

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

Introduction

We decided to take a long cruise this summer (2019) through the Erie Canal, down the St Lawrence Seaway to Montreal, and back via Lake Champlain. Our boat is an express cruiser powerboat with no flybridge – an 18-year-old Legacy 34, which has given us great service with over 1,600 hours on the engines and trips of 4-5 weeks duration, including several trips to Boston and a return from Florida via the ICW.

This was going to be a bit different though, as the trip was estimated to take 9-10 weeks and involve a lot of inland waterways with limited access to diesel fuel, stops in a foreign country (Canada) and a large number of canal locks. The latter didn't really worry us, as we crossed the Okeechobee Waterway with its 5 locks, but in retrospect, 59 locks is a lot different from the 5 we did in Florida.

Thanks are due to fellow AYC member Richard Falk, who had already planned the trip but never found the time, and who had collected most of the necessary charts and planning guides and passed them on to us. Also to Jim Sumper, another AYC member who generously made time to share his photos and recollections from his trip in 2017. It was good to hear that Jim enjoyed his Canada trip so much that he went back the following year!

Planning

The “Little or Canadian Loop” is a simple triangle from Albany, NY, to Montreal, Canada, via The Erie Canal, Lake Ontario, the St Lawrence Seaway, the Richelieu River/Canal to Lake Champlain, and the Champlain Canal back to Albany. Of course, you have to get to Albany and then home, and you can go either way, but the Seaway runs west-east, so it is easier to travel “downbound” as the Seaway calls it. The canals have very little current, although the Richelieu River drains Lake Champlain into the Seaway so it has a 1 or 2 knot current northbound.

We had been given the NY Canal chartbook, Richardson's Lake Ontario chartbook (which covered the Seaway to Cornwall,) and the Skipper Bob books for the NY canals and for the Richelieu & Rideau canals. We purchased the Richardson's Hudson River chartbook as it covers the Seaway from Cornwall to Sorel and beyond, plus the Richelieu, Lake Champlain and the Hudson.

It is the law in Canada that you must carry current paper charts as well as any electronic charts. We had our chartplotter updated with the Canadian charts for the Seaway and Richelieu – and were charged for them (\$600!) As I was working through the plans, I found that the Seaway charts were all small and disjointed, and very difficult to follow, so I also bought a large overview chart: 'CHS 1400 Montreal To Lake Ontario' from Bluewater in Miami (\$19.95) who print them on demand. This covers the major part of the Seaway, so I was able to pin it on the wall, highlight the locks and figure out where the border was without constantly flipping pages.

We finally bought the Waterways Guide to the Great Lakes, as it covers the whole “Little Loop” and gave us a different perspective. It was very helpful for finding provisions and other local features. However, it is enormous and heavy, as it covers all the lakes and the rest of the Great

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

Loop down the Mississippi, so we removed 3/4 of the pages and put the remainder in a 3-ring binder which we took with us!

The plan was created using a spreadsheet to tentatively set dates and figure out where we might want to stay for a night or two. We like to travel a few days (40-60 miles/day is comfortable, as long as the Canal speed limit allows and before considering locks,) and then take an extra rest day to look around, buy provisions or meals, clean ourselves and the boat, etc. We planned to visit friends in NJ, Albany and in upstate NY so we tried to let them know when we might arrive. Our daughter decided to meet us in Montreal for a weekend in a hotel and that meant non-refundable airfares and actual fixed dates. All the friends were flexible and the arrangements worked fine.

Our trip involved heading out of the Bay to NYC (via our friend Gerri in Barnegat Bay,) then up the Hudson to Troy, where the sign points West for the Erie Canal and North for the Champlain Canal. We went west along the Erie and Oswego Canals to Lake Ontario, then headed east, down the St Lawrence Seaway to Montreal. From there, we continued down the Seaway to Sorel, then down the Richelieu River through the St Ours and Chambly Canals and eventually to Lake Champlain. From there, the Champlain Canal and Hudson river brought us back to Waterford.

Ottawa?

There are alternative “little loop” routes that can be taken. One involves taking the Rideau Canal from Lake Ontario (Kingston, ON,) to Ottawa, then the Ottawa River back to Montreal. It skips the commercial locks on the Seaway, which (as you will read below) were not the most fun you can have in a boat. However, it does involve another 47 locks. Our fellow AYC member Jim Sumper thought that was a great part of the trip, and enjoyed his stay in Ottawa. In the interests of keeping the trip shorter, we elected not to go that route.

