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p. 22
1000 Islands
A Photographic Tour by Ian Coristine

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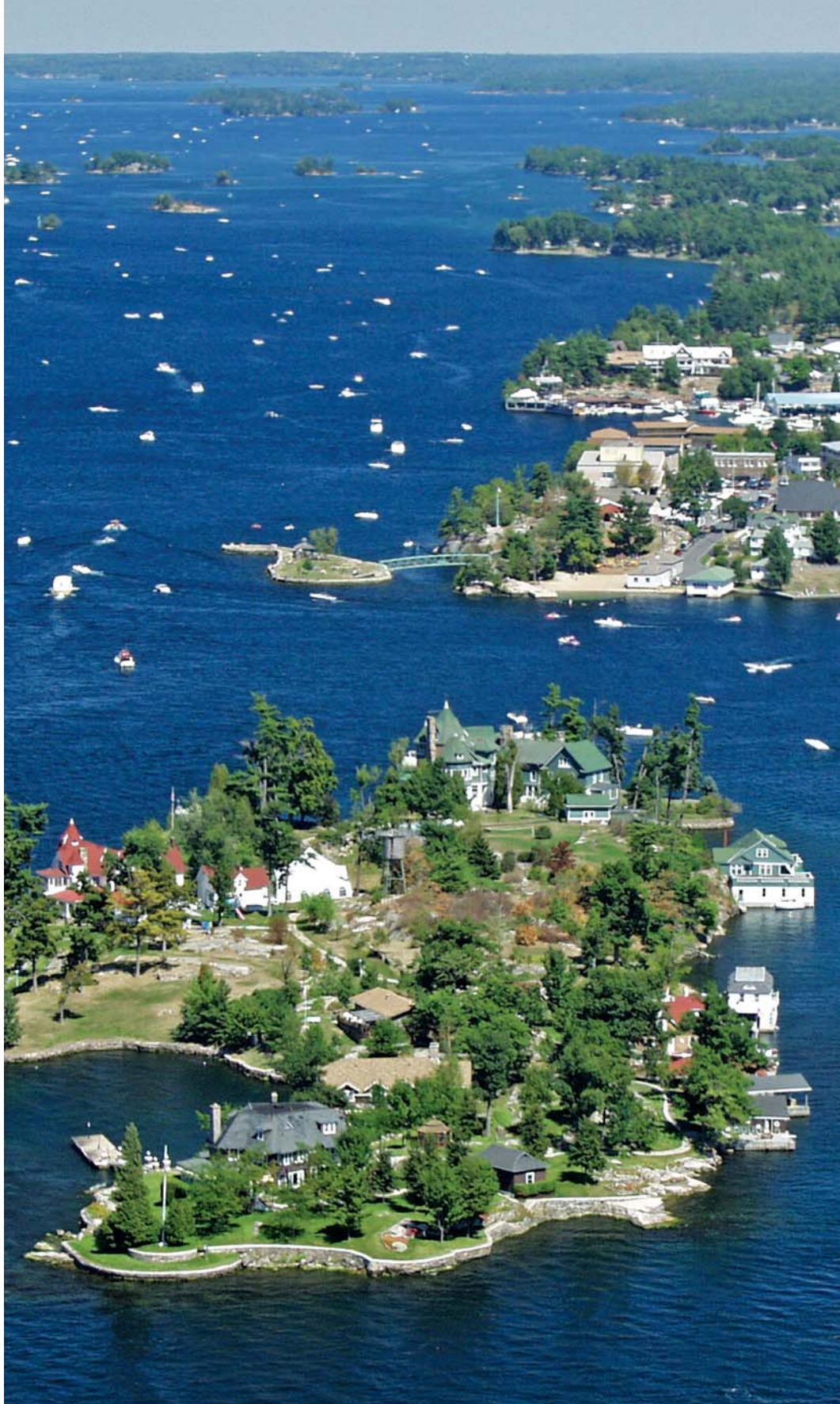
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On the cover and this page: Ian Coristine shoots the 1000 Islands in New York from his float plane.



