

Canada

Hangin' Out

In Ontario's Wilderness Wonderlands

Vanessa Santilli takes
a holiday in her home
province and discovers
some remarkable escapes

*The steel suspension
bridge that sits 10 metres
above the Trent River
near Campbellford is
just one of Ontario's
natural thrill rides.*

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ONTARIO TOURISM



The beaches at Sandbanks Provincial Park east of Toronto would not look out of place in Florida or South Carolina.

By Vanessa Santilli
TravelLife Contributor

CAMPBELLFORD, ON. — Standing completely still, I feel myself swaying in the wind on a steel suspension bridge more than 10 metres high above the Trent River.

I’m surrounded by lush forest and dramatic gorge cliffs.

Looking down through the bridge’s steel mesh, I see the river rushing beneath my feet. It’s a breathtakingly scary moment.

But everything about a camping trip to Ferris Provincial Park, where the suspension bridge hangs precariously over a 100-metre-wide stretch of the Trent River at Ranney Falls, supplies visitors with memorable moments.

The suspension bridge is the park’s main attraction and to reach it, you have to navigate part of the Trans Canada Trail, which snakes through this 200-hectare natural wonderland.

Summer weekends are the busiest in Campbellford, the

epitome of small-town Ontario. City slickers like me trade in our forest of glass-and-steel towers for a chance to walk in a forest of pencil-straight pine trees and enjoy strolls along the network of gentle waterways that converge in this town of 3,400.

At night, the park and town, which are void of bright lights, are canopied by a ceiling of stars — Orion’s Belt among them.

Downtown Campbellford is on the Trent-Severn Waterway, where weekend boaters spend lazy days barbecuing their meals and bodies on deck.

Campbellford is a sweet surprise for first-time visitors. It’s home to the World’s Finest Chocolate outlet store as well as an artisan farmers’ co-op called Empire Cheese. Both blend in beautifully with the quaint shops and lovely B&Bs that make up the downtown.

Walking by the water, I see a giant sculpture designed by a local artist towering above the trees. It’s not a war monument, nor is it a tribute to some important historic event. Instead, it’s the biggest Toonie imaginable.



Prince Edward County is beginning to produce some of Ontario’s best wines.

I must admit, it gives the riverside character.

Following the trail, I admire the families picnicking on blankets and tables and the flower beds in full bloom. The colours range from vibrant shades of orange to hot pink to purple and blue.

The Trent Waterway was planned as a commercial venture to move wheat from the Prairies to Lake Ontario and then on to Montreal, but by the time it was completed, grain was being moved much faster more efficiently by train.

So, the canal never developed into the commercial enterprise envisioned by its founders, and today, the 386 kilometre-long waterway and its 42 locks serve mainly as a tourist attraction — and a popular one at that.

This area of Ontario is one of the most inviting in the province — it’s filled with small towns that provide wonderful escape from big-city life.

Take Hastings (pop. 1,200), for example, a short drive west of Campbellford. It’s known as the “Hub of the Trent” and is a favourite spot for anglers and boaters. In fact, Hastings has the only bridge in Ontario from which you can still legally fish.

Then there’s Warkworth (pop. 600), an artisan town where the main street is filled with boutique shops and where the neighbouring rolling country side has been transformed into three of Ontario’s better golf courses — Warkworth Golf & Country Club, Pine Ridge Golf Course and Salt Creek Golf Links.

For the wine aficionado, a visit to the nearby Prince Edward County offers lots of variety. Called Ontario’s newest wine region — or the poor man’s Niagara, by wine snobs — this area has grown immensely over the last few years. Starting with one winery in 2000, there are now 32 Prince Edward Country wineries with more opening every year.

At the opening weekend of Casa-Dea Estates Winery, I taste local cheese and sample local vintages and am surprised at the quality of both.

This is one of the most intriguing regions of Ontario because it offers such a diversity in landscape. Just a few kilometers away from the lush, rolling wine hills of Prince Edward County, there are beautiful South Carolina-like beaches made up of sand dunes in Sandbanks Provincial Park.

Here, where gentle Lake Ontario waves wash up on white sandy shores, summers are chaotic and reservations at park campsites are always required.

A cycling trail known as the Waterfront Trail follows the lake shore for kilometres and canoeists find great joy paddling the tranquil waters around Sandbanks.

Whether it’s Ferris Provincial Park or Prince Edward County, birdwatchers will find a lot to see — some 337 species. Some rare birds can be spotted in this area, which has been designated a Globally Important Birding Area by the Canadian Nature Federation and Bird Studies Canada.

Each summer, I’m drawn back to the campground in Campbellford and seize the opportunity to explore the hidden treasures of the neighbouring counties. It’s a chance to disconnect from the city, let the e-mails go unchecked and ground myself in the beauty of small town Ontario.

•For more information, go to www.trenthills.ca or www.prince-edward-county.com •