

GANANOQUE, ONTARIO - OH, CANADA!

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by Robert H. "Backroad Bob" Miller

As I motored north on central New York's back roads, I was thinking "I'd been awhile", maybe 10 or 12 years, since my last motorcycle trip to Canada. I was wondering if it was as nice as I remembered. Because of its foreign flair, Canada's been a favorite destination of mine for decades. Long after leaving Canada, the memories that linger are of friendly, fun loving people, good pubs, and good drivers. It's as close to European travel as you can get without leaving North America and you don't have to deal with the language barrier.

On several occasions early in my motorcycling career I'd two-wheeled it north to Toronto and Montreal, but this time I'd be venturing to a part of Canada I'd never been before - the near border area around Kingston along the St. Lawrence River. It's a perfect weekend destination being only 40 miles west on Provincial Highway 401 from the New York border between the U.S. and Canada. Just follow I-81 North to its terminus at the Thousand Islands Bridge and turn left. Kingston is a modern metropolitan city of over 100,000 and typical of large Canadian cities with its downtown surrounded by open spaces devoid of suburban sprawl. Canadian cities are modeled on the European plan where the populace resides within the city limits. This prevents the city centers from becoming ghost towns after 5 p.m. and perpetuates a vibrant downtown where the favorite after dinner past time is people watching when everyone hits the streets for their evening stroll.

KINGSTON OR GANONOQUE?

Kingston has all the usual amenities and conveniences - chain hotels, restaurants by the dozen, skyscrapers, shopping malls, and museums, but if a quaint, romantic, pedestrian-scale town one tenth the size of Kingston suits you better, then Ganonoque is the better choice. Ganonoque is 25 miles east of Kingston on County Route 2 - only 15 miles from the border. From Ganonoque, if you take the river road to Kingston, County Route 22, it's a very scenic drive past marshy inlets, abandoned farms, and dirt lanes leading to the water's edge. There's almost no commercial development along this two-lane road as it winds along trying its best to follow the natural contours of the shore line.

Gananoque can be a bit touristy because of its casinos, but more often than not it's enjoyed by the local inhabitants rather than out of town hordes. Its shops are concentrated in its small downtown where there're a variety of lodging options, and the town's waterfront park is across the street. If you visit the park, the first things you may notice are the large greasy spots atop every picnic table and the trash cans stuffed with crumpled newspapers. If you spend a few minutes trying to figure it out you may have your nostrils filled with the aromas of fried fish batter and hot cooking oil. If you follow your nose across the street it'll take you to a tiny shop that serves only one thing - fish and chips, but it's about the best fish and chips you'll ever taste. An unmarked back door takes you inside where there's barely enough room to turn around and head out the door when you're ready to leave. It's nothing more than a couple of deep fryers, a counter top, and a cash register. There's no place to sit and dawdlers aren't tolerated. It's get in, get out, or get lost.

In Gananoque there're a couple of older waterfront motels and a few downtown chain hotels, but the finest lodging is at the Blinkbonnie Harbor Inn. This bed and breakfast is a Victorian mansion restored to 19th century splendor. Inside, you'll find dark paneled walls of oak and mahogany, linen covered dining room tables, and intimate bedrooms decorated with every detail. If your visit includes romantic intentions, you won't have to try very hard at this place.

Gananoque's waterfront is home to a tour boat fleet that plies the St. Lawrence River. This fjord-like waterway is a maze of islands and channels where 1000-foot long, ten story high freighters could surprise you just around the next bend. These behemoths silently glide along until their horns blast you from only a hundred yards away almost tearing your ears from your head. A three hour seaway tour with a stop at Heart Island's Boldt Castle, the Canadian Taj Mahal, can be an all day affair consuming lots of time and memory sticks.

MIKE'S RESTAURANT

For another all day adventure you can take the 70-mile trip west on Provincial Highway 33 that includes a short ferry crossing along the river's northern shoreline to the resort town of Picton. A walk through this picturesque seaside town can work up an appetite and there're plenty of waterfront restaurants to choose from, but if you want to experience the Canadian version of a good American diner with hot, home cooked food piled high and cheap you'll want to travel another five miles farther west to a desolate crossroads and Mike's Restaurant. There you'll find fresh seafood, tender steak, or tasty fried chicken served with a salad, two vegetables, a drink and dessert for less than \$10. It's as though you've entered a time warp and been transported back 25 years. It's the kind of place you wish you could find back home, but even if you did the same meal would cost you \$25.

When it comes time to take a scenic tour outside of any town, you'd be wise to fill your tank to the top. Despite being one of Canada's larger cities, as soon as you get outside of Kingston the road narrows, the shoulders become quicksand, and all the side roads are gravel so you can imagine what happens outside of the smaller towns. There's a surprising amount of wilderness just past Kingston's northern border and not every village has a filling station.

For a nice 300-mile looping route from Gananoque to Calabogie and back follow the accompanying route sheet. This is a scenic ride over large, almost mountainous rolling hills through old world-like villages, along innumerable lakes and streams, and past isolated homes where smoke from wood stoves emanates from chimneys even in June. The upside to such desolation is that there are few road choices so the chances of getting lost are minimized as long as you don't keep heading north into the bush where they probably won't find you until the next hunting season.

