



Travel

Water weave

A canal cruise in Canada is an eclectic voyage along shores steeped in history, where wildlife abounds. **ANDREW HOLMAN** plied the Rideau waterway and marvelled at this engineering feat.

FOR A moment, you can sense the gaze of 1000 eyes peering out from the heavily wooded riverbank as you cruise along in the motorised houseboat. The imagination runs wild. This used to be Iroquois territory, First Nations tribes of hunters, gatherers, traders and protectors of the land.

The final rays of the afternoon sun flicker across the waterway while mirror-like reflections of treed banks grow more subdued as the sun sinks. The chorus of evening starts with the bird calls, from treetop to treetop as if to signify the night watch has begun.

But there are no Indians, no native campfires, dances or smoke signals, no bows or arrows, no tomahawks. Instead, the gaze of 1000 eyes comes from a modern-day Jungle Book – moose and deer, curious and wary; bears woken from their slumber; raccoons; tiny reptiles; busy little chipmunks and amazing bird life. The eyes and noses of squirrels

dart this way and that way, almost in sync, before the creatures scurry up into the canopy of trees. A pile of logs float by – remnants of a dam built by an industrious beaver.

The sound of rustling leaves jolts the imagination further. Then, magnificently, an eagle emerges from the heights, its wings outstretched, its talons sharpened and wide eyes steeled – swooping, striking, then flying off triumphantly with a meal in its grasp.

The houseboat glides a little farther, another wonder seen, another to anticipate along a 202km stretch of this amazing Canadian waterway, which includes 1091 km of

shoreline, 292 islands and scores of towns each with a unique flavour and memories.

Welcome to Rideau Canal, a tapestry of lakes, rivers and man-made canals wonderfully woven into the World Heritage-listed waterway linking historic Kingston in the south to the glorious Canadian capital of Ottawa in the north.



The journey reveals an amazing array of wildlife experiences. A loon, one of the oldest birds in the world and one that will mate for life, dives into the water for its meal, holding its breath for up to six minutes. Ospreys hover, cranes straddle and woodpeckers peck and chip then peck some more.

Along the shoreline, fir trees stand tall and green, contrasting against the reds, oranges and yellows of oaks and maples and the many

Canadian flags that flutter tall and proud, signifying yet another waterside holiday home. Trout, carp and pickerel dart this way and that, mixing with the soothing sound of water lapping at the houseboat. The waters are so crystal-clear, largely cleansed by the freshwater mussels that can each filter 58 litres of water a day. It invites you to swim.

"Great day," says the lockmaster as we sail into his realm. He takes the front rope of the houseboat and helps tie it secure. "Been a busy one," he adds, mentioning that in the peak days some people can be lined up for hours or more waiting for their rite of passage through the network of locks.

The lockmaster could have been from an era long past, but for his modern, khaki Parks Canada uniform. His face is bronzed and wrinkled. His hands tough and calloused, the result of years working the lock system in the same manual way it has been worked since 1852.

The Rideau Canal last year celebrated its 175th anniversary. It is a cultural, historical, eclectic mix of towns, tastes and antiquities, introducing tourists to a new summer dimension to eastern Canada – a great complement to the more acknowledged offerings of ski resorts, maple syrup and Rocky Mountains.

Far from the steamers, and log barges of yesteryear, the canal has become a favourite of modern adventurers, romantics and those seeking solace and relaxation away from stresses of today.

Built by the Brits between 1827 and 1852 as a military corridor for troops and supplies

from Montreal to the naval dockyards of Kingston, the Rideau Canal is a story of engineering greatness, human endeavour, adversity and even despair.

At least 1000 souls succumbed, most to malaria. They now rest in lonely graves many kilometres from their homelands of Ireland, England, France and Scotland, where they had learned their crafts of stonemasonry and building.

Carving canals out of Canadian Shield – one of the hardest granites on Earth – was slow and tiresome, a task of hard labour using explosives, picks, chisels and muscle, so much muscle.

Even project overseer Lieutenant-Colonel

John By, of the Royal Engineers, was charged for misappropriation over the total cost of

the project – 822,000 pounds. It originally had been costed as low as 62,000 pounds. Regardless, the project is now regarded as one of the greatest engineering marvels of the 19th century. The scenic waterway today belies the heartache of all those years ago, its natural and cultural treasures linked by 47 mostly manual locks to overcome hundreds of metres of falling and rising water levels.

