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Rideau Canal a monumental feat of engineering

Built as a line of defence against the U.S. 175 years ago, the 'By way' still amazes visitors

Gordon Beck, CanWest News Service

There are highways and back roads, but there's only one By way. Officially called the Rideau Canal, this monumental work was supervised by Lt.-Col. John By of the British Royal Engineers.

This year, on the 175th anniversary of its completion, the canal received world heritage status from UNESCO, joining such illustrious icons as China's Great Wall, India's Taj Mahal and Quebec's Old City.

Built from 1826 to 1832, the Rideau Canal was intended to be an inland line of defence and communication against American intrusions: the War of 1812 having been a reminder of the threat posed by our southern neighbour. To this end, it was peppered with blockhouses and defensible lockmaster stations.



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Jones Falls Locks: A private yacht heads downstream towards Kingston on the Rideau Canal. Gordon Beck, Canwest News Service

It was pushed through a wilderness of marshes, granite and limestone. The mostly Irish workers were joined by British military engineers, French Canadians and Scottish stone masons toiling with saws, pick axes, chisels and explosives (the cause of not-infrequent fatalities). Malaria took many other lives. The 200-km distance between Kingston and Ottawa (then called By Town) required 50 dams and 47 cut stone locks.

Today the crack of the pick axe has been replaced by the haunting call of a loon or perhaps the Oyes of a town crier. What better time than fall and what better year to celebrate this feat of engineering. Merrickville is the ideal port of departure.

Fondly called the "jewel of the Rideau," the village of 1,000 has the most classified buildings per capita in Ontario. That's just for starters. Add excellent restaurants, a spa, pubs, cosy inns and B&Bs, walking trails, a bird sanctuary, kayak and canoe rentals, boutiques, the canal locks, marinas, industrial ruins and the largest Rideau blockhouse (1832) complete with moat (now a museum open weekends).

The village is compact. Main St. parallels the canal and points of interest run west from Sam Jakes Inn (1861) to the Locks, a fine Italian restaurant located in the Old Town Hall (1856). Most stores are found in the first three blocks of St. Lawrence St., and many artists studios are in what is called Merrickville South. Here you'll find the celebrated glassworks of Kevin Robert Gray. Around the corner, at 123 Bruce, are the delightful painted gourds of Claudette Hart. Like a snowflake, each one is unique. As good things come in threes, turn the next corner, to 606 Elgin, and discover The Studio at Greyweathers, where Holly Dean creates artwork for the Cirque du Soleil among others.

Farther west on the canal you'll find the Depot, run by the Friends of the Rideau. Brochures for the "Depot to Dam" walking trail and on the locks are found here. This is also where you take the Rideau River National Bird Sanctuary tour on the Harriet By, a small electric boat. If you feel more energetic, rent a canoe or kayak from the Canal Gallery at 230 St. Lawrence. By all means take a telephoto lens, but keep a respectable distance from water fowl, especially loons which are very sensitive to interference.

If there was but one website for your journey it would have to be rideau-info.com. Hosted by Ken Watson, author, raconteur, historian, it leaves no (canal) stone unturned. His book, Rideau Lockstations is available at the Depot in Merrickville and is highly recommended.

IF YOU GO ... www.rideauheritageroute.ca

Where to stay

Sam Jakes Inn, 1861 (www.samjakesinn.com) with a spa and excellent restaurant rates highly in Merrickville. The Millisle Bed and Breakfast (613-269-3627) is a favourite for its ambience and location. For a range of B&Bs, see BBCanada.com, and click on Ontario, then eastern Ontario.

Where to eat

The Sam Jakes Inn and The Serendipity Bistro (106 Main St. W., 613-269-2017) partner with local agro-producers for farm fresh ingredients. Both have Sunday brunch. Or pick up a picnic from Brewed Awakenings (205 St Lawrence, www.brewedawakenings.ca), which prepares sandwiches, wraps and homemade desserts. For a thematic variation try the Gad's Hill Place (www.dickens-restaurant.com), a restaurant and bar named after the home of Charles Dickens.