A Road Trip Along The Northern Shore Of Lake Superior

By Jennifer Bain
August 27, 2023

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An unmistakable flash of dark brown fur moving through the greenery caught my eye as I drove down the Trans-Canada Highway hugging the coast of Lake Superior. It was a moose, a young one, and it was alone. Wide-eyed, it stared at my rental car as I pulled over on the shoulder. I could see it gauging whether I was a threat and weighing its options.

Everyone knows to drive defensively in rural Ontario, especially at dawn and dusk when wildlife come out of the bush to feed on plants and grasses. Everyone knows that you can be killed, and your vehicle totalled, if you collide with a moose.

But it was 9:20 a.m. and I had plenty of time to react and safely enjoy this rare encounter. The moose trotted a few steps into the woods, stared at me through the foliage, then trotted right back out almost as if willing to pose for a few photos in order to eat whatever had caught its eye.

I didn't overstay my welcome. Not when I had interesting people to meet and new places to explore on a weekend road trip from Thunder Bay to Marathon.

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Liam Giffin is the visitor experience product development officer for the Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area/Jennifer Bain

I had just taken a Viking expedition cruise through the Great Lakes between Milwaukee and Thunder Bay, crossing Lake Michigan and Lake Huron (and Georgian Bay) before getting a taste of Lake Superior. Now I would continue my Lake Superior explorations from land to see the wildlife, people and geological wonders that can only be found along the shores.

My first stop would be Nipigon to meet Liam Giffin, the visitor experience product development officer for the proposed Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area. He would take me to a "metaphorical museum" so interpreters could bring to life the submerged history preserved by the lake's cold waters.

Lake Superior is the world's largest freshwater lake by surface area and the third largest lake by volume. With an average depth is 482 feet and a maximum depth of 1,332 feet, it looks and feels like an ocean and is often called an inland sea. Whether that's accurate is a matter of debate, but everybody agrees that Superior is much greater than a mere lake. It's an international body of water administered by the governments of Canada and the United States, the province of Ontario, and the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan.

I was keen to know more about Parks Canada's work to protect a massive chunk of the Ontario side of things as the country's first national marine conservation area (NMCA) — a designation that hasn't yet been finalized.

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The Viking Octantis anchors off Sleeping Giant Provincial Park within the Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area/Jennifer Bain

Once established, the water-based site will encompass the north part of Lake Superior from Bottle Point in Terrace Bay in the east to Thunder Cape at the tip of the Sibley Peninsula in the west, and from the shore in the north to the Canada-United State border in the south. It's 4,200 square miles and occupies one-eighth of the lake and one-third of the Canadian side of the lake. By boat, it apparently takes 7.5 hours to cross from Silver Islet in the west to Terrace Bay in the east — or double that if there are three-foot swells.

On the land front, the NMCA surrounds or is adjacent to, numerous other protected areas across two large peninsulas and an archipelago of isolated islands. Finally, it includes about 23 square miles of dry land encompassing smaller islands linked with the lake environment and places with high natural and/or cultural heritage value.

"This lake is full of surprises," Giffin told me. "We're protecting a very unique and very delicate ecosystem underwater and above water."

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In Nipigon, Parks Canada's Abbi Buckley and Patrick Tate test-drive the Underwater Museum program with a remotely operated underwater vehicle/Jennifer Bain

It was June and we tested the new one-hour summer Underwater Museum program. It lets you "channel your inner underwater archaeologist" as you learn how Parks Canada uses technology and archeology to study and share the cultural resources contained in its waters.

We walked from the Parks Canada office to the Nipigon River, the only tributary that the NMCA will be protecting, to meet with interpretation coordinator Abbi Buckley and learn about some of the 70-plus known archaeological sites in Lake Superior.

"Lake Superior is perfect for preserving shipwrecks," Buckley explained, showing photos of the 1911 Gunilda Shipwreck, a popular diving attraction near Rossport that Jacques Cousteau called "the most beautiful wreck in the world."

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An abandoned skiff is one of the things you'll see in the Nipigon Lagoon as part of Parks Canada's Underwater Museum program for the Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area/Parks Canada

She and Patrick Tate, a visitor experience student, pulled out a remotely operated underwater vehicle dubbed Dora to show off submerged relics in the Nipigon Lagoon with the help of an iPad. Everything from a station wagon and row boat to a wagon and skiff are in the murky shallows, but they've been stripped of anything toxic and don't pose an ecological threat.

Parks Canada drafted an interim management plan for the Lake Superior NMCA in 2016, noting that Lake Superior is widely used for commercial fishing and shipping, and by boaters, fishing enthusiasts, kayaker, divers and others.

Dramatic terraced landscapes on the mainland coast were formed when the earth here slowly rebounded after the last major glacial retreat. The region also features geological formations such as columnar basalt outcroppings, geodes and stromatolites (fossilized blue-green algae). Some of the world's oldest known rocks — about 2.7 billion years old — can be found on the Ontario shore.

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People are drawn to Pebble Beach at Marathon to see rocks, pebbles and driftwood that have been smoothed by pounding waves from Lake Superior/Jennifer Bain

I left Nipigon on route to Pukaskwa National Park, stopping in Marathon to see the fabled Pebble Beach on the shore of Lake Superior.

"Pounding waves and shifting ice polish the colourful rocks that line Pebble Beach," the town explains on its website. "Each spring the lake modifies the display by pushing the rocks up into terraces or spreading them in an even layer, before rearranging the driftwood seating."