One can, of course, follow the Seaway all the way and emerge in the Atlantic Ocean among the Canadian Maritime Provinces. Turn right and you follow the coast to Maine and then home via the rest of New England. One of the sailboats that rafted with us at Eisenhower Lock was taking a year to enjoy the trip and planned to go that way.

Other options include the Erie Canal all the way to Lake Erie, boating around Lake Ontario and the other Lakes, and then there are the Finger Lakes with accessible canals in upstate NY. Maybe next time (!) we said.

NY/NJ, and the Hudson River to Troy Lock

The trip to New York was uneventful. We stayed in Lavalette with Gerri Mechler, our Ft Myers Beach (“FMB”) neighbor, who provided a feast (Italian style) on the first night. As usual, we took advantage of her hospitality to do laundry and buy provisions. Joanne and Frank, Gerri’s friends also from FMB, invited us for a delicious crab dinner.

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

We decided to spend an extra day in New York City and had lots of fun exploring the new Hudson Yards with Gerri and Joanne. We stayed, as usual, at Liberty Landing Marina, on the NJ side, where the ferry to the WTC is very convenient.

We left on an overcast day, and before we got too far north of the Tappan Zee Bridge the rain started, and kept with us intermittently all day. West Point was a blur in the rain but it stopped by the time we got to Newburgh. We chose to dock at the Yacht Club, which has a pleasant small marina.

We were amazed to discover that the current in the Hudson River isn't entirely due to the fact that it is a river flowing to the sea. It's actually an estuary and is tidal all the way to Albany, where they have to cope with a 5 ft tidal range! If you go north when the tide is in flood, you'll get some help. Of course, (Murphy's Law) most of our trip was against the current.

At Newburgh we found out something that we would note in many places on this trip. Canals (and navigable rivers) tend to be accompanied by railroads and highways, as they take the easy route through the various hills and mountain ranges. At Newburgh, not only did the railroad run past the back of the parking lot with frequent freight trains, but just across the river is the Amtrak route to Albany and beyond. The train horns were loud from either side. On the Erie Canal we only had the railroad on one side but we had the NY Thruway on the other! The Champlain canal has the same situation for most of the route to Lake Champlain. The majority of the trains stopped running overnight, but sometimes we were woken by the horns blaring at the road crossings adjacent to where we were docked. Newburgh was one of the latter.

Catskill was our next stop. On the way we called in to Kingston for fuel and lunch which was most enjoyable, although the fueling took a long time as there was a disabled trawler blocking the fuel dock. The Catskill main street was dotted with decorated cats displaying skills: Cat-Skills. Apart from the cats, there wasn't much happening, which we found typical of the upstate NY towns and villages. It was a bit like most of the Eastern Shore – the industry had moved on and the town was hanging by a thread.

A routine check of the engine room before we left Catskill revealed water in the bilge under the port engine. We could find no trace of any leak or drip, but we stopped at Coeymans Marina for lunch and checked again – no sign of more water so we decided to monitor it and continue. (In fact, we ended up pumping the water out about once a week until we got to Lake Champlain, when it stopped accumulating and dried up for a week, then it came back on our return through NJ.)

We docked at the Albany Yacht Club for a couple of days, another small club with docks to spare, and a few shops (Aldi, Rite Aid) nearby, which were helpful. The Cruising Guide suggested it was near to downtown, and perhaps it is, with a taxi. It was the only marina in town, as Troy is still rebuilding their town dock after a hurricane a few years ago. Overnight noise this time was caused by trucks on the adjacent highway using engine braking as they passed the riverfront, so we were woken up at 6am.

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

On our second day in Albany, a railroad friend from Florida came and took us off to the Berkshires and showed us around Tanglewood, Lenox and Springfield, MA. Tanglewood, where the Boston Symphony spends their summers, is an amazing complex designed for open air entertainment. He also provided dinner and showed us his garden trains, of course.

The following day we headed north to our first lock at Troy which is the limit of the tidal Hudson. We had done locks before on the Okeechobee and we had a spare set of 4 old fenders with old covers, so we were prepared. (We also had a new set of fenders with snazzy new covers for when we wanted the boat to look its best.)

