

Scenic Covered Portage Cove, one of the most popular anchorages in the North Channel, is the perfect setting for a cocktail hour raftup.



# HEAVEN ON EARTH

*The hearts of trailer sailors more accustomed to saltwater cruising are stolen by the rhapsody of rock and pine found in Lake Huron's freshwater North Channel.*

**BY PIXIE HAUGHWOUT  
AND RALPH FOLSOM**





**W**e were cruising New York's Erie Canal one summer when the crews of two large sailboats, looking down at *Ensemble*, our humble 24-foot Dolphin sloop, said the same thing: "Your boat is trailerable, isn't it? You ought to go to the North Channel. We're coming up from the Caribbean because the North Channel is a better cruising destination."

Raised in New England and now living in San Diego, California, we were clueless as to what the North Channel was all about. The first time we heard these words, Pixie, my wife and captain, and I let them ride. But the second time they registered. So where is this North Channel, we asked? Lake Huron, they said. To which, scout's honor, we actually said, "Lake Huron ... is that the one with Chicago on it?"



Happily, these kind cruisers from Michigan took pity on us, pulled out their charts and undertook some remedial education. Not Lake Michigan, you dummies; the North Channel is above Lake Huron in Ontario, Canada. For cruisers, it's heaven on Earth. Six years and a lot of homework later, we drove *Ensemble* from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, launched her in Traverse City, Michigan, and left our truck and trailer in Penetanguishene, Ontario, at the east end of Georgian Bay. Then we took a rental car back to our little pocket cruiser with eight weeks to make our way back to its rig.

### Love at First Cruise

In Michigan, Suttons Bay, Beaver Island, Les Cheneaux Islands and Mackinac Island were all warmups for the as yet unknown magic of the North Channel. Our last port of call in the States was De Tour Village, Michigan, a sleepy little town across from Drummond Island, the only U.S. island of size reasonably considered part of the North Channel. There we met Cris and Paul Heil, genuinely good people, like so many Midwesterners. They lent us a 1987 copy of Marjorie Cahn Brazer's classic North Channel cruising guide, *Well-Favored Passage* (first published in 1975). We didn't know it, but that guide would change our lives.

Gypsies at heart, we'd been trailer sailing for decades: the Sea of Cortez, the entire U.S. Eastern seaboard, the Pacific Northwest, the Florida Keys and more. Four years hence, our plan was to sail the Bahamas. Three weeks later, in Little Current, Ontario, we sat in the Anchor Inn afraid to speak about falling in love with the North Channel.

"Cruising will never get better than this in our lifetimes," Captain Pixie said to her first mate. "Let's stay."

We called the Heils about winter storage in De Tour, which they made possible, and have never left the cruising environment that has brought us rapture.

Brazer's guide had reeled us in with remote, enchanting island anchorages and charming village ports. We called it "cruising with Marjorie." Long before GPS navigation, she was a pioneer cruiser. She was also an exquisite storyteller. Her North Channel tales remain delightful: "The Great Sawmill Robbery," "The Curse of the Bearwalk," "Captain Black Pete Campbell" and more. After three sparkling editions of *Well-Favored Passage*, Marjorie left us in 1992. Heirs to her legacy, ours is a love story, and we've built a boat barn in De Tour Village where *Ensemble* waits for us to come back each summer. Not much on headroom, *Ensemble* was designed by Sparkman & Stephens, draws 3 feet on her full keel with centerboard up, and loves a reach.

### The Well-Favored Passage

Native Americans from Canada's First Nations found the North Channel a well-favored passage sheltered from mighty Lake Huron. French fur trappers, headed west out of Montreal, followed in their wake by canoe. Annual gatherings for fish runs at the falls of Sault Ste. Marie, and at the Straits of Mackinac, generated substantial commerce. The building of British and United States forts stabilized the region, despite several wars. Miners, loggers, homesteaders and buccaneers arrived in the age of sail, then steam.

Just exactly where is the North Channel? Sweeping away definitional disputes, we think of it as running from Lake Superior at the twin cities of Sault Ste.



Marie (one in Michigan, one across the St. Marys River in Canada) approximately 120 nautical miles to Killarney at the entrance to Georgian Bay. Headed west to east from the Saults, once past St. Joseph Island, the North Channel is sheltered from Lake Huron on the south by Drummond, Cockburn and Manitoulin islands. Its north shore is mainland Ontario. In between, 20- to 30-mile crossings make for exhilarating passages. Inside this modest-size channel, the Gold Coast for island cruising

extends 60 miles east from Blind River on the north shore to Killarney.

