

Six St. Lawrence outings

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Here are Victoria Rose Inn owner Susanne Richter's top six ways to spend a day that starts in Gananoque:

1. River ramble: Start by taking a ferry to Howe Island, connected to the mainland by cable ferries at either end.

"Hop on for the crossing, drive the length of the island and return to the mainland via the other ferry at the west end of the island," says Susanne.

Continue west on Highway 2 toward Kingston, where you pick up a \$15 gourmet boxed lunch at Pan Chancho (shown left). Next, head to the Wolfe Island ferry -- its upper deck has spectacular views and is the perfect picnic spot, says Susanne.

Once on Wolfe Island, follow the signs for the ferry to the United States, enjoying the 10-minute drive across the island.

"Highway 95 leads directly to Horne's Ferry, the only privately owned international ferry in the region, which has been running since 1802," says Susanne. Take the ferry to Cape Vincent, New York. "Steeped in history and noteworthy architecture, Cape Vincent, New York has a strong French heritage since Napoleon Bonaparte once planned to seek refuge there," says Susanne.

Her must-sees in Cape Vincent include a French Festival held on the second Saturday in July, Cape Vincent Historical Museum in an elegant stone building, the aquarium in a restored gristmill and Tibbetts Point Lighthouse, a museum and hostel on the point where Lake Ontario meets the St. Lawrence River.

"Ready for an ice-cream? Stop at Aubrey's ice cream window, located just opposite the village green," advises Susanne. "And be sure to take a peek at Belle Epoque just next door."

Owner Susan Mahrer brings a fresh load of eclectic jewelry, collectibles and clothing direct from her New York City home every summer."

Next, follow Route 12E about 25 minutes east to Clayton, home of the Antique Boat Museum and the Thousand Islands Decoy, Muskie and History Museum. Then continue east on Route 12E to the Thousand Islands Bridge. "For a stunning overview of the area, stop halfway at the Thousand Islands Skydeck." Finally, follow the Thousand Islands Parkway back west to the sign for Shipman's Lane/Ivy Lea Marina, just past the village of Ivy Lea, for dinner at the Captain's Table. "Following a day of river exploration, enjoy dinner overlooking the water in the newly renovated dining room -- still one of the area's best kept secrets. Features include Quebec lamb, Ontario duck and Alberta sterling silver beef, with a great selection of wines from around the world."

2. Beach party

"What's summer without sun, sand and a new suit?" asks Susanne Richter.

This day starts with a manicure and pedicure for just \$38 at 1000 Nails in Gananoque. "Where but in the islands does an esthetics shop welcome walk-ins?" asks Susanne. "1000 Nails delivers quick, thorough manicures and pedicures in a no-fuss setting, complete with your choice of the latest OPI colours. The best part -- a proper pedicure or manicure will take less than 35 minutes."

Freshly groomed, take the Thousand Islands Parkway east to the International Bridge, then follow the signs to Alexandria Bay, New York. "Wander through this bustling summer town, and find your way to the outside deck of the Dock of The Bay Restaurant, located at the Municipal Docks. Sit with an ice-cold drink, and gaze directly across the bay at Van's Sun-n-Fun Shoppe (20 Sisson St.). The gas pumps are a front for an amazing selection of designer bathing suits, located in the dim interior behind the cash register -- truly a hidden treasure."

Next, follow Route 12 (The Seaway Trail) to Cape Vincent. Board Horne's Ferry to Wolfe Island in downtown Cape Vincent (if time permits, grab drinks and snacks for the beach at Aubrey's General Store). Once on Wolfe Island, head to Big Sandy Bay. Its beach/dune complex is reached via a 1.3-kilometre walking trail through wetlands and woodlands. "Be sure to bring along water or other drinks and snacks, as no canteen is available on this pristine stretch of undeveloped beach," says Susanne.

After your beach time, take the Wolfe Island ferry to Kingston -- but before you depart, says Susanne, "stop in at Fargo's for that old-time general store experience (paper bags for penny candy are kept behind the counter), and don't miss the Wolfe Island Bakery just down the street -- great homemade gingersnaps and Red River Bread too good to resist."

If you've got time for one more beach, stop at Grass Creek Park, on Highway 2 between Kingston and Gananoque. "And don't miss Paula's Chick Chip Truck on the way," says Susanne. "It has the best fries in the islands."

3. Cool island culture

"Feel what it was like way back when," says Susanne. This day starts at Arthur Child Heritage Museum of the Thousand Islands, on the St. Lawrence River in Gananoque, next to the Gananoque Boat line docks. "Be transported through 10,000 years of history, from the formation of the islands to the present," says Susanne. "The building is reminiscent of the original island cottages and fabulous hotels that were built during the Golden Era."

Next, head just north of the Thousand Islands bridge, between Gananoque and Brockville, to Balleycanoe & Co. "The original barns of this 1850s farm are now filled with 19th-century architectural salvage, mainly from Eastern Ontario," says Susanne. "The rural character of this material is what distinguishes Balleycanoe from the typical architectural salvage operation. Also located on the property is ArchifolkArt -- ceiling tin, barn boards, cast-iron finials, wire fencing, porch posts, chair parts, sap buckets and fragments of stained glass have been used to create unique objects."