Waterford and the Erie Canal

Above Troy there is a split where the Mohawk River meets the Hudson. Head north and you will end up in the Champlain Canal to Lake Champlain. Go west and you join the Erie Canal to Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, the Finger Lakes, Syracuse, Rochester, etc. The Erie Canal was upgraded many years ago by building dams and locks and flooding the Mohawk River to make a deeper channel, and there are lots of archeological remains of the old, narrower canal. Other locks take the canal past rapids or other difficult stretches.

One rocky stretch is at the junction, as the Mohawk river tumbles down rapids and rocks into the Hudson River valley. The Erie Canal rises alongside in a set of 7 locks, all of which are usually taken in one session of about 4 hours. At the bottom is the Waterford Canal Center which has a floating dock with free tie-up for up to 48 hours and some electricity. Before the centenary last year, one had to pay at Waterford to use the Canal, but they have waived the fees through 2021. We tied up to the concrete wall next to a ladder to see what we could find out, and despite the floating dock being full there didn't seem to be anyone heading for the big lock gates visible just under the bridge. As it was a Saturday, we figured the others were there for the weekend in Waterford, so we shrugged, got back onboard, and cast off.

The lockkeeper on Lock 1 didn't keep us waiting long, and they call ahead to let their fellow lockkeepers know there is someone coming, so after the first lock we didn't have to wait for the next six locks. Some locks have pipes or wire lines embedded in the side of the lock so you can loop a line around and hold the boat steady. All locks had some number of ropes hanging down to the bottom so you grab one at the bow and one at the stern unless you elect to use the pipe. If you are going up, the ropes are dirty and slimy from being in the water – just as the sides of the locks are dirty. We used gardening or work gloves to protect our hands, but it's a messy business. When the water fills the lock there is some turbulence so the boat will try to move around, adding to the fun.

We got to the top of the Waterford Flight and found we could travel at up to 45 mph (!) in the river section of the canal, so we made quick time to Schenectady Yacht Club, where we spent a couple of nights. The club is nowhere near Schenectady, and we had no real desire to go sightseeing as rain was threatened. We did find a convenience store close by, Stewarts – a local NY chain, which has great ice cream! At the back of the club grounds were a couple of original locks from the old canal, which originally crossed the river on an aqueduct just by the fuel dock,

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

where you could see the remains of an arch. The old locks are now used as the boat launch and the old canal is a quiet place for members to dock. (Most docks are along the canal side, which is fine at night but subject to wakes from passing traffic. Many are floating and are removed in winter because of ice.) That weekend the club historian was having a meeting and he had photographs mounted in the clubhouse, so we got our education on the old canal.

The NY Canal Guide, which includes the charts, has useful information such as the time between locks, the time needed to cover multiple locks if they are close, places to anchor, etc. Skipper Bob's guides cover the towns and their facilities, which usually include where to tie up. Most locks have a concrete approach wall, with bollards, cleats and/or mooring lines, which were installed for the barge traffic years ago. Nowadays, many locks have this approach wall available both sides of the lock (upriver/downriver) so you can tie up and spend the night; and there is no tide. Some towns also installed floating docks and have added electrical posts with 30- or 50-amp supplies, either free or a nominal charge. We used the small dock at Canajoharie and the 30 amp electric, which had a sign on it: "Courtesy of the Chamber of Commerce – Please Shop Locally". Then we stopped at Ilion at a marina which wasn't a lot different (concrete wall along the canal,) but it did have bathrooms and a small snack bar as there was an RV park beside the marina, and it charged a modest fee.

All along the Canal, Skipper Bob's guide pointed out places of interest to visit. You could spend days or weeks covering upstate canal-side New York. Canajoharie, for example, was the home of Beech-Nut, the baby food producer, until 2011. The company president, Mr. Bartlett Arkell, donated money for a community library and loaned some of his art as decoration. The town liked the art, and when he died, he bequeathed the collection to the town. The Arkell Museum is accessed through the Canajoharie Library and is renowned for its American art collection. (It was closed the day we visited; always check ahead.) Ilion has the Remington Arms factory and a company store. Something for everyone.

Just before Ilion we passed through Little Falls and Lock 17, the deepest lock on the canal at 40.5'. Its gate rises along a concrete end wall, and as it has been under water before you arrive, the gate drops water all over the boat as you pass underneath. Rome, NY is the high point of the eastern part of the canal, about 420 ft above sea level. Through Lock 20 the canal is rising along the Mohawk River valley, squeezing through the mountains. Then there is a long, boring, 10mph straight stretch of canal from Rome almost to Sylvan Beach where the canal changes to paralleling and using Woods Creek, which flows westwards. Lock 21 took us down, which I found much easier and less dirty than going up!

