

*I grew up in Buffalo and never thought much about Toronto. Even though it was only a couple hours away, it wasn't anyplace I thought of going. Our 7th grade class took a bus up to the science museum there where we put our hands on a steel globe and our hair stood up. That's about the only memory I had of Toronto. But that was then.*

## A Hidden Jewel in Toronto

When I moved back to Buffalo in the 1990's, Toronto became a regular escape for me. I finally realized one of the best things about Buffalo is its proximity to Toronto. We'd go up and see musicals on Yonge Street, baseball games in Skydome—heck, I even got engaged on the streets of Yorkville. (The wedding never happened, but Toronto's appeal lives on.)

I recently went back to Toronto for the first time in 15 years. No agenda, no schedule—just see where the wind took us. I was with my good friend, Colleen, who is an artist in Buffalo and a fun partner in crime for this one-day trip north of the border.

I hadn't crossed into Canada since 9/11. Border crossings have gotten more somber since when I was a kid and the customs agent asked if I had anything to declare. "Um, I don't like skim milk?" No jokes anymore; it's all passports and verbal pat-downs.

We got into downtown Toronto and parked near the waterfront. We saw a lot of people waiting in line to take a ferry across the harbor—er, harbour—so we joined in. We were going to the Toronto Islands!



It was a 5-10 minute cruise across the intracoastal, and each minute revealed a broader photo opportunity of the impressive Toronto skyline behind us. The NASA-like CN tower, the shell-like Skydome and a series of beautiful buildings.

We had stumbled on an area I never knew existed during my previous trips there. The Toronto Islands are the largest urban car-free community in North America, according to Wikipedia. There are three hundred cute little homes, as well as restaurants, an amusement park and plenty of recreation. The islands are only accessible by water or air (there is a small airport), but the city is building an underwater pedestrian tunnel that will be complete in 2014.

To get our bearings, we got a map and walked less than half a mile, straight through the center of the island until we reached a pier that jutted south into Lake Ontario. We looked back at the island and saw the skyline and CN tower looming in the distance.

With so much to see and only a few hours to see it, we rented bikes and began our tour of this beautiful island, all in the shadows of the Toronto skyline across the harbor. Renting bikes was the absolute best way to get around the island's 570 acres. It was inexpensive and charged by the hour.

I saw a sign for a clothing optional beach. Colleen didn't see it, so I decided to play a little trick on her and suggest we go check out the beach. She innocently got off her bike and we walked out to the sand, only to see a 60-something man wearing nothing but sandals. Her expression was priceless. His physique was not.

We had a great lunch at the Carousel Cafe right along a river within the island. We enjoyed seafood, corn on the cob, and cold Molson Ale as we watched a rowing competition on 'dragon boats' just a few yards—or meters—from our seats. It was a beautiful day in Toronto, and hundreds of people were taking advantage of the nice weather and all the recreational options around the island.

As we boarded the ferry and headed back to downtown Toronto, we had a beautiful view of the skyline and wrapped up a very special day in one of North America's finest cities. This trip proved once again that sometimes the things you plan the least, turn out the best!

Funny how it often works out that way. RAY COLLINS

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