"In the islands is the stuff of dreams," Brazer wrote. Bays within bays embrace almost countless anchorages. Little Current's swing bridge linking Manitoulin and the mainland is a choke point, effectively creating two distinct cruising grounds. Little Current is also home to Turners, longtime suppliers of North Channel charts and books. Pay heed: Despite the town's name, wind-driven currents flowing past the





*Ralph Folsom and Pixie Haughwout (right) hauled Ensemble, their Sparkman Stephens sloop (below, right), from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to Traverse City, Michigan, where they launched her. Then they drove the truck and trailer to Penetanguishene, Ontario, rented a car back to the boat, and gave themselves eight weeks to explore (see map), though they're the first to admit they could take the rest of their lives cruising this magical destination. Along the way they visited the Canadian Yacht Charter base at Gore Bay (above, left), and they made plenty of new friends, too (left).*

swing bridge can reach 6 knots.

June through August is prime cruising time, though the locals swear by September. Just about anytime, the North Channel is addicting. Two small Canadian charter companies offer well-maintained sailboats and trawlers (see Charter Companies, page 52). Sailors from Great Lakes ports regularly journey north to get there each summer. Chicago-Mac Race participants linger with family and friends in a time-honored tradition. Great Loop cruisers – the name for those circumnavigating the eastern North American continent – consider it the high point of their voyage. Members of the Great Lakes Cruising Club often

rendezvous in the North Channel. Trailer sailors drive from the South, New England, all over the Midwest and, like us, from California to savor its bounty. The convivial Trailer Sailors Association organizes annual North Channel cruises, perfect for neophyte boaters. After a season or two, some succumb to the addiction and winter their boats in North Channel marinas and boatyards.

**Embrace The Magic**

Lake Huron's North Channel and adjacent Georgian Bay offer more than 32,000 freshwater islands. Though it may seem hard to believe, the Bay of Islands, a large bay with hundreds of islands inside the North Channel, was first charted in



MAPS BY SHANNON CAIN TUMING; COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS



2002. There are even parts of the North Channel and Georgian Bay that remain uncharted.

Nearly all of the islands are public, with more wild blueberries to pick than your crew can eat. Forgive us salties if we dwell on the ever so sweet fresh water of the North Channel. Your body, your engine, your boat will all adore the bliss of sweet-water sailing. The pristine water quality and clarity are phenomenal.

This is also wilderness cruising, an idyll of anchorages and village ports of call. As Marjorie famously wrote: "The North Channel is a rhapsody in rock and pine, high bluff and deep bay, orchestrated in its own key. The elevations are dramatic, the daylight long and sharp, the northern lights brilliant against the night sky. The North Channel is a state of mind, a distant haunt of peace, of timelessness, of mystery, of tempest, of aching beauty." To which we add: Monarch butterflies hang glide in your wind wake, and the call of the loon resonates in your soul.

Nearly all of the North Channel is in Canadian waters. Its hospitable, generous people bid you most welcome. There are no tides to think of here. Swim every day in 10 feet or less, where the warm water has been baking all day on hot rose-colored granite. Put out a line, and reel in a northern pike, salmon, lake trout or walleye. The sailing itself is a dream come true. Winds from the west typically clock in about 11 a.m., peak at 15 knots around 3 p.m., and are gone by dinner at 6. The sun drops below the horizon about 10 p.m., a serene afterglow to your daily adventures.

Here are some of the ultimate destinations in the North Channel, east and west of Little Current's



swing bridge. In the west, the Benjamin Islands, whose rocks are as startlingly pink as a brand-new baby, create secluded single-slot gunkholes. Beware: Captain Pixie defines gunkholing as "going somewhere you probably shouldn't." A large, readily accessible anchorage between North and South

Benjamin has room for all. On the southern end of South Benjamin, you can anchor and tie up in gorgeous finger coves. The Benjamins are probably the North Channel's most popular destination. For extraordinary seclusion, blueberry-strewn Porcupine Island lies slightly east of South Benjamin. Its only

anchorage can take one boat captained with courage through a gap in the rocks so tight your heart will race. For 12 years we waited our turn. Finally, in 2010, Porcupine was unoccupied. In we went, using a five-point shore tie that still left a bit of bottom paint behind. We stayed for days.