Sylvan Beach, Oneida Lake, Brewerton

It was getting close to July 4th. We are not fans of boating on the 4th, as everyone else seems to be out on the water and half of them seem to be oblivious to the courtesies and rules of navigation. Our plan was to stop at a marina off the canal in Rome, NY, on the 3rd, and to head for Sylvan Beach and Oneida Lake on the 5th. Then we would dock at Brewerton west of the Lake to visit with friends near Rochester.

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

According to the guide books there isn't much of interest in Rome, which we confirmed when we got there, through a very shallow channel to their marina. We decided to call the marinas at Sylvan Beach and see if there were any spare slips. We snagged one, so on the 4th we headed west and docked near Oneida Lake in Sylvan Beach. Not only does it have a beach on Oneida Lake, but there is a small amusement park and various vacation stores and restaurants. You can imagine what it was like when we arrived on the 4th, - Coney Island comes to mind – lots of local day-trippers determined to have a good time. We did take a walk and some photos, but we elected to eat onboard. (We did that fairly often on the trip. The wine is less expensive too!)

One constant worry was that, due to high water from the rains early in the summer, the Oswego Canal and parts of the Erie were reported as closed. In fact, when we set off we didn't know if we'd get through, but about halfway along the Erie we heard they had finally opened the canals all the way to Lake Ontario. We encountered lots of "canalligators" as the floating branches and logs are known. We ran over at least 2 on the trip – one on the Hudson River. Our jet drives were not affected, but propellers will be at risk.

Oneida Lake has a reputation for being rough when the wind is from the west. The guides say it is shallow, but I found it was 30-40 ft deep. In any case, the 5th was a nice day for crossing the lake. Unfortunately, we immediately noticed a problem with engines, jet drives, or both. We had backed in to a slip near the grassy area of the marina, and our jets picked up some of a canvas seat cover: sucked it through the grid and wrapped it around a drive shaft. That was a first for us – the water intakes sometimes get blocked but we never had something substantial sucked in that we couldn't get rid of by reversing the drives. It created a nasty vibration. To add to the problems, our hydraulic reversing system decided to give up with one reversing bucket half down – the same one that had the vibration. We had lost all our hydraulic fluid. At the time, we weren't sure what the problems were, but the symptoms were evident and troubling.

Sometimes it is nice to have 2 of everything, so we soldiered on across the lake with the starboard engine running almost flat out and the other at low revs below the vibration point. We had intended to run fast across the Lake, as we'd been idling at 10 mph all the previous day, so the starboard engine got to work at rated speed, although it took us almost twice as long as we planned.

We had another piece of good fortune when we reached Brewerton at the other side of the lake. We had booked ourselves in to Winter Haven marina, and it turned out to be a service and storage location with lots of big, fancy boats. [Store your boat in their heated sheds and have it worked on while it is snowing outside.] We radioed and told them we had no reverse gear, and they sent a couple of dockhands to the face dock and between us we managed to stop AnnieB and tie up. The Service Manager came out to see what our problem was, and he arranged for more hydraulic fluid. It seemed to cure our reversing problem, so we cast off and tested operations, and found we still had the nasty vibration and we were (unsurprisingly) leaking oil.

This was Friday the 5th, and the marina arranged to haul AnnieB and take a look in the jets on the Monday. We were collected the next day by our friends and taken to Middlesex, NY, to their mountain retreat for a few days. Monday at 8:45am, as I was thinking about breakfast, I

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

got a text with 3 photos from the marina, showing the oil leaking out of a reversing cylinder and the canvas clearly seen inside the grid intake of the jet. We ordered a new cylinder to be sent to them, and a new seal kit to fit on the old cylinder when we get around to it (or when we need it.) By Tuesday afternoon AnnieB was back in the water and had stopped leaking. We had no more hydraulic or jet problems for the rest of the trip.

Middlesex and on to Lake Ontario

Our visit with Norman and Sylvia in Middlesex, NY, was delightful. They are high in the hills with a view of Canadagua Lake, one of the smaller finger lakes near Rochester. The property is about 50 acres, and Norm has cleared several trails, so visitors are taken on a high-speed tour in the ATV – fun! The local area has plenty of attractions, and we visited Hammondsport and the Glenn Curtiss Museum (he was a pioneer bicycle maker and aviator, holding the world speed record on a motorbike for 12 years.) On the way back we had to stop at a couple of wineries; much improved from my last visit to NY state about 40 years ago.