26 *Idylls of the 1000 Islands*

Summer cottages have majestic castles as their next-door neighbors on the dreamy isles that dot the St. Lawrence River.

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PUBLISHER Walter "Bing" O'Meara

EDITORIAL STAFF

Editor: Matthew M. Wright
Technical editor: Dave Mull
Field editor: Tom Thompson
Editor-at-large: Heather Freckmann
Associate editor: Kirsten Moxley
Office dog: Sara

CONTRIBUTORS Ron Barger, Ian Coristine,
Mike Harris, Brian Opfer, Mark Stevens, Colleen H.
Troupis, Dave Wallace

CREATIVE STAFF

Art director/production manager: Amy Hiemstra
Associate art director: Brook Poplawski

BUSINESS STAFF

Associate publisher: Mark Conway
V.P./marketing director: Linda O'Meara
Regional sales and classified ads manager: Patti McCleery
Circulation director: Sharon P. O'Meara

EDITORIAL & ADVERTISING OFFICE

727 S. Dearborn St. • Suite 812 • Chicago, IL 60605
Phone 312-276-0610 • Fax 312-276-0619
email: staff@lakelandboating.com
www.lakelandboating.com

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING

727 S. Dearborn St. • Suite 812 • Chicago, IL 60605
Phone 800-892-9342 • Fax 312-276-0619

SUBSCRIPTIONS

P.O. Box 502 • Mt. Morris, IL 61054
For Customer Service call: 800-827-0289
O'Meara-Brown Publications, Inc.
Walter B. O'Meara, president
Timothy Murtaugh, secretary
Tracy Houren, controller

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from the helm



Ian Coristine's 1000 Islands

Ian Coristine is the aerial photographer whose work appears on this month's cover and in the Port O' Call feature on the 1000 Islands, which begins on page 26. Ian is a family man—father of Haley and Scotty, husband of Mary, and owner of Molly, his Irish setter and constant companion.


Prose does not always work when attempting to describe the indescribable. One needs poetry, and for that I leaned on Ian's good friend, the now-deceased Paul Malo, poet and professor emeritus of Syracuse University. He wrote the forward to Ian's book *Water, Wind and Sky*.

The Coristines' island is classic 1000 Islands, formed of ancient graphite, irregular in shape, providing a tenuous foothold for the white pines, pitch pines, oaks and varied flora so characteristic of these islands. These fragments of land, floating in the ceaseless current of the St. Lawrence River, are small worlds, each comprised of species, some quite rare, that cling to life in the nooks and crannies, the cliffs and coves. Each island is unique—Ian often observes that although there are some 1,800 of them, no two are the same. Every one is different, and from each the river appears to be a totally different place.

These photographs are the art of Ian Coristine. Through them, he shares his intense love of this special place and the privileged view from above. Read his story on page 36.

Ian has produced three books of photographs and has an impressive website, 1000islandsphotoart.com, where all of his work is available.

P.S. This 1000 Islands issue is the second in our Great Lakes Islands series. The first appeared in February, which was devoted to the Lake Erie Islands. The third will appear in next month's issue—the Apostle Islands of Lake Superior.



Idylls of the 1000 Islands

The St. Lawrence is dotted with quaint cottages,
stately castles and anchorages aplenty. STORY BY MARK STEVENS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY IAN CORISTINE

The path turns back and forth, opening at last upon a rolling meadow. Off to the right is a veritable explosion of wildflowers—purple loosestrife, goldenrod and white lady’s slippers. Past this meadow, a steep emerald hill falls toward the river.

Down below us, islands carved from granite are scattered like jewels amidst the cerulean water. A mosaic of patterns are painted by the current, the reflection of the sky and the steep slopes dotted by pine and spruce. We have marched up a gravel road that climbs a hill overlooking Chippewa Bay in the eastern reaches of the 1000 Islands.

