

A trip to Ontario proves rewarding

BY PAM HOUGHTON
SPECIAL WRITER

In keeping with the tradition of the driving vacation, my husband, two kids and I explored a section of Ontario, Canada, where rural ruled. Armed with nothing but a AAA Trip Tik and a vague idea of our destination, we crossed the Blue Water Bridge in Port Huron to Canada and headed north on Provincial Route 21 along the eastern coast of Lake Huron.



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HAWLEY
Natural: Inglis Falls.

A few Google searches on the Internet and word-of-mouth from a couple of friends beforehand pointed us in the direction of the Bruce Peninsula. The base of the peninsula is roughly parallel with Traverso City, the northernmost area, not as far north as Mackinaw. The peninsula is home to the Bruce Trail, a sometimes rough, rocky hiking trail with limestone cliffs that runs along the Georgian Bay coastline.

Since we had no reservations and few inklings of where to stay, we settled on Owen Sound. However, an annual tradition called the Summerfolk Music Festival drew such a huge weekend crowd that all the local hotels, motels and B&B breakfasts were sold out. We were diverted to Warton, a small town less than 30 miles north by the Ontario Tourist Board (a quick roaming call away). There, we stayed at the Pacific Hotel where we received very basic accommodations but it went sleeping in the van.

After a night of tentative sleep and breakfast at the local diner, we drove north to Tobermory. There, you can take ferries to several different islands that separate Lake Huron from the other side of the water, the lovely Georgian Bay. One of the islands is called Flowerpot Island for the intriguing rock formations that closely resemble that of your every day flowerpot. The island is accessible by a glass-bottomed boat tour where the water is so clear they say you can see a number of old shipwrecked boats underneath the

gated a very rocky shore path - small boulders, rock slabs, small groups of rocks packed tightly together - until we got close to the water. There we languished in the natural beauty of the rough, pristine water as it hit the jagged edges of the rocks and the sounds of wind-soaked silence.

The music festival in Owen Sound concluded, freeing up space in the hotels there. We spent the next several nights at the Jocal Days Inn, which we used as a base for day trips. We drove back to Warton to visit a conservation area where we explored Bruce's Caves. Another hike through another thick forest on a damp trail led us to a series of caves.

I was expecting stalactites, stalagmites and a tour guide, but instead you are left on your own to navigate through caves inhabited by the ever-present rocks. We found ourselves gingerly climbing up and down the rocks as we entered and exited each cave - one must be careful to use those rocks firmly in place - beware of the wigglers.

We also visited Inglis Falls Conservation Area, located just south of the city. There, we admired the view of a dramatic waterfall as it surges from the natural curve of limestone cliffs and walked another quieter path along the river. You can view the waterfall from several vantage points - across the river, behind the waterfall and as a few visitors did, the bottom at the base of the river. Our son, fascinated by the strength and fury of the cascading water, wanted to get a bit too close to the water - it took the strength of two parents to hold him back.

We found the rural environment and accessibility to outdoor activities in this part of Canada a welcome intrusion into our busy lives. It's not bad to take a few moments to experience something that's not typical of every day reality. After all, there's nothing like getting in touch with one's inner hiker.

Provincial parks

Further south, we stopped at Cyprus Lake Hiking Trails, one of the many well-maintained provincial parks throughout the peninsula. The park, a few miles off the main road, had several links to the Bruce Trail. We parked our car and got a map from the park employees in the tourist office who recommend three hiking trails depending on the type of hiker you are. Because of the age of our children, we chose the shortest trail, 30 minutes to the shoreline.

We walked through a dense, quiet forest with tall pine trees and the occasional surprise sound of an animal brushing against the foliage, alternating between a dirt path sprinkled with pine needles, and wood planks constructed specifically for the trail. The silence was eerie but welcoming. As we drew closer to the end of our trail, we heard the sound of the Georgian Bay waves rushing the shore. As we emerged, we navigated

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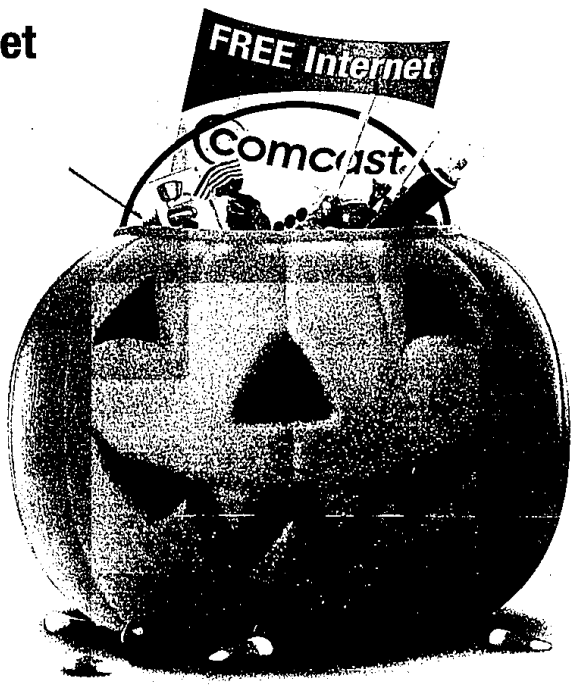
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