Our friends John and Tina arrived to visit with them (and us) on the Monday, so they got the tour of the wooded trails. The following day we had lunch with Helene, a friend who used to live in our new condo complex, Creciente. We went on to downtown Rochester to see the Great Falls (very impressive) and sample a Genesee beer (not so impressive.) The next day John and Tina then dropped us back in Brewerton on their way home to PA.

The drive problem didn't impact our vacation at all (apart from the dent in the wallet.) We loaded fresh provisions and set off for the Oswego Canal to Lake Ontario, which splits from the Erie Canal just west of Brewerton. That night we stopped in Fulton, which has a floating dock with plenty of slips and free electricity, although access is a bit tight. The town was, as usual, almost dead.

We finished the canal the following day, tying up in the Oswego Marina among a number of fishing charter boats. There is an evening farmers market on Thursday, so we strolled among the stalls and inspected the local produce and merchandise. We had a rest day planned for Friday or Saturday, depending on the weather for crossing Lake Ontario, and it was not supposed to be nice on Friday so we stayed in Oswego. (One of the fishing boats went out and came back early at 1pm. I asked if the seas were 3-5 ft as NOAA projected. "More like 4 – 8 ft" was the terse reply. We were glad we stayed!) We had a pleasant afternoon visiting the Richardson-Bates House museum and stopping at one of the well-reviewed restaurants for appetizers and cocktails.

St Lawrence Seaway Notes

July 13th we crossed Lake Ontario and entered the St Lawrence Seaway heading for Montreal, and eventually to the Richelieu Canal. The Lake is pretty wide so we were out of sight of land for the first time on this trip. It took us the best part of a week to cruise from Clayton, NY, to Montreal, QE. Our boat is an express cruiser that usually runs at 20 knots. The Seaway guides

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

and charts have confusing information about speed limits: the Guide says they only apply to 12+m vessels and we're only 11.5m, but the charts have no such caveat so it wasn't clear.

We don't think the St Lawrence Seaway is "recreational cruiser friendly". Their website has a 25-page 'guide' which is a must-read and can be downloaded from www.greatlakes-seaway.com, where you can sign up for email alerts which we found useful. All the Seaway locks charge a fee for passage. Canadian locks are CAN\$25 and the US locks are US\$30, each. Where there are pairs of locks, they collect the fees once at the last lock. All can be paid online or at the lock, in theory, though some locks said the high water prevented use of the lock fee machine. We had receipts to hand out for all of the locks as we paid online before we left home.

The trip after the Thousand Islands was not fun. Partly because we had set a deadline – our daughter was flying in to Montreal to meet us, so we didn't have the luxury of stopping for a day or two when we got tired of waiting for passage through a lock. But mostly it was a series of long, hot, hurry-up-and-wait days getting through these locks.

Another planning issue is the need to clear Canadian customs. In theory, once you stop in Canada, you must clear customs, and if you return to spend a night on the US side, you should clear customs again back into the USA. As you are constantly moving from one side of the border to the other, deciding where to stop and where to buy fuel becomes more complicated, though it is not clear anyone is checking if you happen into a marina on the wrong side.

Thousand Islands

The west is the scenic part of the Seaway, around Clayton, NY, and on to Alexandria Bay. We could have enjoyed a few more days in that area. Clayton is the home of the Antique Boat Museum, which is always a fun place to visit. Lots of varnished teak and mahogany to admire, and some unique racing boats. The food in Clayton was good too: strawberry-rhubarb muffins for breakfast, anyone?

Lake Ontario was 3-4 ft above normal this year, which was an occasional problem. The fuel dock at Clayton was almost under water – the dockhands wore rubber boots and our fenders had to be in the water to be effective. Clayton municipal marina is fairly new and is floating (with room to float higher) so it was comfortable.

We left Clayton and stopped at Boldt Castle, a few miles east. The high water at the public dock was an issue again; our fenders had to be low and in the water. (We had the spare grungy fenders for the locks, so getting them wet or dirty wasn't a problem!) Access to the boathouse was cancelled due to the high water, but the Castle itself was very interesting – built by the Waldorf-Astoria owner for his wife, with no expense spared, until 1904 when she died and the almost-complete castle was abandoned. It is now owned by the Thousand Island Bridge Authority which is doing the restoration.

