps.

The ripples have flattened; the waves from the lake don't reach this far. And it is the most peaceful morning you could possibly experience.

The boat slices through waters, now glittering as the sun tries to push through the clouds. The river takes a gentle turn, and Niagara-on-the-Lake falls away behind our stern. The fort is gone, the lake but a memory.



Niagara-on-the-Lake is a must-add destination to any Great Lakes boater's summer cruising list. Come see why it's earned the nickname "the prettiest town in Canada."

We travel between twin bluffs, lush and green, ridges dominated by a cacophony of foliage. A smattering of cottages hunkers down at water's edge. High above, mansions offer up breath-taking views to their residents.

The river meanders lazily south, and now we see only leaden skies, precipitous emerald slopes and water.

The river turns again. Her mood has changed. The waters grow agitated. Tony throttles back and we drift downriver.

"Now things pick up."

He throttles up. The waters grow frenetic. The river has narrowed, and the weight of humanity, gone for three or four nautical miles, is felt again.

But we go no further.

"My GPS stops here," says Chisholm. "Upstream from here, and you're either a jet boat or crazy."

Back at Niagara-on-the-Lake our berth awaits.

In a short hour we've plied the waters of one of the Great Lakes and we've negotiated the navigable section of one of North America's best-known rivers.

"But it's not just that," says Chisholm, nodding toward the lake as we turn to port and pass the opening for Niagara-on-the-Lake Sailing Club.

"You've got the lake, and you've got the river. It's the best of both worlds."

And but one of a multitude of attractions that makes Niagara-on-the-Lake a must-do port of call for any Great Lakes boater.

RIVER AND LAKE

Niagara-on-the-Lake is a historical showpiece, a ransom of fascinating architecture, a cultural landmark, a place where museums, galleries, gift shops and boutiques abound. The RiverBrink Art Museum is an experience not to be missed. Here you will find an extraordinary collection of fine art, sculpture and antiques displayed in a mansion on the banks of the Niagara River.

The town also boasts a wealth of fine dining options, its own fort and one of the world's best professional theatre companies. And wineries galore. This year marks the 60th annual Niagara Wine Festival, September 16-25. The event offers winery tours and tastings, Niagara cuisine, wine seminars, concerts, live entertainment and more.

"And then you've got the Falls," says Chisholm.

For this natural wonder roars scant miles upstream.

At the Falls, one-fifth of the entire world's supply of fresh water plummets over the lip of the Niagara Escarpment. The American Falls is much smaller in area. Including Bridal Veil it's just over 1,000 feet long. On the Canadian side—at Horseshoe Falls—waters go

If you're looking for a mixture of calm and culture, Niagara-on-the-Lake is the perfect Canadian getaway.

Navigating NIAGARA

★ If you don't know these waters, make sure you order *Lakeland Boating's Ports O' Call Cruising Guide* to Lake Ontario, available through The Nautical Mind Bookstore. Call **800-463-9951** or visit nauticalmind.com.

★ For navigation purposes, you also can purchase Canadian Hydrographic Charts from The Nautical Mind Bookstore, nauticalmind.com. Chart 2207 gives a broader perspective on western Lake Ontario; Chart 2043 gives Niagara approaches and the lower part of the river.

★ Niagara-on-the-Lake Sailing Club takes phone reservations and offers a number of transient berths, depending on seasonal dock vacancy. Call **905-468-3966**.

★ For tourist information specific to Niagara-on-the-Lake, visit niagaraonthelake.com.

★ For a bigger picture of area attractions, visit tourismniagara.com; additional information about Ontario ports of call is available through ontariotravel.net.

★ Arrange a shuttle from Niagara-on-the-Lake to the Falls by visiting 5-0taxi.com, or call **905-685-5464**.

★ Guided winery tours are available through niagaraworldwinetours.com, grapeandwinetours.com and others.

★ For bike rentals or tours, contact Niagara Wine Tours International (800-680-7006; niagaraworldwinetours.com) or Zoom Leisure Bikes (866-811-6993, zoomleisure.com).



Continue west and make landfall at Port Dalhousie, boasting period charm, lots of restaurants and bars. Or berth at Fifty-Point in the confines of the natural wonders of a conservation area.

But you probably won't want to leave Niagara-on-the-Lake once you tie up here where the river meets the lake.