## CUSTOMS AND IMMIGRATION

Skippers must check in with authorities of the Canada Border Service Agency by telephone. Some ports have dedicated phone lines for this purpose set up dockside. After a few formalities regarding firearms, alcohol, pets, passengers and vessel registration, typically you will be given a clearance number good for the length of your cruise.

Clearing into the United States is more demanding. Pre-arranged and pre-paid programs called NEXUS and I-68 allow you to clear conveniently by phone. Otherwise, you must clear in person at an authorized center such as Drummond Island Yacht Haven, Mackinac Island or Sault

Ste. Marie. Passports, U.S. passport cards or enhanced driver's licenses (not just photo identification) are required. Boats over 30 feet must obtain a U.S. Customs and Border Protection user fee decal, which presently costs \$27.50. You do not need to clear *out* of either Canada or the States.

**For more details, consult the Canada Border Service Agency websites:**

[www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/prog/canpass/canpassprivateboat-eng.html#s1](http://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/prog/canpass/canpassprivateboat-eng.html#s1)  
[www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/prog/nexus/menu-eng.html](http://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/prog/nexus/menu-eng.html)  
 CANPASS phone number: 888-226-7277



The Benjamins aren't far from the island-studded Whalesback Channel, surely one of the most beautiful 15-mile passages in the world. Dark pines march across steep granite slopes standing in bold relief against a limitless blue sky. The North Channel comes in layers; nearby Oak Bay is an inside passage of an inside passage. Possessed of multiple majestic anchorages, you could spend a week here and just scratch the surface of its nooks and crannies. Hushed forest, rocky hills, placid lily pools, pike and bass await your pleasure.

East of Little Current's swing bridge, Baie Fine is a true fjord set deep into the La Cloche Mountains, a location immortalized by the Group of Seven Canadian landscape painters. A small,

winding entrance off Frazer Bay actually has buoys, a rare sight in the North Channel. For 9 miles the high-sided fjord hosts gungholes galore. Then a slip of a passage takes you into a mini-fjord of jewel-like quality with good anchoring. At the far end, called The Pool, where the Evinrude family of outboard-engine fame own the only cabin, their mega-yacht, *Chanticleer*, has been seen. A hike up for a swim in the unbelievably clear water of Topaz Lake will get your juices going.

Also in the east, Covered Portage Cove is a legendary anchorage. Guarded by the massive Indian Head rock formation, "Portage Couvert," as it was known to French *voyageurs*, is almost totally encircled by towering pine-laden bluffs of chiseled white quartzite. A reef protects its

*The public docks at Little Current are always busy with boats, mainly because the Little Current swing bridge passage divides North Channel cruising into two distinct destinations (top, left). The Benjamin Islands are protected by rocky shoals but there's a safe way in, as evidenced by the boats snugly anchored (above). Be aware: Bears are known to visit here.*

hidden entrance, but can be readily avoided. Inside there is room for dozens of cruisers to anchor. Dazzling, even in a destination filled with breath-takers, hardly seems sufficient to describe Covered Portage Cove. Take your camera up to the cliff top.

Feel like anchoring alone, as we often do? You can in the North Channel, for summers on end. Thomas Bay, just east of Killarney, is our favorite and a gem of a hideaway. Tough to enter, and open to winds off Georgian Bay, Thomas is surrounded by what we call Blueberry Heights. Red rocks, green pines and aquamarine water

generate the "aching beauty" of which Marjorie wrote. Without doubt it is the most stunning spot we have ever set a hook anywhere in the world. Twice we have been forced to reluctantly depart when rare, strong easterlies pounded into Thomas Bay. It's not easy to see the rocks when the surf's up, but there is shelter only 2 miles away in Collins Inlet.

Manitoulin Island is claimed to be the world's largest freshwater island, and is the location of some of the North Channel's most enjoyable ports of call: Gore Bay, Kagawong, Little Current and Meldrum Bay.



There you can refuel, pump out the holding tank, stock up at stores and farmers' markets, go to summer theaters, and gorge on ice cream that does not come in measured scoops. Shirin and Elena at the remote Meldrum Bay Inn bake to-die-for bumbleberry pie. Herbert's deliciously fresh fish 'n' chips, sold out of a red school bus in Killarney, make this town another memorable landfall. Cruisers have been known to plan their summer itinerary around repeat visits to Herbert's.

