

Exploring the Waterloo Region

Part I

Who knew it was going to be so amazing!

By Dale Dunlop

For the past three years, I have been enticing readers with the allure of Atlantic Canada as an RV destination - first Labrador, then Nova Scotia's Eastern Shore, and last year, New Brunswick's Bay of Fundy. This year, I decided to set my sights on Ontario's heartland to see and experience the RV possibilities within a day's drive of over twenty million people. Starting on the Labour Day weekend, Dale Jr. and I spent an amazing week in the area, and as the tired expression goes, "Who knew?"



The trip began in Bolton at Motorhome Travel, where we picked up a Class C Coachmen Leprechaun, courtesy of Waterloo Regional Tourism. It didn't take long to get on the road heading for our first destination, St. Jacobs Farmers' Market.

I'd heard of St. Jacobs as a small village that had preserved its architectural history, and also had a strong 'Old Mennonite' presence. The adherents of this sect of Protestantism date back to the very beginnings of the Reformation, and are known for their tenacity in avoiding modern technology and manners. Just outside St. Jacobs, we encountered our first road sign with a horse-drawn buggy on it.

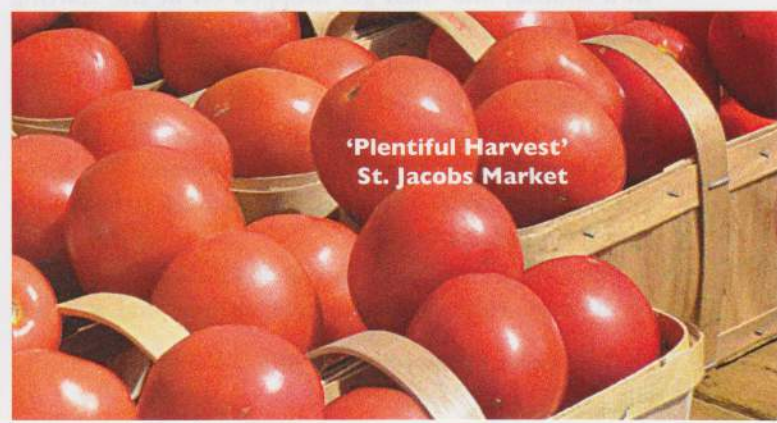
St. Jacobs Farmers' Market is not actually in the town, but just outside, on the way to Waterloo. The traffic approaching the market was intense. So much for my preconceptions of getting out and wandering among market stalls in the middle of a quaint village. We had passed such markets in a couple of places along the way – just not in St. Jacobs.

I have never seen a market as large or as well patronized as St. Jacobs. Still, we had no problem finding a place to park the RV, and it was only a short walk to the first mar-

ket stalls. The place was a veritable cornucopia of fresh fruit and vegetables, all arranged in colourful displays that begged to be photographed. One of the vendors tossed me a nectarine that was so juicy that I almost couldn't believe this was the same fruit they sell at home. After a half hour of enjoying the sights, sounds, and aromas of the market, I parted company with Dale, who wanted to explore the many other vendors selling everything from antiques and handicrafts to clothes and shoes.

I returned to St. Jacobs, parked in one of the RV friendly free lots, and strolled around the town taking pictures of the well-preserved homes, most with well-tended English style gardens. I spent half an hour touring The Mennonite Story interpretive centre, which gave me a historical perspective of the Mennonites, and how they came to Canada after suffering immense persecution in Europe – all because they believe in peace.

However, what I really came to see was the St. Jacobs and Aberfoyle Model Railroad, which is housed just off the main street. As a model railway nut, I was impressed by what the volunteers have achieved. Virtually everything on display was made from scratch, including the locomotives, rail cars, rails and ties. The display is set



in the 1950's era when steam and diesel were both in use. There were four trains running at the time of my visit, and their realism was such that looking at the photographs I took, it was hard to tell they were not real trains.

Two hours flew by, and I returned to the market where Dale had bags of peaches, apples and beans. We had lunch at the Crazy Canuck, a hole in the wall restaurant whose walls were covered by just about every album cover put out by a Canadian group. I studied it closely for many albums I had purchased decades ago.

Our next stop was the Mount Hope Cemetery in Kitchener, where we met up with cemetery historian Wayne Miedema. Wayne guided us through a fascinating hour-and-a-half tour of the final resting places of many of the prominent figures from the area's early history. Two of the more famous dearly departed are the distillery magnate Joseph Seagram, and the famous hockey playing priest, Father Bauer.

By now we were ready to set up camp, and checked into Bingemans Camping Resort, which is on the outskirts of Kitchener. It is a huge complex that also offers a water park, bowling arcade, mini golf, and other activities aimed at families. Bingemans was alive with children and pets at play.

