

1000 Islands Harbor Hotel



A welcoming fire pit at the 1000 Islands Harbor Hotel.

Nautical Pleasures in New York's 1000 Islands

BY JILL FERGUS

Ask people, even New Yorkers, where the 1000 Islands are and you might get a few blank stares. Though not as known as other Empire State vacation spots like the Catskills or the Adirondacks, this on-the-rise region has plenty to offer visitors. Are there really a thousand islands? Actually, there are 1,864 — some quite large, others just islets — that dot a scenic 50-mile stretch of the St. Lawrence River between northern New York and Canada. Add to the mix charming shoreline villages, historic lighthouses, tales of pirates and Prohibition smugglers and you have all the ingredients for a great getaway!

A major boon to the area was the 2014 opening of the 1000 Islands Harbor Hotel, a AAA Four Diamond property

on a prime waterfront location in the low-key village of Clayton. The staff couldn't be friendlier and touches, like the front desk staff greeting you by name and complimentary morning coffee offered on each floor, set the welcoming tone. Just off the lobby, with its warm color scheme and fireplace, you'll find vintage black-and-white photos of the old steamships that plied these waters during the region's Gilded Age heyday. And while the hotel celebrates Clayton's rich maritime history, it has all the modern amenities you'd expect: an indoor heated pool, Jacuzzi, fitness center and banquet facilities (weddings here have become quite popular).

The 105 rooms are quite spacious and feature flat screens and nautical photographs (most rooms have river views). Mine had a window seat overlooking the mighty St. Lawrence, but I needed to get

into town — it was time to hit the shops. There are dozens of flavored balsamic vinegars and olive oils at 1000 Islands Cruet, while locally made cheddar is the thing to buy at 1000 Islands River Rat Cheese. The Golden Locker sells Sea Bags made from recycled sails and award-winning wine can be sampled at Coyote Moon Vineyards' in-town tasting room (the actual winery, where you can take a tour and sip a glass of chardonnay overlooking the vineyards, is nearby and highly recommended).

The Antique Boat Museum is a can't-miss attraction. Housed in a former lumber mill, the collection of 300-plus watercraft includes dugout canoes, racing boats, vintage mahogany vessels and classic St. Lawrence River skiffs, which are small wooden fishing boats. There's also an exhibit on the area's history. After a visit by President Ulysses S. Grant in 1872, it became a popular summer resort for the wealthy (they journeyed up by train, then took steamships to grand hotels like the now defunct Frontenac on Round Island). One such person was George Boldt, the manager of Manhattan's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. The museum offers tours of his houseboat La Duchesse, complete with nine staterooms. Boldt eventually bought an island and built a fairy tale-style castle (you can see it up close via a sightseeing cruise).

I had lunch across from the museum at Wood Boat Brewery, with tasty brick-oven pizzas and craft brews. I also had several excellent meals at the hotel's Seaway Grille, serving dishes like steamed clams, roasted duck, gnocchi and seafood scampi. The wine list features local labels as well as those from the Finger Lakes, Napa and beyond. The bar is a fun spot to nosh on charcuterie and sliders and meet locals (I chatted with a few and you got the sense of how happy they are with the arrival of the hotel and what it means to the community). In warm weather, the place to be (especially at sunset) is the Riverside Patio, a

sprawling outdoor space where you can have a drink and relax on an Adirondack chair beside a fire pit as pleasure boats glide by.

I was ready to get out on the water, so I joined a tour with Capt. Jeff Garnsey, who owns Classic Island Cruises. A self-proclaimed "river rat," he knows every inch of the archipelago, and as he navigated past million-dollar summer "cottages" and wooded islands with just a single home, he pointed out places of interest. We saw Rock Island Lighthouse, where pirate Bill Johnston, who robbed British ships during the War of 1812, lived out his days as the keeper, and Watch Island, so named for the "watch" bootleggers kept for the Coast Guard. I asked about the many freighters I saw, and he explained that they were transporting cargo along the St. Lawrence Seaway (a commercial shipping channel, marked by buoys, that connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Great Lakes).

Back on terra firma, Captain Jeff provided the ultimate 1000 Islands experience — the shore dinner. This centuries-old tradition started when local fishing guides would prepare a meal (using cast-iron pans over an open fire) for their guests after a day on the water. You start with a fried fat-back (similar to bacon) sandwich on white bread, followed by fried fish (perhaps northern pike or perch), salted potatoes, corn on the cob and a side salad (with 1000 Islands dressing — yes, this is where it's from!), and, for dessert, French toast. It's totally over the top (fat-back is pure fat, by the way) and totally delicious. I loved this tradition and the many others that I've learned about the 1000 Islands — a region that's just waiting to be discovered.

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