As you motor from village to village you may notice a few things like the lack of traffic, no visible police presence, the brisk pace of any vehicles you may encounter, the isolated farms and homesteads, the desolation between far flung villages, unused churches surrounded by large cemeteries where villages used to be and the lack of road signs. It's so desolate you may even look forward to the dose of civilization found at village pubs and shops after seeing no signs of humankind for hours on end.

“YOU CAN’T MISS IT”

Near Calabogie Lodge, one of the area’s largest ski resorts, my route sheet failed me and I stopped at a filling station to ask for directions. A robust woman walked out to greet me and as I fueled I noticed she was the only one there. Her directions to the next town on the route were, “just go down this road for ten miles and turn right - there’s no sign, but you can’t miss it”. With my history of missing so many “you can’t miss it” turns, I asked for further verification. “Why won’t I miss it”, I inquired. “Because it’s the only paved side road for the next 50 miles”, was her reply. Satisfied, I motored on and at 10.0 miles the road was right where she said it would be.

That filling station, with its deli, grill, mini-market, and service bay was “manned” by this one woman. As customers arrived, she went to grill a burger, work the cash register, or sell parts for vehicle repair. The only thing she didn’t do was an oil change and lube while I waited, but I’m certain she would have if I’d just asked her. Obviously, these Canadians are a hearty, self-sufficient bunch.

The favorable Canadian exchange rate is just one more reason to visit Canada. The 20% premium covers tips, but taxes hurt when it’s time to fill your gas tank. At \$4.12 CND per gallon the exchange rate means you’ll be paying \$3.30 USD a gallon which, these days, isn’t that much more than we’re paying at home. The good thing is, the Canadian government makes it easy to get HST and GST tax refunds that can add 22% to goods and services costs. Just be certain to save your receipts and stop in at the border’s duty free shop for your instant refund or the order form.

Don’t miss the gift shops at Maberly Junction where County Route 36 crosses Provincial Highway 7 (45 miles into the route), the Swiss Inn lunch stop that’s 12 miles past Griffith, or the un-numbered route to Vernacher Junction. With so much scenery and a 300-mile loop, you may want to take advantage of the lodging opportunities in Calabogie. Combine this route with a tour along New York’s Seaway Trail to Cape Vincent and the two ferries to Kingston or a stop over in Alexandria Bay and you’ll have a long weekend to remember.

WHAT IS IT?

Touring this part of Canada is a lot of things - and almost all of them are pleasant. It’s meeting lots of friendly folks who sincerely say “we want to see you back” and it’s entry into a time machine that takes you to a place where, thanks to the favorable exchange rate, prices are seemingly from decades ago. It’s also a place with unsettled weather where you might have to do the rain suit shuffle several times a day and it’s a place inhabited in the summer months with man-eating black flies that will find their way inside your helmet, jacket, shirt and underwear where they’ll leave painful dime sized welts. Traveling in the spring or fall is highly recommended.

It’s a place where there’s no such thing as traffic jams, but with inadequate road signs where you should never venture into the back country without a route sheet, a good map, and a compass. One thing you won’t need is your horn. Most Canadian drivers are alert, courteous, and fast and they move out of the way for motorcyclists. Don’t forget to test your horn when you cross the U.S. border because you’re certain to need it shortly afterward. The Web is always the place to go for information so you may want to check these sites before you thumb that starter button - <www.visitkingston.com>, <www.blinkbonnie.com>, <www.ganboatline.com>, <www.boldtcastle.com>.

www.visit1000islands.com, and www.ccra.gc.ca/visitors.

OH, CANADA ROUTE SHEET

Key to Symbols

S = straight

L = left turn

R = right turn

PH = Provincial Highway

CR = County Route

() = town

-# = approx. miles

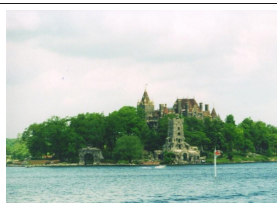
Gananoqua to Calabogie to Gananoqua

1. S CR 32 North (Gananoqua) - 15
2. R PH 15 North (to Morton) - 15
3. L CR 42 West (Crosby) - 10
4. S CR 36 North (Westport) - 27
5. R CR 12 North (Elphin) - 20
6. L CR 511 North (Lanark) - 30
7. L CR 508 South (Calabogie) - 10
8. R CR 65 South - 18
9. R CR 71 North - 9
10. L PH 41 South (Griffith) - 16
- *Lunch at the Swiss Inn (Denbigh) - 166
11. L 4 miles past Swiss Inn (Vernacher Junction) - 25
12. L CR 509 South (Plevna) - 34
13. L PH 7 North - 1
14. R CR 38 South (to Sharbot Lake) - 45
15. L PH 401 East (Kingston) - 25
16. S to Gananoqua

Total Miles - 300



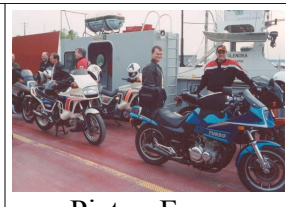
Ferry To Picton



Boldt Castle



St. Lawrence River



Picton Ferry