High above the waters of the St. Lawrence, the wind rustles through the trees and birds strike up a chorus. A rustic cottage fills one island, while a teal clapboard Victorian mansion with dormered windows, a wraparound porch and a candel-snuffer roof is on another. Terra cotta-tiled turrets sprout from a stand of cedar on yet another—it’s Singer Castle on Dark Island, a few miles upstream from Brockville, Ontario. It boasts an electrical plant designed by Thomas Edison, secret passageways, a nine-bedroom boathouse and a dungeon. It is like a bit of Europe snuggled down in a river as full of history and boaters as it is full of surprises.

Anywhere else in the Great Lakes, a neo-Gothic castle would be an anachronism. Not in the 1000 Islands. This palace was built by Frederick Bourne, one-time president of the Singer Sewing Machine Co. and commodore of the New York Yacht Club. By no means is Singer Castle the only—or most famous—château in these parts. Boldt Castle, near Alexandria Bay, New York, sees more yearly visitors.

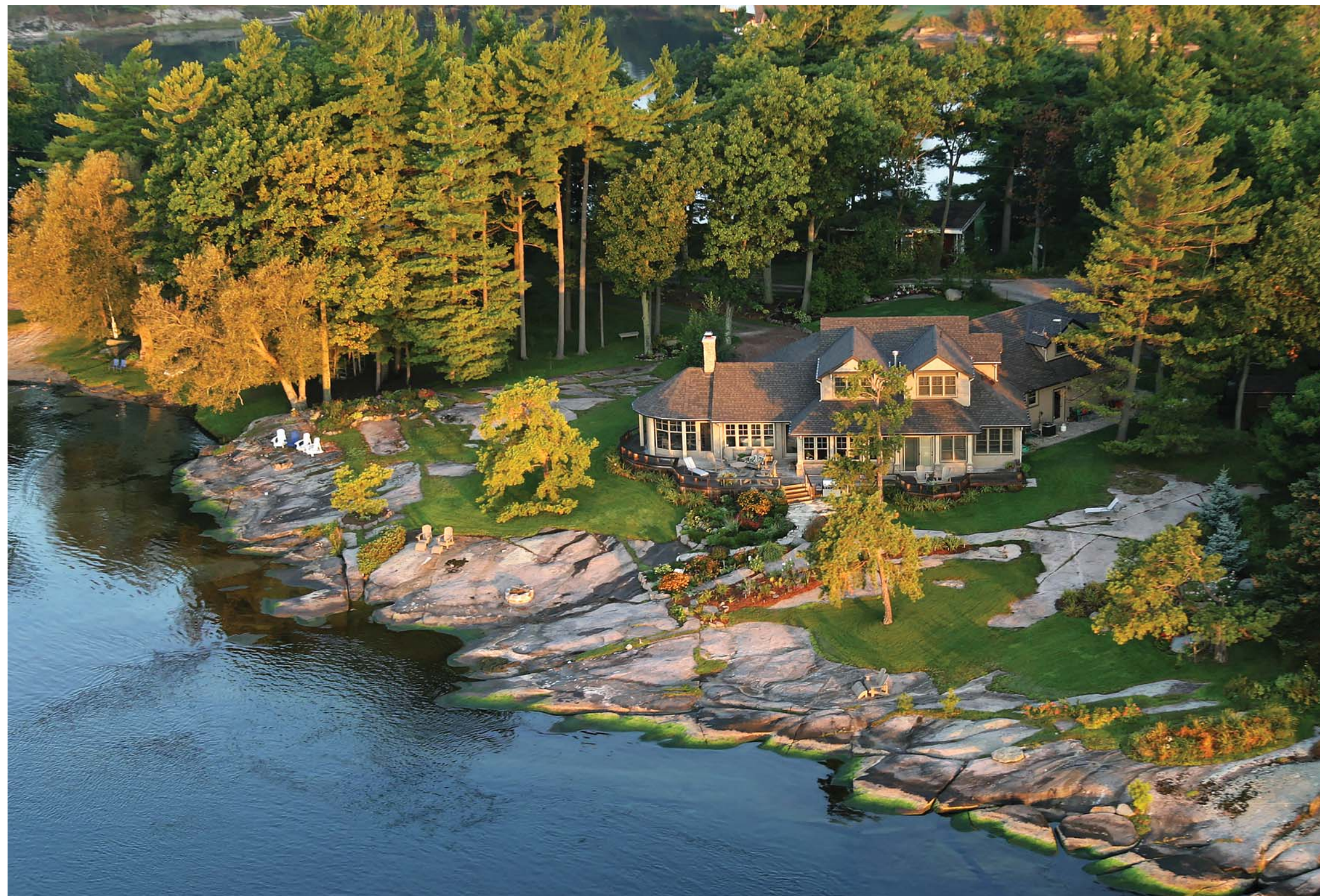
The islands are full of contrasts. One morning we see two kayakers sharing the water with a freighter 740 feet long beside a sailboat next to a mahogany runabout riding the wake of a great white tourboat. They float along within view of Boldt Castle, with its red conical roofs and stag-decorated stone gate. All on a river that stretches from Lake Ontario to the ocean 800 miles east.

