

# The Erie Canal

## AN EXTRAORDINARY WATERWAY

Story | Mark Stevens

Photos | Sharon Matthews-Stevens



The 'towpath' near Pittsford is popular with cyclists.



Each canal boat booked through Erie Canal Adventures comes with bikes.



Fellow Erie Canal Adventures clients share the lock with us.



The colourful lift bridge at Spencerport.

As I shift our chartered canal boat into neutral, I'm soothed by the soundtrack of bird calls, the occasional plaintive horn of a distant train and the hum of our engine.

I reach for the VHF to radio the lock-master in charge of Erie Canal's Lock 32 dead ahead. Our boat spins gently in the current like a maple key in a mud puddle.

"This is *Onondaga*," I say. "Headed westbound and requesting passage."

Unbroken emerald forest lines the south bank. A lone cyclist pedals along a trail

called a "towpath" on the north bank. 200 years ago, mules were used on this trail to "tow" cargo-laden barges through these waters.

I feel like we've been transported through time.

"Come ahead *Onondaga*," the lock-master replies. "All clear."

We enter a narrow stone chamber with walls reaching 6 metres above us. The massive doors close behind me; millions of litres of water rush into the chamber.

My wife Sharon and I secure *Onondaga* to the seawall with dock lines. As we

ascend, I review our passage along the canal so far: several small waterfalls, a shallow foliage-festooned canyon, a herd of deer watching our progress, great blue herons at water's edge.

It's been an extraordinary boat ride, which is hardly surprising.

The Erie Canal is an extraordinary waterway.

### AN EXTRAORDINARY BOAT RIDE

I'm both boater and history buff so the chance to explore the delights of the Erie Canal has long been on my mind,

but the logistics always dissuaded me. Lake Ontario boaters can access the Erie Canal via the Oswego Canal but that's a long way from my Toronto yacht club. Furthermore, I'm a sailor; without unstepping my mast I couldn't navigate the canal anyway.

Then I discovered a company called Erie Canal Adventures.

Boasting a fleet of purpose-built canal

boats, this company facilitates nautical canal exploration on a self-drive boat suited to your crew size, and options that include 3-, 4- or 7-night cruises.

Even if you're not a boater, you could comfortably skipper one of their vessels after the company's excellent onshore orientation and on-water instruction, which includes a lesson on negotiating a nearby lock.

On a sunny August afternoon, we cast off.

Taking Erie Canal Adventures Owner Brian Keenan's advice, our float plan would lead us through historic villages, stopping at museums, dining at water's edge, exploring the wealth of wineries, breweries and distilleries along the way.

"Go east," counseled Keenan, "and feel like you've gotten away from it all."





Writer Mark Stevens at the helm of Onondaga.

Our chosen route leads us through those beautiful villages, and between these various ports of call it's just us and nature, hours passing without seeing anyone but the occasional biker on shore, an

occasional kayaker, a SUP boarder. Even longer passes without seeing another boat. It's an extraordinary boat ride. On an extraordinary waterway.

## AN EXTRAORDINARY WATERWAY

Before meeting up with the folks at Erie Canal Adventures to begin our voyage, we stroll through nearby Palmyra, a place billing itself "Queen of the Erie Canal Towns", since it's one of the few Upstate settlements that precedes the canal's construction.

Approaching the canal itself early in the morning, we cross a former railroad bridge, now pedestrian access only. Gazing down at an arrow-straight expanse of water, I'm reminded of the words of a traditional folk song celebrating the canal:

*Low bridge, everybody down...*

The first line of the chorus of *The Erie Canal Song*, written more than a century ago.

My inner historian is delighted: barge traffic long preceded the birth of the railway, a fleet of vessels piled high with cargo constantly traversing the canal. Make the bridges low, railroad designers reasoned, and barge cargo capacity would be greatly minimized. Bad for the barges but good for the railroads.

We visit a nearby museum. In a cellar



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beneath the floor of this former depot we notice a stable, where mules were housed when they weren't working. I'm reminded again of that folk song, which pays tribute to those hard-working animals with the lines:

*I've got an old mule, and her name is Sal / we've hauled some barges in our days...*

I'm overwhelmed by a sense of history.

