

Whatever Floats Your Le Boat

JENNIFER BAIN's Alberta-born husband barely knows how to swim and her kids are tethered to Wi-Fi. Will this family of fish-out-of-water non-boaters find sea legs on The Rideau Canal?



BY THE TIME WE PASS THROUGH THE final few locks on the Rideau Canal, I've stopped making the boat lurch with jerky, panicked turns. I give the steering wheel a swift pull to the port or starboard, point the bow in the direction I want to go, then ease the wheel back until the rudder indicator returns to centre. I calmly count out the seconds until the 43-foot rental boat obeys. As we glide up to the lock station, my family of non-boaters springs to action: young son safely by my side, husband at the stern and daughter at the bow, ready with the ropes.

Our luxurious floating home stops along a blue line painted on concrete and we tie up and cut the engine to signal to the lockmasters that we want to pass through. The wooden gates are cranked open. We cast off and creep into the lock chamber, where we loop the ropes around drop cables attached to the top and bottom of the lock wall. The lock gates and lower sluices close and then the upper sluices open so the chamber can slowly fill with water and raise our boat. When the water level reaches that of the next portion of the canal, the upper gates are cranked open, and we release the ropes and fire up the engine.

Holger Leue



Left to right: Discover the Rideau Canal with Le Boat; Beveridges Locks along Tay River.

THIS TORONTONIAN CAN'T EXPLAIN how she grew up fishing and sailing around Ontario but has never been houseboating or given much thought to the Rideau Canal. Let me atone by saying my prairie-grown husband and urban kids have now seen loons in real life (and not just on golden coins). They can spot great blue herons standing statue-like in the shallows. They will splash about murky lakes even as aquatic weeds tickle their toes and wrap around their calves. They can tolerate nips from mosquitos and deer flies. They can convey that the canal is a UNESCO World Heritage Site because it's the best-preserved example of a slackwater canal in North America, built using European technology without needing extensive excavations.

The Rideau Canal is 202 gorgeous kilometres of rivers, lakes, canals and locks between Ottawa and Kingston. There are 45 locks in 23 lockstations, plus two more linking Tay Canal to the Rideau. Built by the British as a transportation canal to protect the region from an American invasion, the waterway is managed by Parks Canada as a National Historic Site and the locks operate May to October.

So how did a boatless family of non-boaters end up exploring this historic canal on a four-night, self-drive boating vacation? With help from Le Boat, a European company that arranges trips for avid and newbie boaters out of Smiths Falls—no experience or licence required.

Le Boat, which turned 50 last year, operates Europe's largest fleet of self-drive boats in nine countries like Scotland, Italy and France. In 2018, it arrived on the Rideau Canal, the oldest continually operating canal system in North America. Its 24 Horizon yachts range from two- to five-bedrooms, most with ensuite bathrooms.

WE MOOR AT LE BOAT'S home base the first night, acclimatizing to the boat and the July heatwave, and frolicking in a nearby swimming hole. The next morning, boat technician Sterling Brown provides driving lessons.

"These boats are a little bit daunting because they're quite large," he allows, "but as soon as you get used to the boat, it becomes quite small." Brown issues a "certificate of competency" after introducing me to my new best friends—bow and stern thrusters that kickstart quick manoeuvres.


Confident boaters head south from Smiths Falls for complicated routes and big lakes where they can even sleep at mooring buoys. We meander along the easier route, cruising north on a narrow, winding portion of the canal that's reminiscent of Europe. "People don't even realize how beautiful the Rideau is," confides Rick Pancham, a yacht broker we chat up along the way.

We navigate through Old Slys lock before grilling steaks on the upper "fundeck" while moored at Edmonds lock. We wave to everyone who gathers to see boats "locking through" in Kilmarnock. Cruising through channels marked by red and green buoys, we notice that boaters see our "Le Boat" branded boat, know we're novices and give us a wide berth.

This nervous captain is relieved these boats max out at 10 kilometres per hour and are fully wrapped in black rubber safety bumpers. The husband who can't swim loves the folding bikes and the two mini fridges that we stock with craft beer from Perth and artisan cheese from Mrs. McGarrigle's Fine Food Shop in Merrickville. The kids love the retractable swim ladder off the stern, the saloon-style kitchen and the sunbathing area.

We never find time for movie night, Dominos or Cribbage, maybe because Hazel, who's 12, sets the pace by saying "I can't wait to do nothing." She's happy in Merrickville, population 3,000, with its gelato café, ice cream shop, fancy chip truck, butter tarts, artsy shops and secluded public beach.

It's in this picture-perfect village that I join teenagers in the canal after the locks close, and where seven-year-old Charlie learns to use a flyswatter and jump off the dock into deep water. It's where his distracted parents forget to apply sunscreen so he gets a flaming red face and woefully asks, "Is there any way to fix this or am I going to look like a burnt marshmallow forever?"

The burn is already fading into a summer tan by the time we moor back in Smiths Falls for the final night. We take a quick drive to Beveridges lockstation for a picnic supper with takeout pizza and pasta. In honour of Charlie, we throw in a canal-side marshmallow roast. 

When You Go

Le Boat (leboat.ca) is based in Smiths Falls, Ontario, and offers self-drive boating holidays on houseboat-style yachts on the Rideau Canal between Ottawa and Kingston. Boats sleep two to 12 people, with two to five bedrooms. You don't need experience or a boating licence—they provide a short training session. During COVID-19, nautical distancing, touchless locking and cashless locking/mooring fees are in effect.