“The islands themselves are the extremely ancient roots of mountains,” says Don Ross, a Hill Island resident and author of *Discovering the Thousand Islands*. They form a geological



bridge that joins the Canadian Shield with the Adirondacks, and even the region’s name falls considerably short of how many islands it holds. “We have closer to 1,800 islands here,” says former tourism rep Suzanne Bixby. “And some we haven’t even counted.”

The official definition of an island here is anything with two trees that remains above water all year. We’re out on the water on the *19th Hole*, a beautifully maintained Egg Harbor 33 with Bixby and Ron Mowers, who lives on Tennis Island. Bixby points toward a small isle near Boldt



Castle from the boat’s flybridge. A cottage there has a 7-foot slab of granite for a front porch, and the foundations around back are actually in the river. Nearby is a single tree. “Doesn’t qualify,” Bixby says.

Delightful ports are scattered along the

(previous pages) In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many of the most successful tycoons from the post-Civil War industrial boom gravitated here, spending summers in Fantasyland. World War I ended the party, but many of the grand cottages, yacht houses and châteaux, such as Boldt Castle, remain, attesting to an unimaginable Gilded Age.

(left) Whenever weather permits, this is many islanders’ “room” of choice for conversation, cocktails and meals with a view. The cottage serves as a last resort.

(above) The islands are actually the roots of ancient mountains, part of a geological fault known as the Frontenac Arch. Here at Fernbank in the Brockville Narrows, a cottage sits in harmony with its surroundings, perfectly placed to view the parade of ships passing just a few yards from shore.



These islands in the Summerland Group were retreats for wealthy families who built gorgeous mansions in the late 1800s. Sunnyside, the green “cottage” in the center, was designed by H.J. Hardenbergh, the architect responsible for New York City’s Waldorf Astoria and Plaza Hotels.

river. One morning we venture off the docks of Bonnie Castle Yacht Basin and stroll through the business district of Alexandria Bay, one of the chief burgs on the American side. “A Bay,” as the locals call it, boasts more than its share of establishments offering libations, and its jovial atmosphere makes it worth a visit. Sip a cool one in the Caribbean ambiance of the lounge at Dock by the Bay or stretch out beneath brightly colored umbrellas on the patio beside the pier. Admire the view from Top of the Bay across the street, marked by battleship gray railings, a two-level deck and its own small dock. There’s the Islander, Shipwreck Tavern, Bootlegger Café and Rum Runner Wharf Bar, as well as Skiffs, with its horseshoe-shaped bar and Jolly Roger flag over the bandstand. Order a glass of wine and a beer with free peanuts (“Just throw the shells on the floor,” says the bartender) and you’ll get change back from your \$10 bill.

A Bay is more than just a port for drinkers with a boating problem. Begun as a lumber trade site, wharves sprouted up in the 1830s, and it became all the rage when Ulysses S. Grant visited nearby Pullman Island in 1872.

