

## A canal for all seasons

**Lt.-Col. By's wonder of engineering is also a pristine waterway, surrounded by quaint communities brimming with history, mystery and charm, writes Isobel Warren**

February 01, 2007  
**ISOBEL WARREN**

OTTAWA—"The Rideau Canal is Canada's pyramids," lockmaster John Watt enthuses. "It's an engineering marvel."

After a lifetime on the Rideau, the last 18 of them as lockmaster at Davis Lock, Watt is unstinting in his admiration for the planning and construction of the venerable waterway, which celebrates its 175th birthday this year.

But he marvels even more at the grit of the men who built it.

"Imagine these guys," he says. "Thousands of them, mostly Irish and French-Canadian, coming to this wilderness, living in shanties, no protection from the weather, hundreds of them dying of malaria, no construction equipment except picks and shovels, hauling stone from quarries six miles away, bringing clay in wheelbarrows from maybe two miles away."

The 202-kilometre Rideau Waterway comprises 19 kilometres of man-made canals and 47 locks, connecting a network of rivers and lakes from Ottawa to Kingston. Most locks are opened and closed several times daily by strong men cranking massive machinery that dates from the canal's debut in 1832.

Lockmaster since 1989, Watt puts in well over 2,000 hours in the seven-month boating season, working seven days a week. The Rideau is the oldest continuously operating canal in North America and, in its time, the biggest construction project in the British Empire. It employed up to 10,000 stone masons, lumberjacks and labourers (of whom about 1,000 died of malaria), and cost ??800,000 (about \$500 million in today's money). Lt.-Col. John By, who modestly gave his name to Bytown (now Ottawa), was the project's engineering genius. He later faced an inquiry in Britain about overspending and died five years later, never receiving recognition for his work.

But that picture is about to change. As if a 175th birthday party isn't enough, the canal may join the aforementioned pyramids as a UNESCO World Heritage Site – Ontario's first and Canada's 14th. The UNESCO decision is expected about June 30 just when Ottawa will celebrate its 150th birthday as Canada's capital.

From Ottawa to Kingston, the Rideau Route is studded with parties, festivals, concerts, regattas and learned lectures. Every town, village and hamlet along the route will roll out the barrel including Heritage Brewing in Carleton Place which marks the occasion with two new Rideau 175 lagers.

The Rideau was built to provide a vital shipping alternative to the St. Lawrence River which was constantly under threat from Americans still infected with 1812 war fever. Today, it swarms with Americans of a different persuasion, most of them armed with fishing rods or golf clubs.

This sparkling year of celebration is a special treat for Ken Watson, a retired geologist who has made the canal his specialty. He has developed a website that has become the definitive source of information about the canal's history, ecology, geology, archeology, engineering, recreational activities and more. He has written several books about the canal with a new one set for this year.

"It's the mysteries that intrigue me," he says. "For example, there's the mystery of Jones Falls, which was not a waterfall but a mile-long series of rapids, that still exist at the base of the channel. We were able to map it under water and put together the story of how this dam and locks were constructed, and what it all looked like before 1826, the challenges they faced, why those locks were situated in that location."

In fact, the Jones Falls lockstation, with its four locks, a lift of 18 metres and a soaring arched dam, 106 metres long, 19 metres high, is his favourite landmark.

"It's one of the jewels of the Rideau," he commented.

The whole canal is a jewel, with its tranquil lakes and hidden bays, excellent fishing and old-fashioned communities.

"Most people picture the Rideau as a big ditch," says Rideauphile Sue Pike.

"They're shocked when they actually experience this gorgeous, pristine waterway with its big lakes linked by canals, oozing history and mystery and charm."

It's true. Whether you drive the Rideau Route – which skirts the canal from Ottawa to Kingston – or cruise it in a boat, hike it or bike it, you'll encounter lovely heritage towns, pleasant hotels and B&Bs, good food and friendly folks, and oodles of music, museums, artists and artisans.

We began our journey in Ottawa where the city's oldest building, the canal commissariat, built in 1827, and flanked by the first eight locks, is now a fascinating museum. We sought in vain the ghost that's said to haunt Watson's Mill at Manotick and settled for a bag of made-on-the-premises stone-ground flour instead.

We toured the canal museum at Smiths Falls and nipped over to Perth to view the Tay Canal, built by local businessmen after their town was bypassed by the Rideau Canal. We stopped at Westport to admire the spectacular view of lake and forest from atop Spy Rock, once used by Ojibway to send smoke signals. We cruised briefly aboard Cuddles, a restored 10-metre lobster boat while Capt. Lance Jervis-Read, told tales of the canal's unique personalities, past and present, and wowed us with his splendid uniform, a replica of an English naval captain's outfit of 1832 – except for the sneakers.

"Wellingtons just don't work on a boat," he explained.

But we lost our hearts to Merrickville, a town rich in art, history and hospitality. Our guide was Gary Clarke, innkeeper at the venerable Sam Jakes Inn ([www.samjakesinn.com](http://www.samjakesinn.com)), built in 1861.

A prime mover behind the town's historic preservation and its delightful mix of artisans and specialty shops, he was named Canada's Tourism Man of the Year in 1988, the same year he bought the derelict inn and set about restoring it to its original state.

He also rallied local business people to celebrate the town's history by restoring heritage buildings and attracting artists, artisans and shopkeepers who have transformed the town into a walkable delight.

At Jones Falls, we stopped by the Hotel Kenney ([www.hotelkenney.com](http://www.hotelkenney.com)) which also marks a landmark birthday year – its 130th. Proprietor Joe Kenney's great-grandfather established a depot on the site in 1877, serving canal ships and local farmers receiving or shipping goods. Among its illustrious guests over the years were U.S. president William Taft to TV writer Rod Serling (*The Twilight Zone*) to a Cleveland couple who honeymooned there and returned every summer for 52 consecutive years.

In Ottawa, an easy walk from Parliament Hill and the first eight locks of the canal is another heritage inn, the Carmichael ([www.carmichaelinn.com](http://www.carmichaelinn.com)), with antiques-furnished rooms and a well-appointed spa. At the opposite end of the route is the Green Inn ([www.greenwoods-inn.ca](http://www.greenwoods-inn.ca)), smack between downtown Kingston and the final locks at Kingston Mills.

Finally, there's Kingston's Old Fort Henry which, like the waterway it was built to protect, was such a successful deterrent that it was never attacked. But this summer, like the Rideau, it will be invaded by hordes of tourists, eager to view its colourful ceremonies and handsome cadets.

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**Isobel Warren** is a Newmarket, Ont.-based freelancer. Her trip was subsidized by the Rideau Heritage Route Tourism Association [www.rideauheritageroute.ca](http://www.rideauheritageroute.ca) .