After lunch we headed east to Prescott, ON, where I phoned Canpass and got a customs clearance number. The conversation was interesting, as Canada has licensed cannabis but it is illegal to import it. The other interesting conversation happened on the gas dock when I asked

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

for 20 gallons of diesel – “what’s that in liters?”. (Google came to our rescue and we noted that 38 liters is about 10 gallons.) We then wandered in to the town for a few provisions and realized, as it was Canada, we could buy all sorts of good British items, like my favorite cheese.

Canadian Waters and our first Seaway Locks

Iroquois lock, which drops 4” (inches), was our first experience of locking on the Seaway. When we got there a large commercial ship was already in the lock, so we had to wait about an hour. There is a floating dock for recreational vessels with enough room for 3 or 4 boats; more if they raft together. There were only 2 waiting with us that day. When we entered the lock and grabbed the rope on the side, the lockmaster came along to get our boat’s particulars, and while he was doing that the lock water level dropped a few inches. (I think the lock separates the water flows above and below. Apparently sometimes they don’t even close the lock.)

We stayed at Crysler Park, ON, as we were already checked in to Canada. It’s a nice summer vacation marina and RV park in the middle of nowhere, but it had diesel fuel. We walked to the adjacent golf club restaurant, which was a long hike (4km), so they took pity on us and the manager organized a ride back to our boat.

The Eisenhower and Snell locks are a disgrace for recreational boaters. (The Canadian locks are marginally better equipped.) The locks are supposed to have a floating dock for use while waiting, but that dock at Eisenhower is broken down and only large enough for one boat. A sailboat rafted with us (at our invitation, but there was only room for one,) and we had some socializing while we waited two hours for the locks. At least one other sailboat was waiting at the lock when we arrived, and it circled for all that time, along with other boats that showed up.

We made it through and boated on to Cornwall, ON, where we spent a pleasant evening, dining at a specialty burger joint. We then travelled through the Seaway, and Lake (Lac St-François) which is quite wide and calm at this point, to Salaberry-de-Valleyfield. Nice little town, lots to see and do, and close to the marina. It has a neat town dock along the old canal which is definitely worth checking, although it reportedly can get noisy on the weekends.

Seaway Canals and the final Locks

From Salaberry there are 4 more locks but not many miles to reach Montreal. First is the Beauharnois Canal, with two road bridges that need to lift (even for us, who need only 13 ft/4m.) The Seaway website claims that the bridges open on alternate hours, so you get to one, and the other will open an hour later, which should give you time to reach it at the 10mph canal speed limit. The locks are close together east of the 2 bridges

The first bridge was due to open at 11am, so we got there early. At 11 am the bridge started to lift, so we moved closer anticipating a green (go) light. Nope – there was a freighter coming in to view so the bridge tender dropped the bridge down again and we had to wait until 11:15.

However, that had unforeseen consequences. The current was running 4-5 mph in the canal, and we had moved closer to the bridge and the dolphins (big circular structures designed to

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

keep barges moving to the bridge.) There were strong eddies around the dolphins and one grabbed our boat and banged us on the steel. Just trying to escape meant we banged another dolphin quite hard. Fortunately, our boat is significantly overbuilt so it suffered no damage except a sprung screw or two on the rubrail.

We finally got through the bridge and moved on to the next one. It was past 12 noon when we reached the locks. As we were nearing the weekend and Montreal, there were quite a few other pleasure craft waiting for passage through the lock, rafted 3 across on the floating docks. We tied up to the (rough, crumbling, high) concrete wall a little way from the dock and waited, with another sailboat, for the lock. We finally got through the second lock about 4pm. Some of our companions, from Montreal, were upset that they wouldn't be getting home that night due to the lock delays. We learned from them that the lockmasters aren't anti-American or anything, they are government employees who just consider commercial traffic to be their customers.

After our first Seaway lock experiences, we were concerned about getting through 4 more locks in one move. Quite apart from the time it would take, the effort of locking was tiring, especially for the First Mate who had to deal with fenders, hanging ropes, picky captain, etc. Therefore, we planned an overnight in Dorval on the side of Lac St Louis at the Royal St Lawrence Yacht Club. The bad news, as I remembered afterwards, is the Montreal International Airport is in Dorval, so we had lots of aircraft noise until it quietened down at midnight (not that we noticed – we fell asleep from exhaustion at 10pm.) The good news was that it was a delightful evening so we had a delicious dinner on the docks at the Club and enjoyed the hospitality.