You can take a houseboat from Kingston to Ottawa in five days, or paddle a canoe in 10. You can cycle the shoreline or hike the trails, stopping at the hotels and restaurants and resorts to sample a pot roast, a cherry pie, a crisp cooling wine or a soothing ale.

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The journey north begins at Kingston, Canada's second-oldest city (after St John's, Newfoundland), where the St Lawrence River enters Lake Ontario.

It's a two-hour train trip from bustling Toronto and well worth a wander around its quaint 19th century limestone streetscapes, its bistros and shorefront or historic Fort Henry military site, a vital naval defence location since the war of 1812-14 between the U.S. and Great Britain.

But if history is bunk, try a haunted walk, led by lantern-carrying guides who will show the sights and tell shivering tales of haunted student ghettos, ghosts who play organs and appear at stairways or who have come back to haunt the area after their hanging in the old courthouse.

You board the houseboat at Kingston Mills, a settlement built on the timber industry, just north of Kingston. It is here you see the first locks, wrought-iron winches operated by musclepower, a system of levers and gears, sluices and valves and thick lock gates to manipulate water levels.

All lock stations are operated by Parks Canada from mid-May to late October, after which locks are drained and much of the canal is turned over to skating activities.

Where to stop

Jones Falls: One of the most striking locations, with a visitor centre, blacksmith shop and lockmaster's house. Drop a fishing line on Whitefish Lake, near the base of the locks, for a feed of large-mouth bass, northern pike, perch or lake trout. And don't forget to drop into the curved whispering dam, built long before South Australia's Whispering Wall, but only "discovered" by a resourceful Canadian after visiting our Williamstown



structure and returning to see if the concept worked there. At Jones Fall, enjoy a meal, an ale or wine and stay at Shangri-La Lodge, built in the late 1800s.

Chaffey's: In 1820, English immigrant Samuel Chaffey established a milling business at Opinicon. The building of the Rideau Canal required the demolition of Chaffey's mills to make way for the construction of the lock and the dam that converted a maze of swamps into the navigable and picturesque Newboro Lake. Today, Chaffeys Locks is a thriving cottage and tourist community centred around the lock station. At Chaffeys, stop off for a light meal at historic Opinicon Resort, a grand weatherboard building that since the 1870s has served as many things, from family home to boarding house and men's fishing club. Yes, it's the same Chaffey lineage who pioneered irrigation in SA's Riverland.

Newboro: This charming little settlement, once home to hunters, explorers and missionaries, is a proud community with stunning Canadian architecture. Its picnic grounds and resorts provide a welcome stopover for boaters, campers and hikers.

Westport: One of the most picturesque settings along the Rideau, nestled in the heartlands of the Rideau Lakes, with beautiful buildings, tall spires and typical Canadian quaintness. Foley's guesthouse is a grand Victorian home built in 1867 and furnished with lavish antiques, luxury bedrooms and bathrooms and an outstanding view over the Lakes. It was a favourite stopover for Canada's first prime minister,

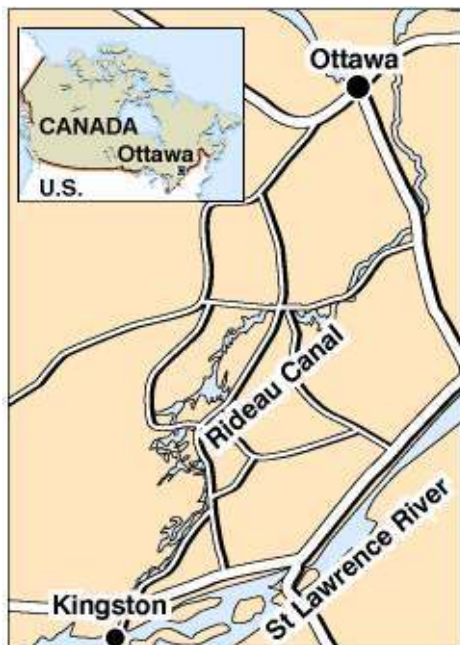
Sir John A. Macdonald, in the 1860s. The hotel next door is a must, with its wide menu and an excellent selection of cocktails.

Perth: This stunning offering has been described as the prettiest town in Ontario, the best place to retire and the greenest town in Ontario. Today, it is a modern community with old-world charm, a living mosaic representing life in rural Ontario during the 1800s. There is a wealth of Canadian history, architecture and culture. Streets are lined with heritage homes. While at Perth, make arrangements to visit nearby Wheelers Maple Farm and Museum for a feed of to-die-for-pancakes, french toast, maple cookies and even maple sausages.