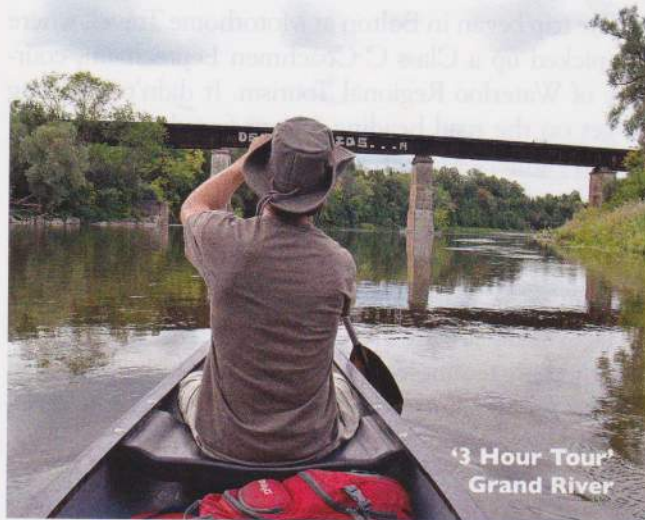
We concluded the day with a walk around the camp, where many groups were gathered around fires, no doubt telling ghost stories. Consistent with its family orientation, the campground settled down early, and we had a quiet night.

The morning of the second day dawned bright and sunny, inspiring optimism for the day's adventure. The Grand River drains a huge watershed in Southern Ontario, and has always been at the centre of the area's history. During our time in the Waterloo region, I intended to find out if the Grand is really grand, or just famous because it happens to be close to Toronto.

Canoeing the Grand has been providing services to canoeists and kayakers for twenty years. The concept is simple. You park your vehicle at the company parking lot, which is on the Grand on the outskirts of Kitchener, rent whatever type of transportation you want, get in a shuttle, and then get dropped off at the starting point and paddle/kayak/tube back to your car. It was recommended that we start at Breslau, a two to three hour paddle back to base.

It didn't take any time to get underway. The river, at this point, was wide with a gentle current. We spent the next two hours on an easy paddle back to base with nary a sign of civilization.

The Grand flows through Canada's Carolinian forest. Its hickory, tulip tree, sycamore, walnut and sassafras



can only be found in southern Ontario. I've canoed in the east, west and north of this country, but never in an area with such a variety of native trees and shrubs.

There was plenty of bird life – too many mallards and Canada geese to count, gulls, blue heron, osprey, many kingfishers, and one unfortunate robin being chased by a Cooper's Hawk. We also came upon a painted turtle sunning himself like turtles seem to do most of the time.

We conquered a few riffles, (baby rapids) and in just under two hours, we arrived back, and decided to tour the cities of Kitchener-Waterloo.

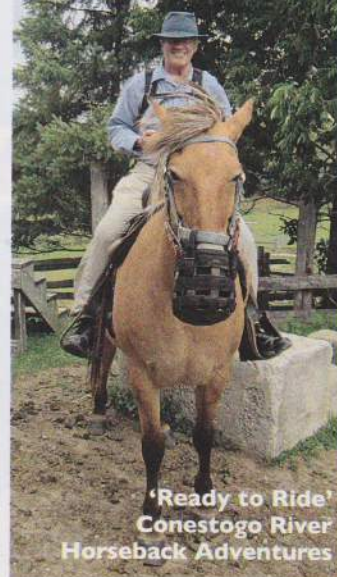
The two cities are connected by one main drag, King Street, which runs for miles from the countryside at one end, to the countryside at the other. Waterloo is home to both Waterloo and Wilfred Laurier Universities, which makes it a college town with all that entails, lots of interesting bars, restaurants and bookstores. Kitchener, on the other hand, was, and perhaps still is, the blue-collar city where they actually make things instead of learning how to make them. To Kitchener, Waterloo is sort of the real life version of 'those who can't - teach'.

Our first stop was at Woodside National Historic Site, the boyhood home of our longest serving and definitely Canada's weirdest Prime Minister, Mackenzie King. While the estate is closed to the public for reasons unknown, probably budget cuts, we still had a chance to admire this fine building and its grounds.

We parked the car and got out to stroll the King Street area of Kitchener. I was immediately struck by the number of huge industrial buildings that had escaped the wrecker's ball, and were now being put to different uses. First, there was the Lang Tanning Company, once the largest tannery in the British Empire, now being used as a hi-tech hub. Then we saw the Breithaupt building, which was being converted to condos. The Kaufman



Mennonite Country



'Ready to Ride'
Conestogo River
Horseback Adventures

Shoe Co. building encompasses an entire city block. And lastly, the astonishingly large Seagram Distillery building now used as the headquarters for The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI).

By now we were thirsty, and dropped into a place called Imbibe, which sold Ontario craft brews. We ordered pretzels accompanied by aioli and hot mustard dipping sauces. I always think of pretzels as those hard thin twisted things that are about dead last on my list of snack options, but real pretzels right out of the oven with dipping sauce are a thing of beauty.

Back at Bingemans, we went for a walk around the entire park, and discovered that there were sites in the lower part of the campground right on the Grand River.