BOATERS AND LANDLUBBERS

On Clifton Hill, ground zero of the Canadian side of the Falls, a street splattered in neon falls gently away from the crest of the Niagara Escarpment to the lip of the gorge, offering a good view of the Canadian Falls, and a great view of the American Falls.

Around one corner the roars of dinosaurs assail you as you go for a hole-in-one at a mini-golf course. A Ferris wheel spins above an arcade where bells and whistles and beeps offer up a soundtrack that competes with the pounding pulse of rock emanating from a beer garden across the street. Then there are the fast food restaurants and ice cream parlors, jostling each other to waylay throngs of people cascading down Clifton Hill as inexorably as the water cascades over the Falls.

Niagara-on-the-Lake is as different from the Falls as boaters are from landlubbers.

Here on the main street people sip afternoon tea on the white-railed terrace of the Prince of Wales Hotel, circa 1864, serenaded by the clip-clop of horse hooves drawing carriages to the Historical Museum.

into freefall from 175 feet along a precipice more than 2,500 feet long. Six hundred thousand gallons of water course over the Canadian Falls each second.

That's a lot of water—and cruising ground for the "Maid of the Mist," one of the most exhilarating boat rides you can take.

Imagine the most confused seas you've ever encountered. Add a couple of nasty line squalls for good measure. Then be thankful you're merely a passenger. Then again, if you have an ounce of boater's blood in you, you're going to find this rollercoaster ride right to the base of the falls one of the highlights on your float plan.

And that's just the river.

Back at Lake Ontario you can see the skyline of Canada's biggest city 25 nautical miles due north. Roughly nine miles west of here is the opening of the Welland Canal.



The Niagara Historical Society has been collecting and preserving the history of Niagara-on-the-Lake for more than 100 years. Tour the museum, or take one of its guided walking tours and enjoy the beauty of this historic town. Discover haute cuisine, restaurants and explore the many shops.

Now celebrating its 50th season, the Shaw Festival presents musicals and classic plays by George Bernard Shaw (the playwright who penned "Pygmalion," upon which "My Fair Lady" was based) and his contemporaries in multiple venues.

Go for a matinee, then stroll the streets, admiring prime examples of Gothic, Edwardian and Georgian architecture. Stop beside an Italianate mansion, and you'll feel like you're in a movie set.

Then you walk into the churchyard of St. Mark's, and you sense a dark side. A grave memorializes the failed journey of a crew who voyaged here from Toronto more than a century ago and perished just off the shore.

"They were all built around the same time," says Chisholm, wearing a different hat now—docent for a historical walking tour.

WAR AND PEACE

Fort George staffer Dan LaRoche points toward Youngstown, a sleepy little burg on the New York side of the river. Nowadays, the vista is peaceful and idyllic.

"It was early in the morning." He points to one rise, now shaded by gentle trees. "Cannon from there opened fire. They pounded the fort here into rubble." He turns, gestures at the blockhouse, the officers' quarters, the palisades and cannon, the powder magazine. "It's all been rebuilt. The magazine was the only thing left standing."

Down at the Niagara-on-the-Lake Golf Club (incidentally one of North America's oldest) are the ruins of a fort right beside a fairway. Just west of there, early on a May morning in 1813 the Americans invaded. They occupied the town until December.

I remembered, on our upriver cruise, seeing a monument rising up from the ridge at Queenston Heights near the bridge. It was the scene of a bloody battle. It is the final resting place of Canada's hero of the war—General Isaac Brock.

This region is today a vision of peace and serenity. Two hundred years ago it was buffeted by the winds of war.

An astonishing one-fifth of the world's fresh water supply pours over the Niagara Escarpment (opposite, top). The "Maid of the Mist" tour is an exhilarating boat ride, but don't forget to put on that poncho; they don't call it "mist" for nothing (opposite, bottom). Built in 1864, the Prince of Wales Hotel is an evergreen reminder of days gone by in this charming and quaint Canadian town (above).



Galleys Galore

Given the presence of wineries, tourist appeal of the Shaw Festival and the sheer charm of the area's architecture and setting, it's hardly surprising you'll find a whole collection of great restaurants in NOTL.

