

February
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A Lighthouse Fantasy in Georgian Bay!..... by James Ellsworth, a freelance writer living in Cambridge, ONt.



There is nothing better than an opportunity to leave behind your hurly-burly schedule and the madding crowd to go off sailing, even if only for a week. When that voyage includes exploring abandoned lighthouses on windswept islands, well it's fantastic!

Ray Davis, a young licensed captain with 20 years of Georgian Bay sailing experience operates a refurbished 72-ft. tugboat, the Dawnlight, and offers a tour of 16 lighthouses on both the western and eastern sides of Georgian Bay. Davis is a descendant of lighthouse keepers himself; his ancestors, Abraham and Henry, were the first lightkeepers at Tobermory's Big Tub from

1885-1901. The five-day trip completes a 260 miles circuit from Tobermory and Cove Island to Colpoys Bay, across to Hope Island, up to the French River, before sailing back to Little Tub Harbour via Club Island. I sailed on the inaugural voyage in June and was thoroughly delighted.

I have experienced crewing on a sailboat in the Caribbean and crossing the Atlantic on an ocean liner. Sailing on the Dawnlight offers more room and stability than the sailboat and as much care and attention as the cruise.

The tour fulfilled all that its poster claimed: lighthouses, sunken wrecks, wild flowers, windswept islands, historical lore, three great meals a day, and FUN.

The Dawnlight can accommodate eleven passengers in comfortable bunks (although only the aft cabin provides privacy and six or seven people would be ideal), serves meals in a spacious saloon from a well-equipped galley, and has a well-stocked library to read about the sites and to compare old photos to the present. Plus Ray, also a dive master, knows wonderful moorings for swimming, fishing, or scuba diving (Georgian Bay is renowned

for its water clarity).

I would encourage booking as a group of like-minded friends and it would be

terrific as a reunion venue. A marine historian and guide, Pat Folkes, was part of the crew and added a wealth of information about the history of lighthouses in the ebb and flow of Ontario's lumber, grain, and fishing economy, the technical capabilities of catoptric and parabolic lens, the mysteries of some of the shipwrecks that dot the bay (over 20 in the Fathom

Five Marine National Park alone), and insight into archaeological glimpses of fishing and lumbering camps from bygone eras. Indeed, there was something

for everyone.

If you want physical activity, then you will appreciate stepping in and out of the 18 ft. steel tender, hiking on lonely granite islands, climbing steep winding lighthouse stairwells, or relaxing with some fishing, swimming, or even diving. If you want photographic beauty, then you will be rewarded with

brilliant sunsets, the myriad colours of wildflowers and lichens, the bent sweep of pine trees on desolate islands, or the remarkable hues of blue water along limestone and granite shores. And if you just want to relax, you can lounge on deck, or chat, read, and play board games before being served

great 'meat and potatoes' fare with a flair.

But the lighthouses are the focus and each day is memorable. Davis has a knack for making memories. Wanting us to see the Cove Island lighthouse in

the setting sun, he eased out of Little Tub and ferried us to the marvelous imperial-designed, white and red conical structure. We climbed the 90 ft. tower, all 95 steps, read the date that a worker had carved in a windowsill in 1856 and saw the setting sun catch the huge famous Fresnel lens at the top, capable of casting its own light 25 km away. We left Cove Island in a purple haze and later, as we rounded Flowerpot Island in the moonless night,

Ray switched the Dawnlight's floodlight onto the abandoned lighthouse there,

built in 1897. It was a magical beginning to a week of light and colour that just kept getting better and made us reflect on our changing environment.

That first night we anchored over top of the wreck Niagara II and in the morning with the sun behind us, entered the tropical blue Wingfield Basin - the refuge of the burnt-out, wrecked hulk of the steam tug, Gargantua, and home to the Cabot Head lighthouse. We hiked to the 80 ft., white cedar and red-trimmed lighthouse. A volunteer organization, The Friends of Cabot Head,

have repaired and now maintain this lighthouse which had its square light tower torn down in 1971. In fact the light station is available to rent to 'wannabe' keepers during the summers.