The $1-million Pebble Beach development project is adding terraced viewing platforms atop a bluff overlooking Lake Superior, accessible walkways, bathrooms and a boardwalk down to the beach. New landscaping will help prevent erosion. I had to dodge the construction zone and find an alternate way down to the beach, but the rounded rocks, pebbles and driftwood — all smoothed by pounding waves — were worth the effort and I wandered the mile-long scenic shoreline in silent bliss.

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An Indigenous teaching about love on Pukaskwa National Park's Bimose Kinoomagewan Trail/Jennifer Bain

Speaking of solitude, when I hike alone, I like a trail that talks to me.

With just an afternoon to get a first taste of Pukaskwa National Park, on Lake Superior about four hours east of Thunder Bay, I took a trail called Bimose Kinoomagewnan (Walk of Teachings), where the words of Anishinaabe Elders from Pic River First Nation (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg) provide powerful messages.

"Elders teach that all teachings are equal and none is better than the others," a sign explained at the trailhead. "All people who follow the teachings will be a better person." Along a 90-minute loop around Halfway Lake, thoughts on love, respect, truth, wisdom, honesty, courage and humility are shared on colorful signs featuring First Nations art.

Then while dabbling in the first hour of the Coastal Hiking Trail, I lingered in a short Fire Walk section that details how a prescribed fire unfolded here in 2012 after months of careful planning. The Hattie Cove prescribed fire was considered a "great success" and now, to track the re-growth, Pukaskwa asks people to put their digital cameras in a certain spot, take a photo of the landscape and post it to social media using the hashtag #aliveandwell.

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Be a citizen scientist at Pukaskwa National Park and take a photo of how the landscape is faring after the Hattie Cove prescribed fire/Jennifer Bain

My time in Pukaskwa was short, but heading back to Thunder Bay there was the ferocious Aguasabon Falls and Gorge to see in Terrace Bay. A 100-foot waterfall cascades into the gorge, flowing along ancient rock. Signage explains that the Augasabon Generating Station, a treasured asset of Ontario Power Generation, has been operating on the shore of Lake Superior since 1948 and produces enough electricity to power 45,000 homes.

Parks Canada, in its visitor experience strategy, calls the Lake Superior NMCA "a blank slate with enormous tourism development potential." It is working with the communities that surround it to create tourism experiences for the largely untapped Northern Ontario region.

The main challenge, of course, is that water-based sites are tougher for people to access than land-based parks. But you can paddle, boat, fish and hike here and delve into Indigenous history and culture. There are highway viewscapes, lake cruises, remote lighthouses, islands and shipwrecks, plus Sleeping Giant Provincial Park and its iconic sea lion arch. Above all there is solitude.

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Parks Canada sets up its \

At Parks Canada's Terrace Bay Beach Pavilion, I met up again with Giffin and his visitor experience team, this time to test drive a guided art program called Painting Superior that will run until mid-September.

I settled into a chair on the boardwalk as Buckley, who turned out to be an artist and not just an interpretation coordinator, handed out small canvases and painting supplies.

We shared a few details about who we were and what we saw when we looked at the beach, waters of Lake Superior and distant islands. The answers ranged from the horizontal lines of the beach, to the colors of the islands, to the greenness of the dune grass and the peacefulness of the area.

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For the Painting Superior experience, we were shown art by people like the Group of Seven's Lawren Harris/Jennifer Bain

"We're all gathered in the exact same place right now, and I think it's really cool that each of you have something different that you bring to the table — different persepctives and different backgrounds and different life experiences that make your perspective really unique," said Buckley. "I want everyone to just think about that and also celebrate that when it comes to the art of painting, because we're not all going to paint the same way. We all see things differently, and that's what this entire program is about is just to relax and to connect to the lake. With art, I believe that there is absolutely no wrong way of doing something. As long as it feels good to you, you're doing it right."

She explained how Lake Superior was a muse for the Group of Seven (landscape painters who created a distinct Canadian style inspired by nature in the 1920s and 1930s), and provided a welcome overview of enough painting techniques and approaches to get us started.

"Just kind of let go and enjoy yourself," Buckley urged before leaving us alone for half an hour to paint. When our time was up, she graciously praised everyone's attempts, no matter how rudimentary, to capture the essence of the colderst, deepest and most tempestuous of the Great Lakes.

While You're Exploring Lake Superior:

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At Fort William Historical Park's Anishinaabe encampment, Zachariah Leonardi works with wild rice/Jennifer Bain

To get to Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area and Pukaskwa National Park, you'll likely drive through, or fly into, Thunder Bay, a city of almost 115,000 that's deeply connected to the water.

With Delta Hotels Thunder Bay as my waterfront base, I dropped by Kangas Sauna for Finnish pancakes (it's a local tradition), and drove to the Fort William First Nation's scenic lookout at Anemki Wajiw-Mount McKay (Thunder Mountain) for a view of Lake Superior. At Fort William Historical Park, a living history site for the fur trading era of 1815, I visited the Anishinaabe encampment to chat with Zachariah Leonardi, a college student from Thunder Bay who was enjoying work that lets him explore and reclaim his Indigenous heritage.

For one last moment on the water, Sail Superior captain/owner Greg Heroux took me by high-speed Zodiac to see grain elevators and the port city's shipping heritage. We zipped over to the Welcome Islands to see the wreck of a barge and photograph American White Pelicans, Bald Eagles and Great Blue Herons. When asked what he loves about Lake Superior, Heroux had a quick answer. "The differences — it's never the same," he said. "So it never ceases to amaze you, it never disappoints you, but it always surprises you."

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American White Pelicans nest along Lake Superior near Thunder Bay/Jennifer Bain

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