Elements on the Falls: With an ambience dedicated to the elements, enjoy panoramic views from the second floor of Table Rock Centre. This restaurant offers the closest dining experience you can get to the Canadian falls—less than a hundred yards from the crest. Make reservations for the best seat in the house if you venture upriver to experience Niagara Falls. **6650 Niagara Parkway (Niagara Falls); 905-354-3631.**

Irish Harp Pub: A fairly short walk from your berth at NOTL, the Irish Harp is a traditional pub featuring polished wood and, more important, 14 different brews on tap. The food is pub fare, but very nicely done and reasonably priced. This place is a popular watering hole with the after-theatre crowd, so it can be a fun little side-trip. Been voted Niagara's number one pub with good reason. **245 King Street; 905-468-4443.**

Olde Angel Inn: If you like a bit of history with your beer (and meal) and you're not afraid of ghosts, check out this establishment just off the main street. Built on the foundation of an inn that never survived the war, it is said to be home to the ghost of Captain Swayze. While he no doubt came for the ambience (huge wooden bar, three dining rooms, scarred hardwood floors and fireplace), he probably stayed for the killer crab cakes or lobster ravioli. **224 Regent Street; 905-468-3411.**

Terroir La Cachette: Though it's a bit of a hike out of town (you won't be walking there), this restaurant overlooks the lush vegetation around Four Mile Creek. Boasting wall tapestries, gentle

jazz and Mozart and the impeccable service of a guy named Kevin, this restaurant is a culinary experience you deserve to have at least once in your voyage. Pair a wine that began from nearby grapes with a Plum-stuffed Ontario Pork Tenderloin, and you'll decide it was worth the cab fare. **1339 Lakeshore Road; 905-468-1222.**

Kurts Orchards Farm & Marketplace: The first thing you notice when you enter the great barn-like structure that is the market just outside town is the wealth of spices and sauces and marinades they boast here. It started humbly enough, this establishment, but they now have a shop in town and one in California. At the back is a little deli with fresh sandwiches in home-baked bread and desserts that make your mouth water. It's a must-do lunch stop if you've decided to do a bit of biking on your own. With several acres in a natural setting, they've also got the perfect venue for a picnic. But bring a backpack—you're going to want to bring some sauces back to the boat. **16006 Niagara Parkway.**

Stone Road Grille: Though it can be a bit of a hike from the docks, this place has the highest recommendation of marina manager Ed McIlroy. Lest he be accused of getting kickbacks, we checked it out. He's right. Sort-of artistic ambience with fire engine-red walls and art deco highlights, packed with pre-theatre diners, it's really a bastion of haute cuisine despite its unlikely placement in a non-descript little plaza. Great selection of local wines. Frommer's Niagara has rated it one of the region's best eateries. **238 Mary Street; 905-468-3474.**



Today, Niagara-on-the-Lake is the picture of peace and serenity. Back in 1812, however, that wasn't the case. This region was at war with its neighbor, the United States. Next year marks the 200th anniversary celebration of the War of 1812.

WATER AND WINE

For this river that meets the lake was a strategic stronghold. For this stretch of water marked the prime battleground of the War of 1812.

The story of this area is a saga of water and war.

But it's also a story of wine.

There are 26 wineries here. Discover wineries with individual personalities and fabulous wines. You can find everything from wine tours with cooking classes, to the four-legged vineyard tour at Coyote's Run Estate Winery, where your dog is welcome.

Book a Sip 'n Cycle tour with Niagara Wine Tours International. Cycle past vineyards and orchards along the Niagara River as you enjoy "the prettiest town in Canada." Chauffeured, guided tours also are offered, along with gourmet lunch and dinner packages. You will find other tour companies in the area, including Grapes and Wine Tours.

Inniskillin Winery's Debi Pratt gestures at the long green columns of grapevines that march like invading troops toward a green ridge to the south. "The escarpment and the lake together have created a unique





The microclimate in Niagara-on-the-Lake is perfectly suited for grape-growing. Visitors can find plenty of options to experience Niagara Wine Country.



microclimate. And the soil itself is perfect."

She guides us into a tasting room and continues the lesson. "We're located on the same latitude as the California vineyards, as the finest locations in Europe." She smiles and pours a honey-hued libation into a specially-designed glass.

"But what we are known best for is our ice wine. How can you get more Canadian than that?"

It goes down as smooth as water, as sweet as the grapes themselves.