Merrickville: The place of artisans, antiques and curious mustards, spices and homewares, this delightful town is also an ideal place to unwind, taking a stroll along the water's edge or through the backstreets that reveal a wealth of antique offerings and galleries. Sam Jakes Inn specialises in local flavours from butternut squash and goat's cheese tart, to turkey and cranberry sauce, sweet potato and pecan souffle and homemade apple pie and ice cream.

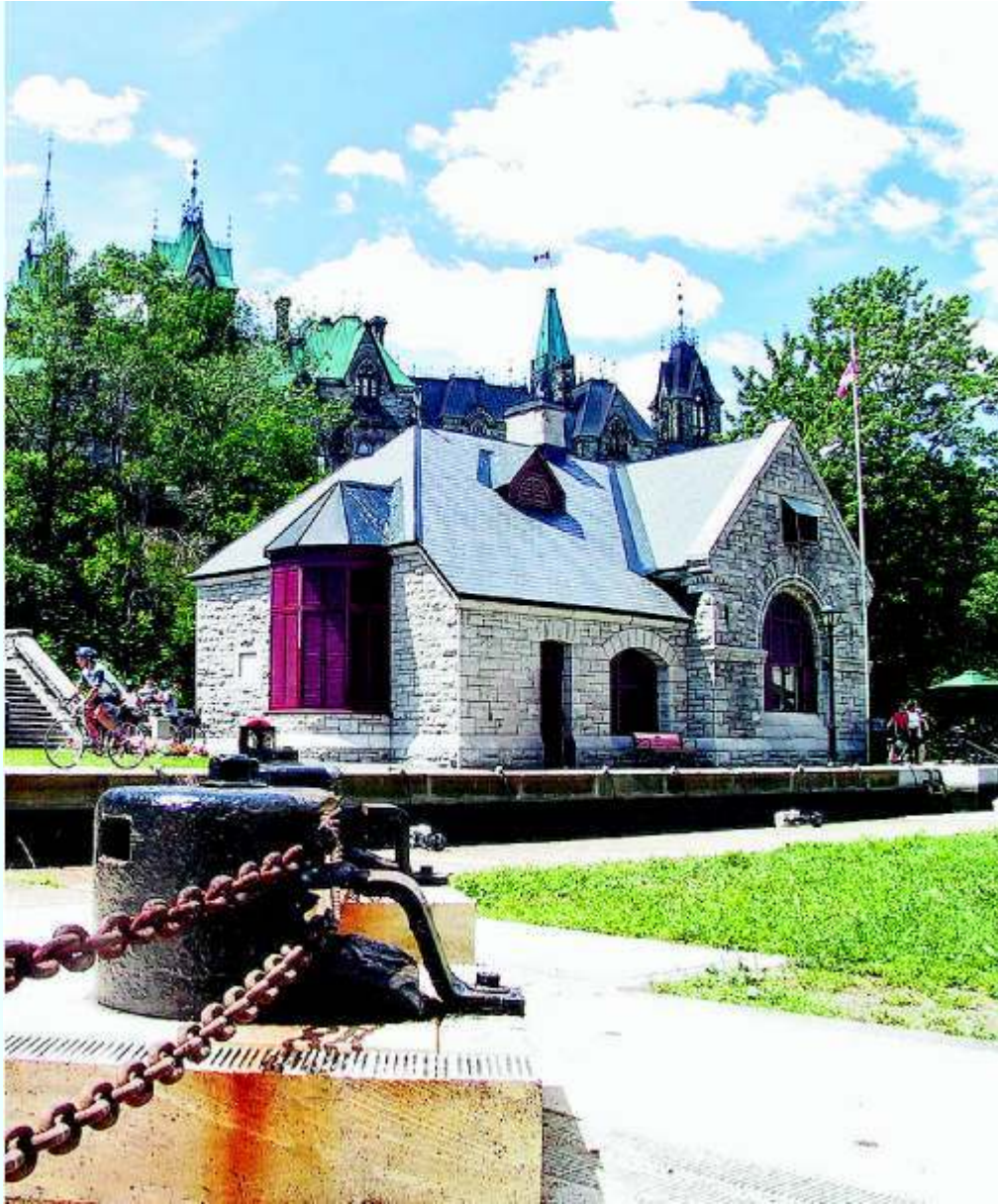
Ottawa: Now this is a story in itself. Ottawa must be one of the most beautiful capital cities in the world. It's the end of the road for the Rideau Canal, or the beginning, depending on your direction of travel. Ottawa last year celebrated 150 years as the capital of Canada. With a population of 1.2 million, it's a hip city with a maze of activities and experiences. But that story will need to be told another time.