We were scheduled to spend our next two nights at the Nith River Campground, about twenty minutes west of Kitchener-Waterloo. Rather than take the RV for the day, I hoped we could check in early and use the SUV for touring. We pulled into the campground at 8:45, and I walked up to the office where a sign basically said emergencies only before 9:00 AM. Somewhat apprehensively I rang the doorbell, and a bear of a man came to the door and said, "You're RV better be on fire!" and then he broke into a grin and said, "You must be the Dale's". This was Doug Rielly, the owner of Nith River Campground, and as it turned out, a fountain of useful information about what to do in the area.

At the Park's centre is a large circular cement pond, which doubles as a very large swimming pool. Nearby is a nice community area, trails to the river, and a catch and release pond which is populated with big bass. Dale and I both liked the ambiance of Nith River Campground. Most of the more permanent residents seemed to be couples.

Doug gave us a map he had made which showed the attractions in the area. We were headed for Elora Gorge, but wanted to take the back roads through Mennonite country, so he drew us a route and said 'You will see the Amish'.

Our route took us through what to my mind is the quintessential pastoral landscape in Canada. The gently rolling hills were covered with fields of corn and beans, interspersed with pastures of sheep, cows and some of the most beautiful horses you will see north of Kentucky. The fieldstone houses were spaced far apart, and looked like they have always been part of the landscape. The occasional orchard added more colour to nature's palette.

We travelled first through the pretty town of Wellesley, which hosts an annual Apple, Butter and Cheese Festival. That sounded like a killer combination.

Between the villages of Bamberg, St. Clements, Heidelberg and Elmira we came across many Mennonites in horse-drawn buggies of different types, from open two-seaters to some that carried entire families and looked like old Black Marias. Equally interesting was the uniform dress of the Mennonites - women in dresses and bonnets, while the men generally wore black with a beard and straw hat.

Lest you think the Mennonites taciturn and unfriendly, the opposite is true. Every Mennonite we met said hello, often with a smile. They seemed quite secure and comfortable in the role that they have chosen to adopt for this life.

One thing you can't help noticing in this part of the country is the many items offered for sale at the side of the road on an honour system. Flowers, produce, honey, pickles, plus pop and water in coolers, were often

sitting at the end of a long driveway or at a country crossroads, without anyone tending them.

As we gradually zigged and zagged our way towards Elora, I could not help but think that the word 'goodness' was the most apt I could think of to describe Mennonite country. The soil is good, the landscape is good, and the people are good. This is something worth travelling to experience.

Elora Gorge is by far the most famous natural landmark in the area, and one that draws tourists from great distances, including us. There are opportunities to explore Elora Gorge both on land and water. There are hiking trails on both sides of the gorge with several look offs, which was all we had time for today. But had we more time, we definitely would have rented tubes to see the gorge from the water. We noticed a group of people descending a stairway on the other side of the gorge with tubes in their hands, and made our way to a spot overlooking some nasty looking rapids that culminated in a small water chute, to watch. It looked like a lot of fun.

The town of Elora is beautifully situated on the Grand River, and has maintained its architectural integrity. This, in turn, has attracted artisans, restaurateurs and innkeepers that make the place a tourist magnet.

We left Elora for our next appointment for - get this - horseback riding. I hadn't been on a horse in forty years, but when considering if I was up for it, thought 'If Vladimir Putin can do it, so can I'. Conestogo River Horseback Adventures offers trail rides not that far outside Waterloo. (The Conestogo is a tributary of the Grand.)

There was one other couple ready to ride, and I was quite happy to learn that they had never ridden a horse before; that encouraged me to check 'beginner' on the information sheet, although at my age, it might be

too late to start. I was assigned a nice looking mare, Brandy, who was spirited enough to satisfy my ego. A quick lesson on how to start, stop and turn a horse ensued, and we were ready.

We set off with a guide in front, and at the rear. After making our way down a fairly steep and rocky path, we entered a sea of tall native grass and I thought 'This is neat'. This wasn't just a walk in the park type of trail ride, but the real deal. Visions of Cullen Bohnannon from *Hell on Wheels* came into my head as I encouraged Brandy into a trot, and looked around for menacing Indians or desperados, but all I saw were the R.I.M. buildings on the horizon.

Eventually, we came to the banks of the Conestogo, which was about 100 feet wide at this point, and the guide plunged right in. This was no dried up little creek, but a real river. With a bit of trepidation I followed, and we forded the Conestogo, with the water at one point up to our stirrups. The horses stopped mid-stream to drink. Then Dale's horse started thrashing the water with a front hoof splashing water everywhere, and soon the other horses joined in. They were having their fun, too.

It had been a very full day. We headed back to Nith River, and stopped on the way to buy steaks, mushrooms and sweet corn for supper.

It was a lovely evening, and as the sky darkened, I saw a sight that almost brought tears to my eyes - one tiny bat winging his way to God knows where, but alive. This is the first bat I have seen since white-nose syndrome came to North America and devastated our bat population. It was nice to end a really great day with a ray of optimism.

See where we head to next, as our trip continues in the March/April issue of *Canadian RVing/RV gazette*. **RV**

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