

Trent/Severn Waterway

By Bruce Kemp



The Peterborough Lift Lock.

As the old saying goes, it's not the destination but the journey itself. Nowhere does this hold more truth than in the Trent-Severn Waterway running from Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay.

Alexis and Berwick Duval were excited about getting started on the Trent/Severn Waterway. From Houma, Louisiana, the couple's first Canadian port of call was Trenton, and they wanted to see more. They had been living aboard their Mainship 430, *Moondance*, for eight months in the Caribbean and motored up the Intra-Coastal Waterway. Now they were finally starting the Canadian portion of "The Loop" and the Trent/Severn – along with Georgian Bay – what was, for them, the most exotic part of their voyage.

The Duvals planned to spend ten days traveling the 386 clicks (240 miles) of the Trent/Severn from Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay. Then, they would follow the curve of the Bay around to the Straits of Mackinac, down Lake Michigan into the Mississippi, and finally, Mobile Bay carrying them home after their year-long odyssey.

Trenton, where I ran into the Duvals, was my first stop, and one thing I wanted to see was the Quinte West Marina.

Along with floating docks, a new breakwater was built several years ago. It's a full-service marina with power, water, and WI-FI.

The older Fraser Park Marina is where you fuel up and pump out before entering the system, but docking is day-use only for people wanting to get off their boats to walk into the city core.

One of the attractions on Thursdays and Saturdays is the Farmers' Market, near the waterfront, just north of Fraser Park Marina. It's an excellent place to re-provision and pick up in-season produce.

To use the mast crane, sailors journeying up the waterway need to visit CFB Trenton. Fixed bridges along the system have a maximum clearance of less than 7 meters (22 feet).

You can always join the waterway at any number of points. There are dozens of launch ramps to drop the family runabout for day trips or weekend fishing.

Despite the normal cautions, like staying within the buoyed channels, there are no big navigational headaches. It's all line-of-sight. You don't even need a GPS. Add to that the fact that it gives a fair sampling of Ontario's landscape – from the low sandy shores of Lake Ontario to the rolling Trent Hills, the northern feel of the Kawartha Lakes, and finally to Lake Couchiching and the rocky outcrops of Georgian Bay.

Upstream from Trenton, the first few hours of the journey ease you through gently rolling farmland. Traditional Ontario farm homes dominate the significant sites.

The locks along the way are easy to deal with and can be handled by a driver and deckhand.

Developing the system was a response to merchants wanting a quicker route from northern Lake Huron.

The first lock at Bobcaygeon was finished in 1833. The Huron First Nation used the interconnecting lakes, rivers, and portages to get from the St. Lawrence fur trail to their homelands around Georgian Bay. The Huron showed French explorer Samuel Champlain its potential as a transportation route.

It shaved off more than 1,400 miles through the American Erie Canal system and was 500 miles shorter than the Welland Canal route.

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Unfortunately, politics soon stalled construction. Plans for the waterway made sense to everyone except the local lumber barons. They moaned about it, claiming dams and locks would interrupt the movement of their log booms. Local politicians, who received campaign financing from the barons, were quick to back-pedal. Only those with a national vision – like Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald - encouraged the system's completion.

With the roadblocks firmly in place, it was in 1920 that the first boat traveled the entire system unimpeded.

Recreational boating rescued the Trent/Severn from obscurity, and it's now a National Historic Site administered by Parks Canada.

Surprisingly, there are only 32 kilometers (21.5 miles) of actual canals. The rest incorporate lakes and rivers linked by locks, lifts, and a marine railway.

The Trent/Severn borrowed some of the British Empire's best engineers for its technology. Of the 45 locks, 36 are straightforward, single-chamber operations. There are two sets of flight locks (double-chambered, requiring two lifts) – Ranney Falls and Healey Falls.

Ranney Falls Flight Lock, just below Campbellford, lifts boaters a total of 14.6 meters (47.75 feet). Three locks overcome Healey Falls. Lock 15 is an individual lift, and Locks 16 and 17 are tandem flight locks. In total, you climb 23.1 meters (76 feet) into Rice Lake.

Great hiking trails border most rivers and lakes. Most are rural, while others take you back to towns like Campbellford.

Stop by the Campbellford-Seymour Heritage Society building and grab the free walking tour guide. It takes a couple of hours but will show you some of the country's most admirable Victorian and Edwardian architecture. If that doesn't stretch your legs enough, hike to the Big Toonie at Old Mill Park on the west side of the river.

The most recognizable of locks on the system is the lift lock (#21) at Peterborough. It's unfair to call it a boat elevator, but that's what it is. You move your boat into a gated chamber, and the gates close behind you. A huge hydraulic ram then lifts you, your boat, and 1,700 tons of water 20 meters (66 feet) to the upper exit.

Peterborough's Lift Lock wasn't the first of this type but is the oldest in continual operation. It's been lifting boats since 1904 and was first built in Anderton, England, in 1875. That lock was eventually converted to an electric motor pulling cables to raise the chambers. It was restored in 2002 and now uses hydraulic fluid to drive its rams.

The system's second lift lock is near Kirkfield.

