

THE ACCIDENTAL ARTIST

An artist usually chooses a subject, but occasionally the subject chooses an artist

Words by **Jack Senett**
Photography by **Ian Coristine**

“**W**e could have turned left and continued a thoroughly pleasant but uneventful flight... Instead, we banked right and my life changed forever.” The intensity in Ian Coristine’s eyes confirms his undiminished wonder at the importance of such a simple choice. To him, that right turn was *the* right turn.

On that summer day in 1992, Ian was piloting his Challenger ultralight aircraft in loose formation with two of his friends in similar craft – just for the joy of the flight, with no particular destination in mind. Their serendipitous change in direction took them toward the northeastern reaches of Lake Ontario, where the lake empties into the St. Lawrence River.

As they neared the town of Brockville, the scenery below changed dramatically. Here, a chain of ancient mountains has eroded to become a multitude of islands scattered across the river. Ian found himself “awestruck, dumbfounded” by the beauty spread beneath him. It was his first look at the Thousand Islands from the air.

Stretching for 80 kilometres downstream from Kingston, Ontario, there are actually 1,865 islands in the Thousand Islands chain. They range from more than 100 square kilometres in area, to smaller ones hosting single residences, to rocky shoals and outcrops that are home

only to migratory waterfowl. Among the islands are thousands of kilometres of coastline bordering waterways with such wistful names as “Lost Channel”, “Fiddler’s Elbow”, “Lover’s Lane” and “Molly’s Gut”.

Each island is a world of its own, but also part of a unique ecosystem that’s home to many species found nowhere else in Canada. Ian observes that every island is different and that from each one the river appears to be a different place. UNESCO designated the Thousand Islands-Frontenac Arch region a World Biosphere Reserve in 2002. Some of the islands comprise St. Lawrence Islands National Park, Canada’s smallest.

The area has a rich history of human habitation going back 7,000 years, but its heyday as a vacation resort spanned the period from the mid-1870s to just before the First World War. In those heady pre-taxation days, business barons bought islands and built summer homes on them. Many of those “cottages” became veritable island castles, a few of which are being restored.

Lap of luxury

Those wealthy visitors who didn’t buy islands patronized newly built grand hotels offering luxurious accommodations. Steamboats plied the waters on tours among the islands. Summer colonies sprang up to cater to tourists of more

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modest means. Originally established as religious campgrounds, they evolved into the quaint gingerbread villages we see today.

When Ian looked down from his aircraft at the splendour of the islands, he was enchanted. He saw trees and granite and intricate shorelines. He saw ships and shipwrecks, mansions and cabins set like jewels. He saw water and land intertwined. He wondered aloud to his friends over the aircraft radio, "How can we live so close to something so astonishing and not even know it's here?" He knew he had found a new spiritual home. In the parlance of the island residents, "The river chose him."

Three years later, the Montrealer became an island owner. When Spong Island came up for sale for the first time in a century, Ian didn't hesitate. A particular attraction is a natural harbour that shelters his plane from the storms that occasionally rage, turning the river into a wild and dangerous place. He now spends each summer here, arriving when the ice leaves the river and departing when the ice returns.

"It's, um, rustic," he warned when we discussed my visit by telephone. When I arrived, he offered me a cup of tea and a seat at a simple table and chairs set on a large flat rock overlooking the river. No baronial mansion ever boasted a more magnificently appointed dining room.

Ian spoke about the subtly shifting colour and the ever-changing visual character of the area that awakened the artist within him. He found his eye constantly ensnared both by nature's broadest strokes and finest details – by the shimmer of entire forests turning their leaves in the wind, and by the arc of a single gull across a setting sun.

When Ian first became captivated by the Thousand Islands, he searched for anything that could adequately convey the beauty of the place. But all he found were pictures of Mounties, moose and maple trees.

He asked the director of a museum in nearby Gananoque, Ontario why there were so few pictures of the Thousand Islands. She didn't know, but she suggested that the local shop owners would be eager to offer such pictures if they were available.

As a former distributor of Challenger aircraft Ian was already an experienced aerial photographer, using in-flight action photos as a marketing tool. He began shooting his beguiling Thousand Islands from the air, showing the results to the shop owners. Their response was enthusiastic. No one from the area had ever seen images like these and they were fascinated.