We hugged the western coast from Cabot Head to Colpoys Bay, remarking on

the photogenic lights at Lions Head and Cape Croker, unique with its octagonal concrete construction. Just pass Barrier Island we were reminded again of the forces of nature as we hove to off Griffith Island to look upon the tapered, 80- ft. imperial lighthouse. Once the adjacent gray stone and slate-roofed house was alive with a keeper and his family of nine, but now it stood deteriorating amongst a stand of white birches.

Traversing to the eastern shore, we explored the shakes and shingled, 54-ft. lighthouse of Hope Island, built in 1884 and now signed with warnings of collapsing floors. My father had serviced this very lighthouse in 1945 when

he was 18. Maybe some of the bags of loam he carried to the keeper's garden

enriched the very earth that helped the wildflowers and poppies that grow there now. Departing in 20 ft. of clear water, we slid gently over the ribbed wrecks of the Lottie Wolfe and the Marquette, both sunk offshore in storms.

Next we headed north along the fringes of the thousands of rocky islands that are part of the old main channel to Midland. One stop was the orange, lichen-covered, barren Double Top Rock, marking the 10 square miles of the Westerns. Sighting this lighthouse was always a relief to those early navigators sailing directly across the bay. Later we anchored off the bare island called Red Rock. The lighthouse, looking like a peppershaker, was an unusual Martello-shaped 60- ft. tower plopped onto the barren granite. Who would choose to live in this desolation?

One morning, we were awakened for breakfast with a lilting folksong about Emmeline Madigan, the last keeper of the 38- ft. lighthouse, Pointe au Baril, dating from 1889. A caretaker society maintains a ship-shape white and red clapboard building and colourful grounds with purple chive florets and yellow silverweed clinging to the granite. We looked onto silhouettes of Tom Thomson-like pine trees and the whiskey barrel on a post, set by coureurs de bois in 1873. And returning to the Dawnlight, we sang like campers a rousing "Emmeline, keep your ear to the wind, as you play your violin" over the bouncing waves.

We had been moving constantly but Ray thought that we might be able to enjoy

a gentle fiord mooring once safely by the lonely Bustard Rocks. The 48- ft. lighthouse and two range finders warned mariners about the archipelago of 559 pink granite rocks and islands. Seasonal fishing camps were set up on these islands from 1875-1934. Ray skillfully navigated up a protected fiord and by late afternoon we tied off on trees against the rocky shore.

Leisurely, we were able to swim off the stern aided by a stable ladder, or try to catch a whitefish. Some set off to paddle up the inlet in the canoe, while others merely watched the setting sun. Patrick countered our reverie by regaling us about the Asia, a 136- ft wooden vessel sunk in these waters in 1882 with only two survivors. A captain on another boat found some wreckage and knew that his son, crewing on the Asia, had died.

Coincidentally Ray said that weather was coming in and suggested heading for

the lee of Club Island across the bay.

Club Island was a refuge. We moored in a deep eddy leading to a ramp of an

old abandoned fishing camp icehouse. Enjoying the dry comfort of the saloon

and a bottle of wine with our last dinner, the rain suddenly gave way to a glorious sunset to end five marvelous days sailing among the artifacts of the bay's navigation.

While on board, I had read another tug passenger's historical journal entry from 1893, 110 years ago. It echoed our own sentiments.

I enjoyed myself amazingly and so will everyone who takes the trip. She is staunch and strong, swift in motion, splendidly officered by those who know the route, and are capable and careful mariners. Passengers will be well treated from the time they step on board till they reach their destination.

Our toast at that last meal had a zen quality as we agreed that we had communed with our past.

(1,452 words)

If you are interested:

Ray Davis and the Dawnlight will tour lighthouses again Sunday, Oct. 5 to Friday, Oct. 10. Go to www.tohermorv.com for Tohermorv Adventure Tours.

email tatours@log.on.ca, or call 519-596-1240

Further Suggested Reading:

Lighthouses: To Light Their Way, by Martin Boyle (B & T Publications, 1996)

Huronian Lighthouse Preservation Society at www.hlps.ca

Alone in the Night, by Andrea Gutsche, et. al. (Lynx Images, 1996)

Northeastern Georgian Bay and its Peoples, by William Campbell, 1982

Georgian Bay, An Illustrated History, by James P. Barry, 1992

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