Explore a fascinating bit of history at the Cornwall Brothers store, built in 1829 and now a museum, or take a walking tour of the village, which offers shopping for souvenirs and antiques, and art galleries, including Riverbank and Cornerstone. Kids will love the 3-foot-tall wooden chess pieces downtown and the playground beside the lifeguard-patrolled beach.

A Bay isn’t the only urban delight. Clayton, on the mainland south of Grindstone Island, is filled with period architecture, much of it reflecting the importance of the river to trade. The gift shops, antique stores and galleries are uniquely positioned—open to the water as much as to the street—and boast plate-glass windows at both ends and a variety of patios and balconies overlooking the river. You can take a historic walking tour here, too, or visit the Antique Boat Museum for unforgettable glimpses into recreational boating’s past.

“Legend has it the runabout was actually invented for this area,” Ross says.

West and north is Kingston, Ontario. Worthy of a story in its own right, the port offers a series of pubs housed in historic limestone buildings and tucked into small courtyards, as well as the best shopping between Toronto and Montreal. Spend a night docked at Confederation Basin and do a pub crawl, tour the penitentiary museum or get some culture at one of the many summer celebrations. Just be sure to survey the expanse of the St. Lawrence from the ramparts of the port’s limestone fort that was the crowning achievement of British engineers 150 years ago.

Head east to Gananoque, or “Gan” as residents refer to it, and explore period shops on the waterfront. Take in another museum or catch a show at the Summer Playhouse Theatre.

You might be struck by the fact that this region wasn’t always so peaceful and idyllic. The Battle of the Thousand Islands was waged here in about 1760. Ross skippers us into a serpentine river passage bordered by the omnipresent granite boulders and windblown pines. “The French lured the British into this passage,” he says. “The British lost the wind and steerageway. The French pounded the ships.”

On our boat ride, Mowers powers us past a tiny isle west of Alex

Bay. A small cave lies at water's edge, a mere split in the granite bluff. "That's Devil's Oven," he says. "The rebel Bill Johnson hid out there for a year." In the late 1830s, Johnston and a small group burned and sank a British ship, the *Sir Robert Peel*, after robbing its passengers and letting them out on Wellesley Island. While he was hiding out, Johnston's daughter brought food and other supplies to the cave almost every day by boat. After a year, he gave himself up. The pirate was pardoned and was later appointed lighthouse keeper at Rock Island.

The islands' names boast of a bellicose past. The Navy Islands bear the names of captains from the British Navy; the Admiralty group memorialize various admirals. Deathdealer, Camelot, Dumbfounder and Endymion were all named for British warships. The Brock Island group and Wolfe, the biggest island here, were named for British generals.

We pass an anchorage at Endymion. Ross slows the boat. Set against a background of evergreen forest, three or four mooring balls bob in the gentle waves. A heron stands in the shallows like a Renaissance statue. "This is what it's all about," Ross sighs. "More anchorages than dock spaces. Maybe 300 transient berths. More than 2,000 anchorages."

Other favorite spots to drop the hook include Thwartway Island (also known as Leek), Brakey Bay south of Howe and the east side of Mulcaster. With so many to choose from, though, you'll have no trouble finding your own favorite, where you can hoist a hammock and while away an afternoon.

If you're looking for dockage, though, Bixby recommends the marina at Wellesley Island (home to what was once the most expensive golf course in the United States) or Keewaydin State Park.

As you cruise along the St. Lawrence, you'll pass myriad Victorian mansions built by old money that share these shores with cozy cottages perched atop granite outcroppings. Price is



Right Island was given away as a prize on the television game show. Tuck in behind Tom Thumb Island, the smallest in the chain, then head for Florence Island, given to Arthur Godfrey in gratitude for a tune he sang called "The Thousand Islands Love Song (Oh Florence)." Idle the engine beside a Tudor boathouse 100 feet high or one that boasts a pair of Venetian gondolas.

On our journey down the river with Mowers, he lets the boat drift at a certain spot. "Caught my first fish there when I was a kid," he says. Nowadays he lives on the river nine months of the year. He berths *19th Hole* at the dock in his backyard.