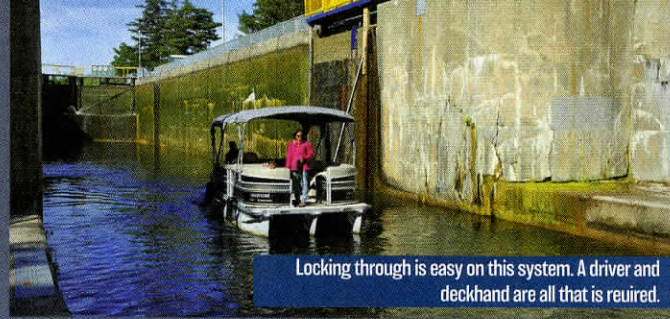
While riding the lift at Peterborough, up the hill from the dockside, is the visitors' center. It describes Richard Birdsall Rogers's construction effort and how the entire system was constructed.

After Peterborough, the fingers of the north extend down through the rolling hills. The trees in the Kawartha Highlands change from predominantly broad-leafed to pine, spruce, and cedar.

Kawartha Lake encompasses Bobcaygeon, Lindsay, Fenelon Falls, Coboconk, Rosedale, and Kirkfield. These are delightful little towns with a summer feel and ice cream stands near the lock walls.

Fishing is brilliant on the Trent/Severn. Kids will enjoy searching for rock bass, bluegill, crappie, sunfish, and perch. With patience, you can hook largemouth and smallmouth bass, pike, and, best of all, pickerel.

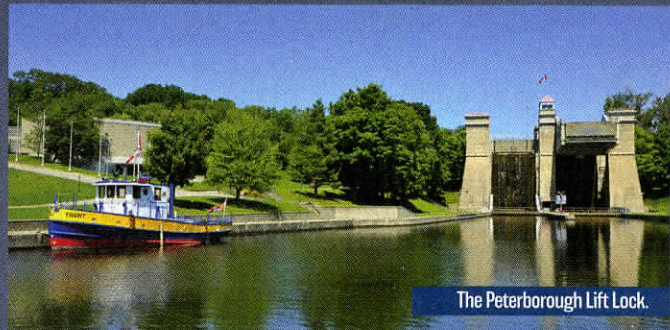
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Locking through is easy on this system. A driver and deckhand are all that is required.



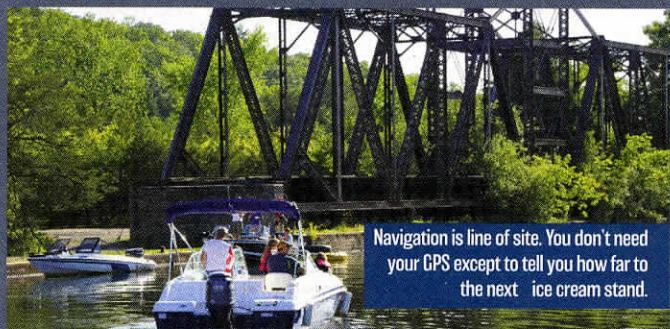
The marine railway.



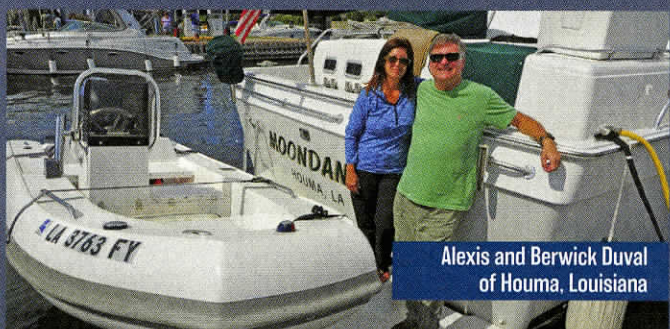
The Peterborough Lift Lock.



The Big Toonie



Navigation is line of site. You don't need your GPS except to tell you how far to the next ice cream stand.



Alexis and Berwick Duval of Houma, Louisiana

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The last small town on this portion of the system is Gamebridge, about 1½ kilometers (1 mile) from where the Trent Canal empties into Lake Simcoe.

Barrie, the largest city on the Trent/Severn (136,000 people), is up the Kempenfelt Bay arm of Lake Simcoe and a bit out of the way. Orillia, at the north end, is closer and has just as many amenities.

Once you pass the marked channel at Washago, which locals call "The Bowling Alley," you're into the final stretches of the waterway. If you appreciate wooden boats, you're skirting the southern edge of Canada's mother lode for classics.

The waterway is now the combination of Trent Canal and Severn River. Big Chute's marine railway is the niftiest part of the system between Lake Couchiching and Georgian Bay.

It really is a railroad (of sorts). You drive your boat onto the slings of a carriage that winch you up an inclined set of tracks by four powerful electric motors that lead to the Gloucester Pool. There's been a railway here since 1917. It was one of the last links allowing passage on the Trent/Severn. This one-lift experience is worth towing your boat all the way up there.

Once you've made the 18-meter (60 feet) ascent, it's a clear run to Port Severn and Lock #45 – the final lock before entering Georgian

Getting There

Basics:

- Charts: Cdn Hydrographic #2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026, 2028, 2029
- Cruise Guides: Ports Trent/Severn – Lake Simcoe
- Transit Fees apply along with moorage and/or camping. A towed dinghy requires its own separate permits. For 2023 rates, check www.parks.canada.ca and follow the prompts.
- Minimum depth: 5 feet (consult with the Trent/Severn Waterway Headquarters if you draw more than this)
- Bridge Heights: Count on 22 feet as a maximum.
- Speed Limit: 10 km/h or 6.21 mph

Additional Websites:

Tourism Ontario
www.ontariotravel.net

Weather
www.weatheroffice.gc.ca/marine

Notices To Mariners
www.notmar.gc.ca

Transport Canada Boating Regs
www.tc.gc.ca/boatingsafety

Trent/Severn Offices
<http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/on/trentsevern>