

Reinventing Storytelling

Photos by Ian Cristine



Ian, your photographs of the Thousand Islands are now recognized all over the world. When did you become interested in photography?

To be honest, photography was initially only a casual interest, but I always thought that if a shot was worth taking, it was worth putting in the effort to make it good. It became more serious when I was in the aircraft business, doing marketing for the Challenger (Advanced Ultralight) across Canada. I wrote articles for aviation magazines, telling stories of our adventures. Images of them in flight, showing a compelling background, became fundamental to that end. To get good shots, I had to get very close to other planes. Flying alone. I learned the discipline of shooting with one eye in the camera and the other on the plane I was photographing, because the possibility of a mid-air collision was very real. I didn't realize this training would become very useful in a career I could not have foreseen.

What are some of the challenges of aerial photography?

In truth, after all the years of air-to-air photography, shooting stationary objects made the Thousand Islands photography seem, in comparison, like a walk in the park. That's an exaggeration, of course. Shooting down at dawn and dusk from a moving aircraft meant I almost always had to shoot wide angle to let in enough light. That required getting very close, so that the subject wasn't a spec in the distance. Getting good shots ultimately requires showing up, over and over again, until nature, light and circumstance eventually cooperate.



In the past decade, Ian Cristine has become known as the iconic photographer of the Thousand Islands. Taken from his Challenger Ultralight, the images capture a unique perspective of a remarkable region. Ian has published five best-selling photography collections, two winning the international Benjamin Franklin Award for Excellence in Publishing. On May 1, McLellan Interactive Publishing released Ian's groundbreaking interactive eBook, "One In A Thousand," written with Donna Walsh Inglehart. We've invited Ian to speak about his latest project.

On August 14th, 1760, Britain's HMS Onondaga was lured into the labyrinth by French attackers. A boat with 14 men was lowered to warn a second ship, HMS Mohawk, away, but was never seen again. On failing to find even where it had been lowered, this spot became known as the Lost Channel.



◀ *The elderly gentleman who sold me Raleigh Island explained, "This is a green leaf place. While the leaves are green, there is no place in the world you'll rather be." I've since learned that every Thousand Islander feels exactly this way.*

▲ *Sister ships. What I affectionately term a "wake up shot," an elusive moment like this, with Sister Island and its lighthouse mirroring a giant laker.*

Why did you make the transition from photographer to publisher?

It was definitely not something I imagined when I began restoring the old cottage on Raleigh. I wanted to share my enthusiasm with friends, and to my surprise, I couldn't find images or books that would convey the beauty of the region. So I began taking my own. As I slowly started to accumulate some interesting ones, it occurred to me that with my Challenger, I had a privileged view that few people ever see. I also realized that unlike most photographers who are sent on brief assignments, I was living in one. I had the perfect plane to shoot from and the unusual training previously mentioned to use it effectively. Creating a book about the Thousand Islands seemed, at first, like a great opportunity, but as it evolved, I realized that the pieces were unlikely to come together again, and I began to see it as an obligation. I realized if I didn't go do it, it was very unlikely that it would happen — and I believed it should.

You have photographed Raleigh Island in so many moods that we feel as if we know it. How did you discover Raleigh?

The initial discovery was not of the island, but of the region, when I went on a random flight with two friends in 1992. I was astonished by the Thousand Islands. I couldn't understand how it was that I had lived within a couple of hours of this remarkable place all my life but never knew it existed. I became the luckiest man alive when three years later I found Raleigh Island. It was, literally, one in a thousand, because it alone had a perfect natural harbor with a sloping shoreline at the end — exactly a wingspan wide to shelter my plane from storms. Raleigh had come up for sale only once in the last century. It was meant to be.

What were your biggest challenges with the first book, "The Thousand Islands?"

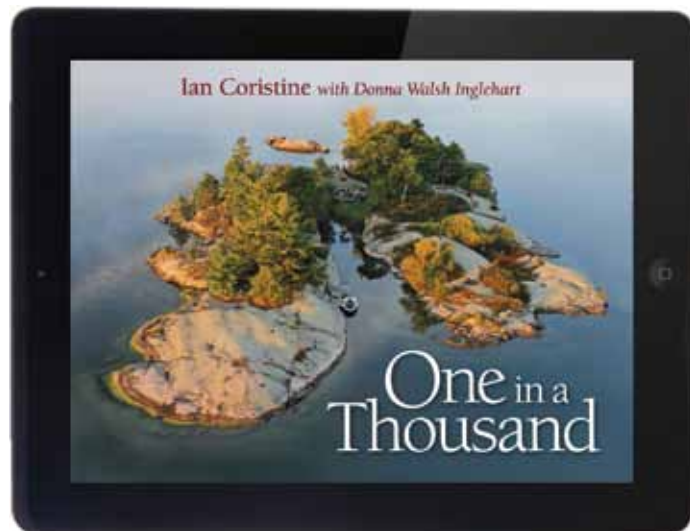
Not having a clue how to do any part of it except take the photographs. It really was intimidating, and I very nearly turned away, but I believed the book needed to happen, and as I accumulated decent images, I was encouraged to figure it out. There were so many issues — seemingly small things like creating informative captions that didn't point out the obvious (e.g. "Glorious Sunset in the Thousand Islands"). "The 1000 Islands" was one of the first books to use digital images, which created huge challenges because the printers weren't familiar with the technology. I was determined to produce a book at a level of quality that was in keeping with the history and beauty of the region. I knew my market would be small and local: A 50-mile stretch without any big cities. The solution for creating an affordable book was to do an enormous print run. I had no idea that the quantity I was ordering was unheard of for such a project, but people appreciate quality and value, so it worked out.