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

The heavenly brew is still on my mind back at Niagara-on-the-Lake Sailing Club. I'm chatting with marina manager Ed McIlroy, looking out across the river.

He pulls out a chart and provides local expertise on the waters here.

"Rocks come out past Fort Mississauga on this side," he says. "A lot of people have made contact with them, and they're not really well-marked." He points out another spot. "It's shallow over there off the fort on the American side—the Niagara Bar. It can be hard to predict. A lot of silt comes out of the river, so it can build up. You do have to be careful."

He also offers up a weather-eye. "Southwesterlies prevail here. But we're a lee shore in a north blow, and the current out of the river against the surf can create some nasty standing waves. You have to watch that."

He pauses, looking south where the Niagara disappears around a tree-festooned bend.

"But then you can head upriver. If the lake's lumpy, cruise the river. You've actually got the best of both worlds."

I remember the natural wonder of the Falls themselves, the history and the beauty and the sheer breadth of the experiences we've had here. I've filed in my memory bank the sweet syrup of ice wine on my taste buds, the haute cuisine offerings of a congregation of restaurants a quick stroll from the marina.

And I disagree with McIlroy, silently but firmly. It's the best of all possible worlds. ♦



Two Hundred Years of Peace

On a June morning in 1812, the United States declared war on the British colony of Canada. Legend has it British officers at Fort George at Niagara-on-the-Lake and the Americans from Fort Niagara across the river in New York shared drinks and a meal as colleagues that night and awakened next morning as enemies.

Queenston Heights was the scene of a battle in October 1812. Canada's hero, General Isaac Brock, was killed in the battle.

The Americans bombarded Fort George in May 1813 and assaulted Canada from the shores of Lake Ontario just north of town. They held this picturesque village until December, when they retreated, burning the entire place.

It's been 200 years since those dark days. Two hundred years of peace. Beginning as early as January, both sides are ramping up celebrations and commemorations for the next three years here.

HERE ARE SOME HIGHLIGHTS:

For 31 years, the **Battle of Stoney Creek at Battlefield Park** has been reenacted on the anniversary weekend of the battle. It's a fascinating glimpse of history with a bevy of reenactors and special events, from period encampments to fashion shows of period clothing. Make your way west along the shore and berth at Fifty Point Marina. From there, it's a quick taxi ride. Held the beginning of June. battlefieldhouse.ca

One of the best War of 1812 collections—an easy walk from your NOTL berth—can be found at the Niagara Historical Museum, from muskets and uniforms to the hat that, according to legend, graced the coffin of General Brock. **43 Castlereagh Street; niagarahistorical.museum.**

The historical society hosts a **War of 1812 Historical Walking Tour of the town**. But that's just the beginning. From a New Year's gala to special events over the next three years, they've pulled out all the stops. Check out visit1812.com for upcoming celebrations. A must-visit for history buffs is the site 1812niagaraonthelake.ca. It provides a current and updated list of events and a great background on the hostilities themselves.

Fort George was destroyed during the war, but they rebuilt it to reflect barracks life during that time and will be offering a slate of events. "We've got reenactors that come each year," says Dan LaRoche. "And next year, a highlight will be the visit of Tall Ships." For more information specific to the fort, log on to friendsoffortgeorge.ca.

NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE MUSEUMS

RIVERBRINK ART MUSEUM

Features annually changing exhibits from the renowned art collection of Samuel E. Weir, Q.C. as well as outstanding artworks on loan from other Canadian & International collections.



Riverbrink Art Museum
116 Queenston Street,
Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON
www.riverbrink.org | 905-262-4510

Open daily Mid-May through Mid-October.
10:00 am to 5:00 pm
(on the Niagara Parkway halfway
between Niagara Falls &
"Old Town" Niagara-on-the-Lake).



Niagara Historical SOCIETY MUSEUM

Established in 1895, the Niagara Historical Society preserves the rich heritage of Niagara-on-the-Lake through publications, lectures & programs and through the operation of the Museum, which contains one of Ontario's most important local history collections.

OPEN DAILY - ALL YEAR
May-Oct. 10:00 am to 5:00 pm
Nov-April 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm

Niagara Historical Society & Museum
43 Castlereagh Street,
Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON
www.niagarahistorical.museum | 905-468-3912



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