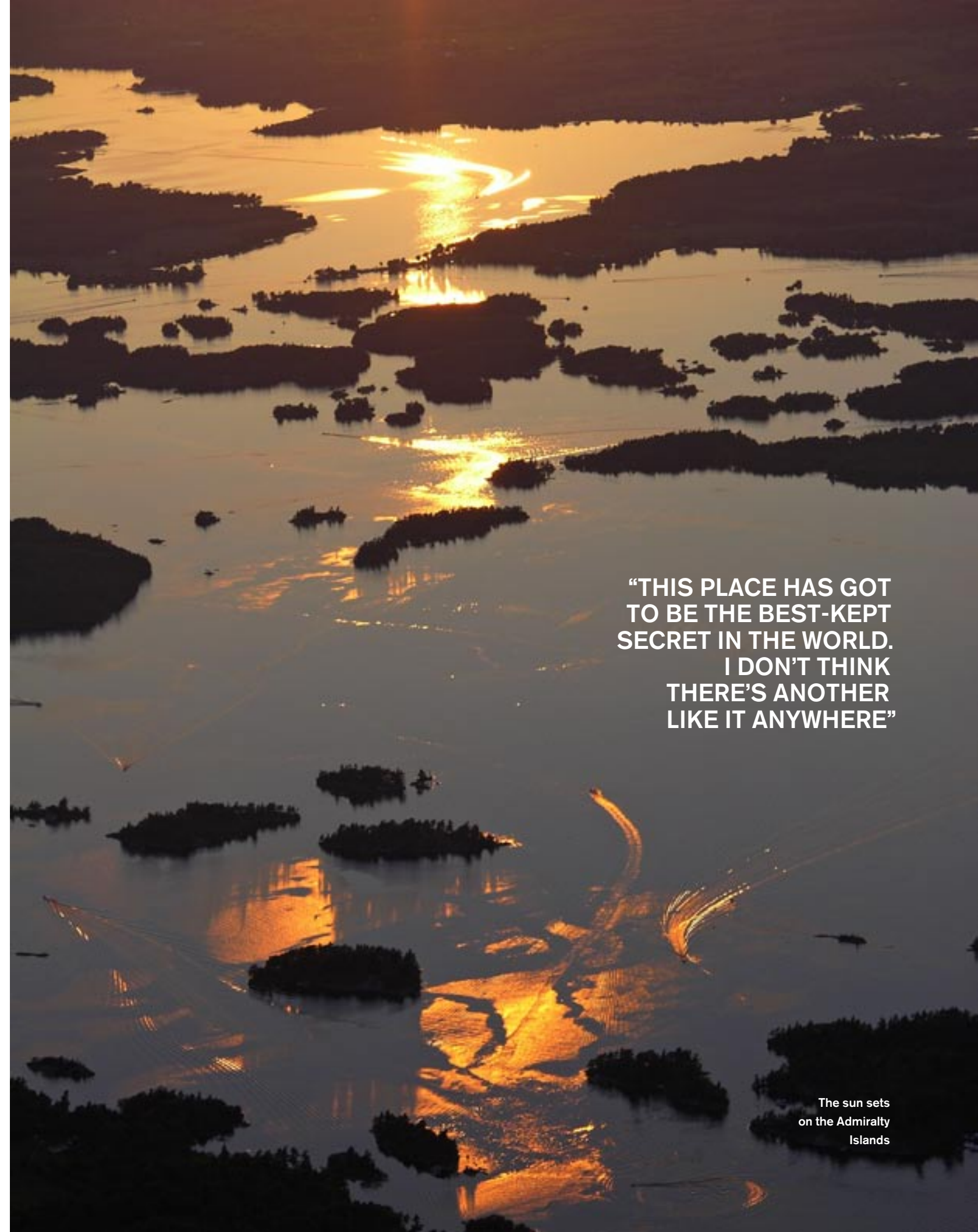
Magical dawns

Ian's image archive grew, and he realized he had a rare opportunity. Typically, photographers have limited time to complete an assignment. Ian has all the time in the world – he lives in the midst of his "assignment". He often awakes to magical dawns that won't wait for the rental plane and pilot that other photographers need. Just as importantly, his own aircraft can fly very slowly and, with its doors removed, provides unobstructed visibility.

Merchants along the river encouraged him to make his images available for sale. He began with a few posters and then a series of prints, but before long realized that, "nobody had enough wall space" for all the beauty he was documenting. It was time to publish a book.

Early in 2002, he self-published 10,000 copies of his first book: *The 1000 Islands*. To his dismay, he then

Left: Natural and manufactured shapes echo each other at the Three Sisters Lighthouse
Below: The appropriately named Dark Island at dawn



"THIS PLACE HAS GOT TO BE THE BEST-KEPT SECRET IN THE WORLD. I DON'T THINK THERE'S ANOTHER LIKE IT ANYWHERE"

The sun sets on the Admiralty Islands

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42 learned that a typical Canadian best-seller moves just 5,000 copies. His book appeared in three editions and sold more than 32,000 copies. Ian knows why his books are successful: “The view from above is a privileged one. Since humans lived in caves, we never had the ability to be up there and look down, and in many places it’s very beautiful... in this place it’s even more beautiful.”

He recalls arising in the middle of the night while working on one of his books – sleepily lugging fuel and equipment to the airplane, stumbling over rocks and roots in the dark. Then, having performed a meticulous pre-flight check, he executed a tricky takeoff in the pre-dawn murk, in order to catch the fleeting dawn light.

Golden slumbers

Ian flies and shoots photos, if not at dawn then in the final golden light of the day when shadows stretch and yawn, and the earth seems to kick back and relax for the evening. In between, he savours the peace of life in this unique archipelago. His constant companion is an alert Irish Setter named Molly, while his wife Mary, daughter Hayley and son Scotty visit throughout the season.

“This place has got to be the best-kept secret in the world. I don’t think there’s another like it anywhere,” he says as we stand onshore and gaze across the ceaselessly flowing St. Lawrence.

Ian’s collection of Thousand Islands photographs now totals more than 25,000 images. His second book of Thousand Island photographs, *Water, Wind and Sky*, was released in mid-2005 and also became a best-seller. Its subtitle is “Ian Coristine’s Thousand Islands”. Of course he makes no claim to actually possessing this place but, clearly, this place possesses him. 

To learn more about Ian Coristine and his art, visit

WWW.THOUSANDISLANDSBOOKS.COM



13
“THE VIEW FROM ABOVE IS A PRIVILEGED ONE. IN MANY PLACES IT’S VERY BEAUTIFUL... IN THIS PLACE IT’S EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL”

Ducks Unlimited Canada made these zigzag cuts in Wolfe Island’s cattail marsh to provide secluded breeding area for waterfowl