How is your new book, "One In A Thousand" different from your other projects?

"One" is infinitely more sophisticated, telling a story in a way that wasn't possible until now. With novelist Donna Walsh Inglehart, I wrote a traditional memoir about my discovery of Raleigh. I had images and maps to illustrate the story, and because the History Channel had shot a segment for a documentary about me, I also had HD video footage. Tony Dekker of the award-winning band Great Lake Swimmers was willing to provide instrumental versions of his hauntingly beautiful music for the slideshows and videos. All of these elements were necessary to make the story complete. McLellan Interactive Publishing was excited to explore the potential of the latest technology, and with its team, not only created the app, but the software with which to build it. Without them, this could not have happened. In the end, the book evolved exactly as I hoped it would.

▶ *For two hours before this shot, there was nothing worthwhile here for the camera. Then, for a minute or two, it played magical tricks amongst the Admiralty and Lake Fleet islands. Moments later it was all gone.*



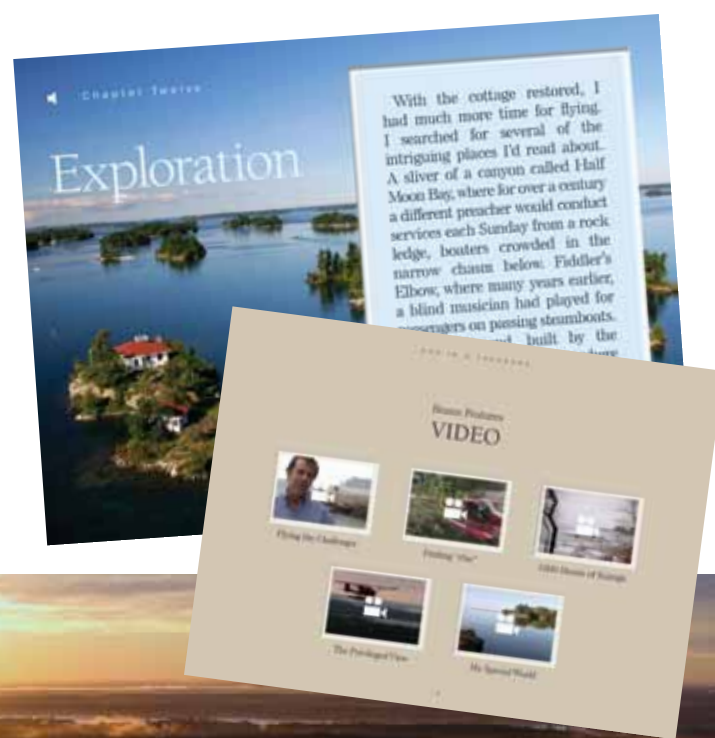


It seems that “One In A Thousand” is a bit ahead of its time, in part, because it can only be viewed on an iPad. Why did you choose this particular format?

I believed all these elements could bring the story alive in ways never before possible. There was a temptation to produce something simpler that could be made available on a wider selection of platforms like Kindle and Android, but to do so would have meant eliminating much of the magic. I simply wasn't willing to do that, and when the iPad emerged, it offered the perfect platform. Print was never considered because it would have been prohibitively expensive while eliminating some of the most compelling material. Our interactive eBook has 455 images, 11 videos, narration, music, an interactive map and quite a bit more. It was worth waiting to do this right.

“One” includes episodes from your formative years as a Formula race car driver, as well as the early days of Ultralight flying. Why did you decide to include these episodes in “One In A Thousand?”

Before Donna came on board, the book was quite different, similar in focus to “A Year In Provence,” “Under The Tuscan Sun,” and “The Olive Farm.” Donna convinced me that my story of discovery must include the path that led to Raleigh, so I reached back to my childhood in Montreal and my early years in car racing and flying. She slashed and burned about 200,000 words of the original manuscript then made me write more. It took two and a half years of intense collaboration to produce the final manuscript. I realize now that Donna was absolutely right. What resulted was educational to me, as I can now more clearly understand how my life had been building toward Raleigh, and how events long ago encouraged me down this path.



You mentioned that you chose Raleigh because it has the perfect harbor for a plane. Do you still fly?

After 9/11, the River changed. It is an international border and a vulnerable one. Flying at dawn, I used to see only friendly fishermen, but following that event, an increasing number of police and enforcement agencies emerged. In “One,” I describe a few episodes in which I had been bending some aviation rules in order to get my shots. I knew that I would always go after the shot if it presented itself, and that this would only end unhappily, so the only way to avoid the problem was to sell the plane.

How has “One” been received?

The greatest benefit of the digital publishing revolution is access to a worldwide market. My other books were limited to regional distribution. Even a brave and aggressive publisher would never have distributed them beyond this continent. With our iPad app, we reach the entire world. “One” has already been downloaded in 29 different countries. That could never have happened with the print books, but we are ahead of the curve. At the moment, we are aware of only two stories aimed at an adult audience in this rich format. Al Gore’s “Our Choice” and “One In A Thousand.” As more stories get told this way, people will go looking for them, but it’s not easy gathering up all the pieces to create them, and at the moment the software to create this level of sophistication is not publicly available. It will take time. Most don’t yet know that books like these exist.



The videos “What are the Chances?,” “DxO Image Master Ian Coristine,” and the eBook’s introduction, “A Flight of Discovery” are on lakelandboating.com, or by use this QR code. See more of Ian’s gorgeous photography at 1000islandsphotoart.com.



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Until that flight of discovery in 1992, I had no idea that the Thousand Islands existed, much less were just two hours from my home near Montreal.