For the finest dining in the North Channel, dock overnight for free at the Bayside Restaurant on Drummond Island, off pretty Potogannising Bay. Thursday evenings in July and August, Bayside does fabulous four-

## CHARTERING IN THE NORTH CHANNEL

- Canadian Yacht Charters, Gore Bay ([www.cycnorth.com](http://www.cycnorth.com))
- Discovery Yacht Charters, Little Current ([www.discoveryyachtcharters.com](http://www.discoveryyachtcharters.com))

are well done, but it's essential to post a lookout at the bow when entering an anchorage. Stay alert in curves resembling an S or Z through narrow passages. Bruce and plow anchors work well in the generally muddy bottoms of the North Channel. You can tie directly to shore or even rock edges, then step ashore and smile. Not to worry — with planning, time and attention, you can do all this.



they meant 3 feet below chart datum. Finally, a professional skipper told us that the water level was at chart datum, down 3 feet from the year before. In chart datum years, what you see on the water corresponds to what you read on your charts. If not,

*Roy Eaton (left) of the Little Current Yacht Club runs the very well trafficked cruiser VHF net on channel 71.*

year, more than 1,000 boats checked in with Roy on channel 71. Roy also covers news, sports and local events, not to mention his fish-fry potluck. The Cruisers Net can be a lifeline in an emergency.

Our favorite person in the North Channel is Carmen Cotnoir. She and her patient husband, Charles, converted a convent into a bed-and-breakfast called Le Bel Abri about a half-mile from the marina in the town of Spanish on the North Shore. Carmen, a French Canadian, is a life force. She bakes, she fishes, she paints, she traps; she throws off positive energy like gamma rays. Carmen serves yummy breakfasts daily to boaters who fall within her radiance. Call ahead, and don't be late.

## ONE OF THE GREAT ENTICEMENTS OF THE NORTH CHANNEL IS THE WARMHEARTED PEOPLE YOU MEET ON WATER AND ON LAND.

course meals with excellent wines.

### Navigation and Anchoring

Navigating the North Channel is challenging and fun, and with all those islands there's always a place to hide if the weather turns against you. Buoys are small, and few and far between. Milk-jug markers indicate a hazard, but leave you wondering on which side of the hazard they have been placed? Canadian paper and electronic charts

Water levels matter in the North Channel. Throughout the Great Lakes they fluctuate yearly in irregular cycles. Mariners need to be aware of how the level stands in relation to the mean low-water depths recorded on charts. This information is broadcast daily on Canadian VHF weather channels. Don't make the mistake we did on our first North Channel cruise. People kept telling us the water level was down 3 feet. For weeks we assumed

when navigating, you need to constantly "correct" your chart depths to the reality of the water level.

### Welcoming People

One of the great enticements of the North Channel is the warmhearted people you meet on water and on land. With a long twilight, dinghies create a gregarious paseo at happy hour in popular anchorages. With San Diego on her transom, *Ensemble* provokes questions: Just exactly how *did* you get here? Depending on our rum level, we might start with Cape Horn or the Panama Canal before confessing to Route I-95.

On land, Roy Eaton of the Little Current Yacht Club expertly runs a VHF Cruisers Net filled with useful weather and navigation information at 9 a.m. every morning in July and August. One recent

*Longtime cruisers and seminar presenters Pixie Haughwout and Ralph Folsom are the authors of a new edition of Marjorie Cahn Brazer's Well-Favored Passage: The Magic of Lake Huron's North Channel, and Canal Cruising in the South of France: The Romantic Canal du Midi (Sea Fever Gear Publications, www.seafevergear.com).*



## RESOURCES

Little Current Yacht Club ([www.lcyc.ca](http://www.lcyc.ca))  
 North Channel Yacht Club ([www.ncyc.ca](http://www.ncyc.ca))  
 Great Lakes Cruising Club ([www.glclub.com](http://www.glclub.com))  
 Trailer Sailors Association ([www.trailersailors.org](http://www.trailersailors.org))  
 Lake Huron's North Channel ([www.thenorthchannel.ca](http://www.thenorthchannel.ca))  
 Turners of Little Current ([www.turners.ca](http://www.turners.ca))  
 America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association ([www.greatloop.org](http://www.greatloop.org))