The author was a guest of the Canadian Tourism Commission and Ontario Tourism. For more information on travel to Canada, visit www.canada.travel

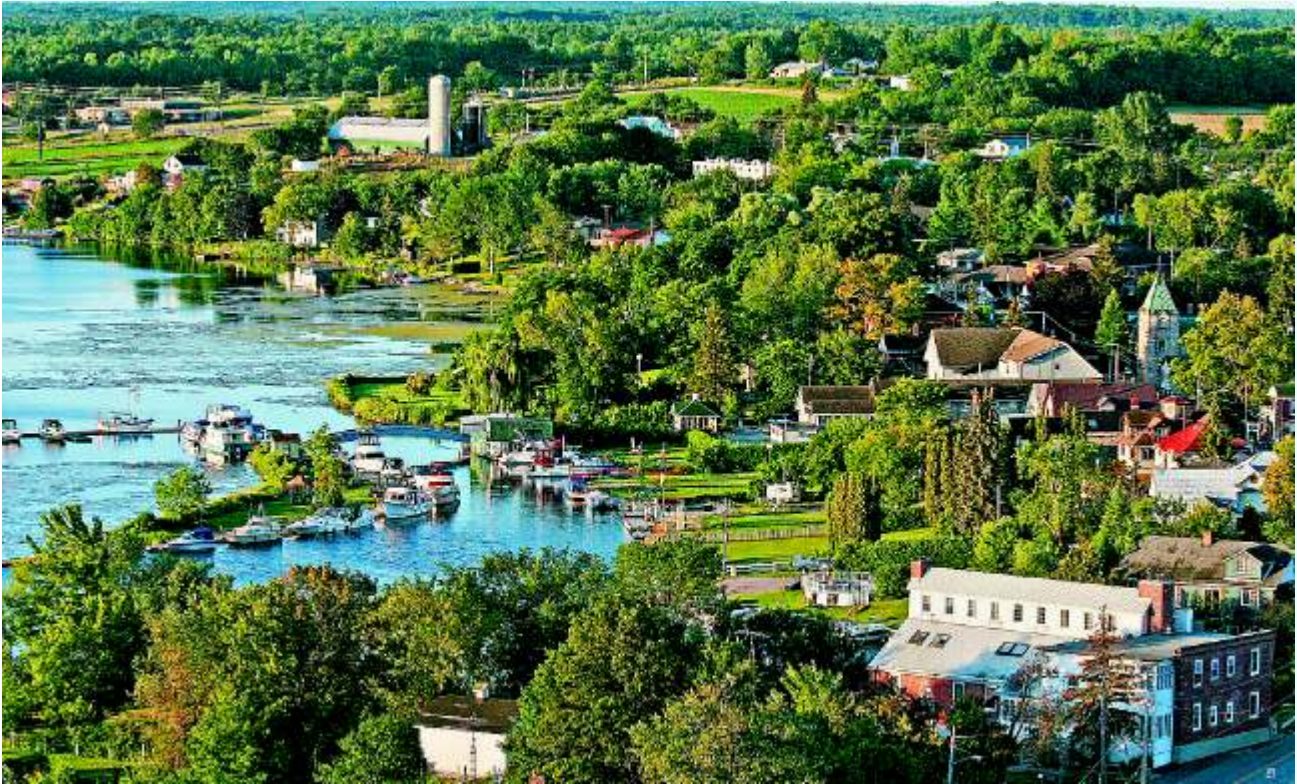


Getting there

Qantas flies daily to LA, with connections to Toronto. Prices start from \$2940 a person ex-Adelaide, plus taxes. Travel by VIA Rail from Toronto to Kingston for the start of the houseboat journey. For details, visit www.viarail.com



End of the road . . . Ottawa Lockstation House, Rideau Canal (Picture Ken Watson/www.rideau-info.com).



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT . . . Ottawa locks in summer (Picture www.rideauheritageroute.ca/en/); Westport from Foley Mountain, Ontario (Picture Ken Watson/www.rideau-info.com); Newboro Locks, Ottawa (Picture www.rideauheritageroute.ca/en/); Jones Falls, Rideau Canal (Picture Ken Watson).

