

Country Roads: Big Rideau Lake Boat Rentals

Houseboats have everything you need to explore the historic Rideau Canal

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE AUGUST 13, 2012



courtesy Heather Heins, Big Rideau Lake Boat Rentals

Photograph by: courtesy Heather Heins, Big Rideau Lake Boat Rentals

Editor's note: Some of the details might have changed since the original publication date. Please check with the establishment before heading out!

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Scroll down for Rochelle's column.

Portland, Ont., is a three-hour, 15-minute drive. Take Highways 20 and 401 towards Toronto. Exit at Gananoque and follow Route 32 north to Route 15 north.

Big Rideau Lake Boat Rentals, 15 Water St., Portland, 613-272-2580, 613-880-9288, www.bigrideaulakeboatrentals.com. Single-day rentals for a 22-foot-long boat: \$195 for up to 10 people, until 6 p.m.

Seven-day houseboat rentals include lock passes, but do not include an \$80 docking pass and damage deposits. In high season (until Aug. 26), four different houseboats range in price from \$1,695 to \$2,195 a week. In low season (Aug. 26-Oct. 15), prices range from \$1,200 to \$1,695 for seven days. Four-day rentals are available, but not in July and August. Canoes and kayaks cost \$75 for the week, with houseboat.

Rideau Canal information: Rideau Heritage Route Tourism Association: 613-389-4783 or www.rideauheritageroute.ca.

Find the ignition switch. Master the gearshift lever. Rev up the throttle. You now are ready to captain a houseboat, taking your family, friends and even your dog on a cruise along the historic and picturesque Rideau Canal.

The Rideau Canal runs from Kingston, where Lake Ontario empties into the St. Lawrence River, north for 202 kilometres to Ottawa, connecting a series of lakes and rivers with 27 locks. Opened in 1832, the canal was built as a military supply route, but ultimately was only used for commercial barges and steamers, and eventually for pleasure boats.

In 2007, the Rideau Canal was named a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site, along with such landmarks as the Statue of Liberty in New York, the Acropolis in Athens and India's Taj Mahal. The award is a tribute to the engineering feat that saw the construction of a waterway through swamps and rocky, scrubby wilderness. Now the well-travelled tourist route is known for scenic parks, quaint towns and quiet bays.

Heather and Robert Heins, owners of Big Rideau Lake Boat Rentals in Portland, Ont., manage seven boats for single-day cruises and for trips of four to seven nights. With each boat rental, they also dispense safety tips, navigational charts and free advice on such marine subjects as the best docking sites for a great lunch and the best bait shops.

Typically, houseboaters take off for a week, cruising at a leisurely eight to 10 knots per hour (about 15 to 18 kilometres per hour) and covering sites along the Rideau Canal. The boats are wide, lumbering floating chalets complete with barbecues, air conditioning, small kitchens and a variety of sleeping arrangements.

"The idea is to stop, not motor all day," Robert Heins said. "You can motor for about two hours, then find a nice, quiet bay and drop anchor. Then swim a little or fish for walleye or trout or bass, and then you can barbecue your catch on board.

"And if you dock at small towns like Newboro, Jones Falls or Westport, there is so much to see and do with all the restaurants and shops."

For one-week trips, the Heins recommended cruising from Portland south to Kingston and back. You pass through about eight sets of locks and several quaint towns.

It sounds effortless, but there are small challenges when you vacation on a houseboat. Piloting in

open waters is usually easy, unless you run into a rainstorm that affects visibility. And navigating locks and docks takes a little practice. The Heins give their clients a one- to two-hour instruction session to make sure they are familiar with safety measures, the controls, docking, navigation charts and recovery moves.

A good introductory boat is the Miramichi, an easygoing 32-footer (9.7 metres), that chugs along at about 15 kilometres per hour and can accommodate two adults and two children or three adults. It's also ideal for a couple.

"It's perfect for someone who has never driven a boat," Heather Heins said. "You can push off the dock with one foot and it's easy to steer. It's my favourite boat because there are no worries."

She has deep roots in the marine business and a nostalgic feeling for this houseboat. The Miramichi was named for the river in New Brunswick where an ancestor, William Davidson, was the first permanent European settler in the mid-1700s. Davidson made his mark trading in fish, lumber and furs, and also built the first sailing vessel launched in the area, which he christened The Miramichi.

To move up in piloting skill and capacity, the Heins's also have 37-, 40- and 42-footers (about 11, 12 and 13 metres), which sleep four, six or eight people. Shipboard living can be comfortable, but it's tight. The salon sofa and the dinette table unfold into beds. The master state room usually has a queen-sized bed. The houseboats' kitchens are compact, but fully equipped with microwaves, wine-openers and garlic presses.

Houseboaters can stock their own provisions and cook while on board, but many simply bring the fixings for breakfast and have lunch and dinner at stops along the Rideau Canal. Day trippers often head north to Perth, which takes about two hours, including passage through two locks.

In Perth, the Goodwood Oven cooks up casual fare with style, and the Fall River Restaurant is a country-style spot for fine dining.

Newboro is well worth a stop for Kilbourn's, a huge gift and decor emporium.

Before you leave Portland, stop in at The Carousel on Highway 15. It's a combination gift shop, bakery and café with great soups, sandwiches and tea served in fine English porcelain cups. This is the place to sample Ontario's traditional butter tart, a flaky tulip of pastry filled with brown sugar, butter and corn syrup, similar to the base for Quebec's pecan pie. Other hot-sellers are fudge brownies, apple pie and lemon-cream cake, all fresh from the oven.

Stock up while you can. If you get stranded on your houseboat, you'll want a full supply.

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