

Water powers Welland Canal in St. Catharines

Big ships, nearly close enough to touch, traverse the canal

Ingrid Sapona • September 21, 2008

As a child, I was in awe of the early explorers who, having made their way west across Lake Ontario, portaged their canoes up and over the 326-foot Niagara Escarpment near Niagara Falls to continue their westward explorations.

Modern ships, on the other hand, transit between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario courtesy of the Welland Canal.

While the Welland Canal might not be promoted as a tourist destination like the famous falls or nearby Niagara-on-the-Lake, visitors have a chance to watch ships from around the world up close — so close, in fact, that you can talk to the crew members as the ship is raised or lowered.

Of the canal's eight locks, two play host to the public. The Welland Canals Centre, located alongside Lock 3, is the best place to start. An introductory video covers the canal's 175-plus-year history and describes how the locks work. You can check out maritime and shipping artifacts on display or look at exhibits on St. Catharines' role in the Underground Railroad and on Harriet Tubman, the railway's famed conductor, who lived in St. Catharines from 1851 to 1858.

Next door, the Ontario Lacrosse Hall of Fame & Museum celebrates Canada's national summer sport.

During the course of a morning or afternoon, it's not unusual to see two or more ships lifted or lowered through Lock 3. A raised observation deck that runs nearly the length of the lock lets you watch the goings-on from 20 feet above.

From your bird's-eye view, you'll notice a rectangle marked on the ground. The rectangle is the size of one of the original locks from 1829. Today's locks — and therefore the ships that go through the canal — are almost four times bigger.

From Lock 3, you can follow the Welland Canals Parkway and, with luck, see ships passing in opposite directions through three sets of double locks (4, 5 and 6) at Thorold. You could also walk or bike on the Welland Canals Trail, which runs 5½ miles from Lake Ontario to the flight of twinned locks.

A bit further on, the Lock 7 Viewing Complex provides you with another chance to take in the majesty of the ships and wish them safe voyage.

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Port Dalhousie has quaint shops and restaurants that attract tourists. (Provided photo)

If you go

The Welland Canal runs between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie at St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. Ships traverse the canal from April to mid-December. Of the canal's eight locks, two have public viewing access.

- The Welland Canals Centre at Lock 3 in St. Catharines has an elevated viewing platform, plus the St. Catharines Museum and the Ontario Lacrosse Hall of Fame & Museum. Cross the Rainbow Bridge into Canada and the complex is about 15 minutes by car from Niagara Falls, Ontario (take the QEW toward St. Catharines, exit at Glendale Avenue West and follow the signs for the museum). For information, call (800) 305-5134 or go to www.stcatharineslock3museum.ca. (You can also call to find out the day's ship schedule.)
- At the Lock 7 Viewing Complex, 50 Chapel St. in Thorold, a cafe offers light fare. www.thoroldtourism.ca.

For tourism information: Tourism Niagara, (800) 263-2988 or www.tourismniagara.com, or the City of St. Catharines Tourism Services, (905) 688-5601, ext. 1731, or www.tourismstcatharines.ca.



Spectators are dwarfed by the giant ships that use the canal's eight locks to get up or go down the 326-foot difference in elevation from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie with their cargo. (Provided photo)

Port Dalhousie

The quaint hamlet of Port Dalhousie, a short drive away from the Welland Canal in St. Catharines, is a good place to get a meal, browse boutiques or relax at sandy Lakeside Park.

Incorporated in 1862, the village played a prominent role in the early years of the Welland Canal. Remnants of Lock 1 of the third canal, as well as the lock tender's shanty, can still be seen as you walk along the Waterfront Trail on Lake Ontario.

Lakeport Road, the main thoroughfare into Port Dalhousie, is lined with shops, restaurants and the Port Mansion Theatre, which also houses a restaurant. More shops populate nearby Lock Street — including some tucked into the Lock & Main Marketplace arcade.

Those with a sweet tooth should check out Olson Foods + Bakery in the Lock & Main Marketplace. It's owned by Anna Olson, celebrity chef and author of the popular cookbook *Sugar*.

Treadwell Farm to Table Cuisine on Lakeport Road is considered one of the finest restaurants in southern Ontario. For foodies, Treadwell's alone is worth the drive.

If you're coming from Niagara Falls, take the QEW to the Martindale Road exit. Turn left onto Martindale and follow it to the end. Turn right onto Lakeshore Road (Main Street) and follow it to the end.

For information, call the Port Dalhousie Business Association at (905) 937-4783 or go to www.portdalhousie.com.



A recreational hiking and biking trail runs along the Welland Canal at St. Catharines, Ontario.
(Provided photo)

History lesson

The first Welland Canal was completed in 1829, allowing ships to rise or fall the 326-foot difference in elevation between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. It was 28 miles long and had 40 oak timber locks that were 22 feet wide and only 8 feet deep. The canal was such a success that by 1842, construction was started on a new canal that would allow for larger ships.

The current canal, completed in 1932, is the fourth. It covers 27 miles, but now only 8 concrete locks are needed to raise ships from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie (or lower them in the other direction). Each lock is 80 feet wide and 25.5 feet deep with an average lift of 46.5 feet. Though each lock holds about 21 million gallons of water, it only takes about 10 minutes to fill one.