Somewhere in Wanderer's Passage, Ross pulls back on the throttle and we drift in the current,



For restaurant suggestions and navigation tips, head to lakelandboating.com/1000islands.

the breeze cooling our faces. "Aboriginals considered this area the garden of the Great Spirit," he tells us. "They thought it the most beautiful place on Earth."

He pauses for a moment, staring into an aromatic pine forest. Then he smiles. "I tend to agree." ↴

(left) The river is seldom this still. If a breeze isn't stirring things up, the wakes of boats or ships in the Seaway are. Here it takes 12 minutes for the wake of a passing ship to reach the island, announced by waves breaking, seemingly out of nowhere.

(above) Madawaska Island sits at the mouth of Smuggler's Cove, so named because it served horse rustlers who would swim their spoils across narrow gaps between the islands to the U.S. shore. The original cottage was built in 1896 by William Devine, founder of Columbia Records.

(next pages) Five historic lighthouses remain in the 1000 Islands. Crossover Light was one of the first, built on an island of the same name in 1848. At this point, the Seaway crosses over from the U.S. shore to hug the Canadian mainland through a tight passage known as the Brockville Narrows.



A Magical Place

BY IAN CORISTINE

Some books have the power to fully absorb you: *A Year in Provence*, *Under the Tuscan Sun*, *The Olive Farm*. Each tells a story about falling in love with a magical place. Hopelessly smitten, the authors uproot their lives to make these places home.

When I took off on a random flight in my Challenger float plane in the summer of 1992, I had no idea such a thing could ever happen to me. Two hours after leaving my home near Montreal, I found myself looking down upon the most beautiful and fascinating place I have ever seen—the 1000 Islands.

More than 1,800 granite and pine islands lie in a shambles in the first 50 miles of the St. Lawrence River, just as it exits Lake Ontario. My plane provides the best seat in the house, but this is an extraordinary place from any angle.

It was love at first sight, but the love affair took three years to consummate. In '95, I became the owner of one of these islands, quite literally one in a thousand. Not far from Brockville, it's ideally suited to my needs, with a natural harbor and protected tie-down spot exactly a wingspan wide to shelter my plane from storms. Offered for sale just once in the last century, I was lucky enough to stumble across it at exactly the right moment. It was meant to be.

Resurrecting a long-neglected 1917 cottage offered interesting challenges but was well worth the effort. Spending summers here exceeded all expectations. Exploring thousands of miles of coastline is an ongoing adventure, especially with so much fascinating history. This was a favored place for natives and then it became the highway that settled the continent. Later still, the islands served as an exclusive summer retreat for the Northeast's business barons during the Gilded Age of



the late 1800s. The grand cottages, castles and yacht houses they left behind speak of a privileged lifestyle. Great fishing abounds, as does wildlife. Divers delight in well-preserved shipwrecks, while the parade of ships threading through adds another level of interest to this special place.

I learned the techniques of shooting photography while flying during a career in the aircraft business. When I couldn't find books to convey the beauty and magic I was seeing, I began to realize several unlikely ingredients had converged to present an opportunity: I had the tools and perspective to capture the extraordinary beauty of the place from a perspective most people never see. I also had the luxury of time to wait for fleeting and unusual moments which come only with patience.

The more I thought about it, the more this opportunity seemed an obligation because I knew these elements weren't likely to come

together again. My first book, *The 1000 Islands* was published in 2002, and two years later, had sold out three large printings, providing me the courage to switch careers. Two more books, *Water, Wind and Sky* and *The Thousand Islands* also have become bestsellers.

I now find myself writing a different kind of book. Titled *One in a Thousand*, it tells the tale of my flight of discovery and the unlikely adventures that followed—with photos, of course.

The moral of this story? Go discover someplace new. If you're not sure where, there's an amazing place not far away that is best appreciated by boat. But watch out! You might just find a new life.

On his site, 1000islandsphotoart.com, Ian shares more of his photography and monthly screen-savers. He's also a founder of the online magazine ThousandIslandsLife.com.