If you're heading to Erie Canal, make sure you make time to visit the Port Byron Erie Canal Heritage Park and learn about how the canal radically transformed settlement and commerce in much of North America. Cargo headed west by land could take weeks. The canal allowed barges or passenger boats to do the trip in just days.

The canal traces a course of roughly 300 nautical miles from its eastern terminus in the town of Waterford to the Niagara River. With an elevation differential of nearly 200 metres, navigation from one end to the other is facilitated by a series of 36 locks and 15 lift bridges.

Upon its completion in October 1825,



*A distillery at Fairport adds to the appeal of this port of call.*

the canal was North America's longest artificial waterway (almost twice the length of the Rideau Canal), second in size only to China's Grand Canal.

This is a truly extraordinary waterway.

#### EXTRAORDINARY PORTS OF CALL

Given a boat speed of 5 knots and our chosen 4-day timetable, we're aware that we won't take the measure of this canal. But

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*Perfect summer evening: a Fairport live jazz concert beside the water.*



*One more fabulous meal on shore, this one at Compané Trattoria.*

bandstand where weekly summer concerts are a must-do. It's quiet tonight, so we take a stroll through the village, marvelling at the wealth of historic structures we find here. That should be no surprise: Pittsford is the oldest incorporated municipality in New York State.

We cross a bridge and stroll the opposite shore of the canal and discover another must-do, a microbrewery, aptly named 'Lock 32'.

The following evening finds us in Spencerport, tying up just east of a whimsically painted lift bridge at brand new docks beside Spencerport Depot and Canal Museum (they offer full facilities for visiting boaters there). Dine beneath

we'll still get a nice introduction. We're delighted to discover an unforgettable trio of villages on our route, spending a night docked at each.

On our first night at Pittsford, we tie up on modern docks several metres from a

colourful umbrellas at the canal side patio of 'Clutch on the Canal', then take a stroll on undulating side streets to check out 19th century homes boasting a variety of architecture.

Our last night finds us in Fairport, where we dock just steps from a lively main street.

In the heyday of the canal, one traveller supposedly described this settlement as a "fair port".

Apocryphal or true, the name stuck. We go exploring by foot, passing a jazz band warming up in a canal side bandstand, then strolling along a street past a half-dozen restaurants and a variety of shops housed in period buildings. We dine at a highly-recommended casual dining spot called Compané Trattoria, which neighbours two microbreweries and a distillery replete with tasting room.

Over dessert I decide that whether the story is true or not, this certainly is a "fair port".

When we return to the boat, having discovered yet one more microbrewery on that side of the canal, after being serenaded by the riffs of the band now performing for a crowd of people ensconced in lawn chairs, I draw one more inescapable conclusion.

The canal's ports of call are every bit as extraordinary as the waterway itself.


## AN EXTRAORDINARY PARTY

In light of the fact that the Erie Canal was completed 200 years ago this October, this year's celebrations will include a slate of events unequalled in the canal's history.

According to Erie Canal public relations representative Colleen Onuffer, "this is sure to be an exciting year of canal activity".

And you don't have to be a boater to join in. Already on tap are paddling events, biking events, music along the canal, historical and educational presentations, and even a floating circus.

Celebrations continue right into autumn when the *Seneca Chief*, a traditionally-built, full-size replica of the canal boat that opened the waterway in 1825, will traverse the length of the canal, making several stops along the way.

It promises to be an extraordinary party for an extraordinary waterway: the Erie Canal. 

## An Erie Canal Float Plan



- Scan this QR Code to check out your options with Erie Canal Adventures. Book a 34' vessel (suited for a couple), a 41' or 42' boat if you're bringing the family. There are 3-, 4- or 7-night charter choices along with sample itineraries. Every boat comes fully equipped.



- The bicentennial celebration of the Erie Canal's completion means this will be no ordinary summer. Scan the QR Code to explore all the festivities this season!