Next, head back to the Thousand Islands Bridge and cross to Clayton, New York (take Exit 50-S off Route 81 southbound, then follow Route 12 west 10 kilometres into Clayton) for lunch at Bella's, at the intersection of Riverside Drive and James Street. "No deep fryer here," says Susanne. "In the words of a local, Bella's offers 'thoughtfully made sandwiches on home-baked breads, great lemonade, excellent coffee, all enjoyed with an unobstructed view of Calumet Island from the small deck overhanging the river.' Wow."

Also in Clayton, take in the Antique Boat Museum, renowned for its collection of more than 200 antique boats -- including La Duchesse, the houseboat built in 1903 for millionaire hotelier George Boldt, manager of New York City's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

Return via the Thousand Islands Bridge, stopping to take in the view from the Skydeck, then take the Thousand Islands parkway back to Gananoque.

4. Summer in the limestone city

"If you haven't visited Fort Henry recently, it's time to come back and see what's new," says Susanne. "The summer season features tours, artillery demonstrations, a noon gun, mock battles and a daily parade. Join an 1867 Victorian schoolroom lesson then enlist your children in a military muster parade."

For lunch, continue into Kingston to Chez Piggy. "Enjoy lunch in the secluded courtyard, sipping sangria and feeding the birds -- quintessential summer," says Susanne.

Spend the afternoon browsing and shopping in Kingston. Here's Susanne's insider's list of the top spots:

- * Find a summer dress (and a sneak peak at next season's hot trends) at Sir Gawain Fine Clothing, 34 Princess St.
- * Get a berry bowl (a handmade pottery colander perfect for washing, storing and serving fresh fruit and summer berries) at Cornerstone Fine Canadian Crafts, 255 Ontario St.
- * Visit the Fireworks Glassblowing Studio and pick up a freshly blown marble as a memento of your vacation (56 Queen St.)
- * Browse for summer read at the As the Plot Thickens Mystery Bookshop -- a world of Sherlock Holmes and deep leather chairs (66 Brock St.)
- * Visit Cooke's just to hear the 1865 floor creaking, and to ingest the aroma of freshly roasted coffee, exquisite chocolate and fine cheddar cheese. (61 Brock St.)
- * Kingston Farmer's Market is held every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday in the square behind City Hall.

Return to Gananoque for dinner before evening theatre. "Choose among Casa Bella, The Captain's Table or The Athlone," says Susanne. "Plan to be seated by 5:30 p.m. in order to arrive at the theatre in time for the 8 p.m. performance. The Thousand Islands Playhouse, in the renovated Gananoque Canoe Club building, is a summer activity not to miss. Where else can you enjoy a glass of wine at intermission, standing on the deck as moonlight reflects on the river and boats bob below?"

5. Moss pillows and luxury down

"Everybody takes the Thousands Islands boat tour, but how about spending a night camping on one of our national park islands?" asks Susanne. "St. Lawrence Islands Park is a tiny jewel conceived in the 1870s. Most of the park islands have docks, privies, delineated walking trails and shelters, and 12 offer campsites. Campsites can't be reserved, however, so plan for mid-week when sites are more readily available -- McDonald Island is a good bet."

Pack your gear and arrive early in the day at Spencer's Boat Rentals or Andress Boat Works in Rockport, both of which can provide water taxi service or rent you a boat. If you don't feel like packing food, pick up gourmet take-out fare from Casa Bella restaurant in Gananoque. "Heat it up on the Coleman -- now that's fine dining in the islands," says Susanne. "The A&P grocery store in Gananoque also caters to campers with things like cut-fruit trays and packaged salads."

For the next night, Susanne suggests getting pampered at her inn, Victoria Rose, and enjoying dinner just a few blocks away at Casa Bella. "The main floor of this warm and welcoming century home is dedicated to a 40-seat restaurant. An Australian said the pavlova was better than in Australia." More information: www.eatatbella.com

6. Leave the car parked

"This day includes a little biking, a little hiking, lunch overlooking the river and a cool swim," says Susanne.

"Bring your bike and enjoy a ride along 37 kilometres of magnificent paved bicycle path that stretches between Gananoque and Brockville. Called one of the finest bike paths in Canada, it meanders along the shores of the beautiful St. Lawrence River.

Stop at Rockport, a historic and quaint village 19 kilometres from Gananoque. "The village features the impressive St. Brendan's Catholic Church (est. 1891), where a Blessing of the Boats is held each year. The two oldest tour boats on the river (circa 1928 and 1954) depart from the Boathouse Country

Inn for one- and two-hour cruises. If you're ready for an ice-cream cone, head to the Top Side Store at Address Boat Works.

"Following a morning day of river exploration, enjoy lunch overlooking the water at The Captain's Table at back at the Ivy Lea Inn.

Next, go for a hike at Landon Bay, a six-kilometre ride farther (back west toward Gananoque) along the Thousand Islands Parkway bikepath. "The Landon Bay Centre is a 225-acre ecological reserve with the best natural lookout in the Thousand Islands. In addition to about five kilometres of hiking trails, the gardens at Landon Bay are a collection of more than 60 gardens including an agro-forestry nursery, a herb garden, a butterfly garden and an experimental bog. A nominal entrance fee is charged."

Finally, take a dip. "The Point, as its known by locals, is a small rocky beach directly across the road from the Landon Bay entrance. It surprises with a sandy bottom once you're in."

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