On to Montreal. We set off fairly early (for us – 10am) to get through the last 2 locks. There were more Canadian boaters, as it was Friday and it was the start of the traditional summer vacation. We rafted with a very nice family at both locks while we waited, and we rafted 3-across inside the locks. There were still some boats who could not find room to tie up so they had to hover or circle for hours.

The Seaway website has reassuring words about recreational boats locking through at 11am and 2pm. Locking takes about an hour to load the boats in (18 by my count at the last lock.) St Catherine Lock allowed us passage about 11:30am so we were at St Lambert Lock by noon. At 1:45pm I went to the phone which is mounted by the floating dock to talk to the Lockmaster. I asked if we were going to be allowed passage at 2pm, as their website suggested, and the Lockmaster said no-one had told him the schedule!! He said it would be another 45 mins to an hour, and it was 2:30 before we started moving.

Montreal

Once out of the lock, Montreal is the other side of the adjacent island, so you do a 180 degree turn and head upriver against the current. We stayed at the Yacht Club of Montreal for 4 nights – it isn't really a Club, just a fancy name – where they charged us CAN\$2.25/ft/day, and gave us fresh towels in the showers and use of a courtesy car. Can't beat that for value.

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

The courtesy car came in useful, as I found a leak in my exhaust hose. I called the plumbing supply house with the help of the marina wifi and google, and managed to navigate myself across the city to buy the clamps I needed. It cost CAN\$11.75 to fix it, which is unheard of on a boat!

Our daughter Kate turned up on schedule to visit with us. Montreal was all we expected: interesting places to visit, great food. It was a bit hot, as it had been all of our trip, so we spent some time in the a/c in the archeology/city museum and at Cirque du Soleil which happened to be on the waterfront across from our hotel.

Seaway to Sorel and the Richelieu Canal

After a long weekend of shore activities, we got back onboard and set off for Sorel and the Richelieu River, which leads to Lake Champlain and home. No locks, a little rain, and very few other boaters so the final part of our Seaway trip was very easy. The St Lawrence River in this section is flat and peaceful but there is nowhere to stop.

Sorel was pleasant but we only stayed the night, and set off along the Richelieu River/Canal. The St Ours Canal consisting of just 1 lock and nothing else. We tied up at the blue floating dock outside (Canadian rule, so the lockmaster knows you are waiting for passage.) Once in the lock, which is part of the Canadian Parks system, a couple of rangers helped us tie up to the unusual inside floating dock and collected our fee.

There are many small marinas with (mostly) boats on seasonal contracts along the river, which is wide and passes many small towns, all of which have the obligatory dual steeples (think: mini-Notre Dame,) usually in silver reflecting the sunlight. We stopped at Otterburn Park which had a large service and sales center across the road, but was otherwise miles from anything. Next was the Chambly Canal, consisting of 9 locks, all hand operated by Park Rangers, who seemed to be mostly students. The first 3 locks out of the Bassin de Chambly (basin, or small lake,) were a tier, where the exit gate from one was also the entry gate for the next, so they all had to be taken together. The other 6 locks were spread out and there were places to stop and tie up, but we had our eye on St Jean Sur Richelieu for that night, as it's the largest town on the river.

The Chambly Canal alternates between river sections and narrow canals, and we were stopped at a low bridge by the canal manager, to let a couple of boats approaching pass us, as the next section was narrow and we were in company with a big (55'+) cruiser. We were also told that they hadn't resolved the problems with the last bridge at St Jean, which apparently was broken. But they would get the guys to work overtime and we should be able to pass by 6pm latest.

The last lock is before the last bridge, and after following the big cruiser down that narrow canal we both squeezed in to the lock. We asked the cruiser's deck hands (grandkids?) to hold our bow which was threatening their swim platform. We still weren't in the lock, and the lockmaster just told me to push off the gate to fit in! We actually managed to pivot a little so our swim platform was in the middle and the gate closed without any pushing. Pretty interesting operation. We got through and were asked to tie up at the floating dock just above

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

the lock to wait for the broken bridge. This was a bit stressful as we couldn't see the bridge or any other boats, so we had to rely on the VHF to contact the lock and find out what was going on. It was about 4:30pm and very hot so we fired up the generator and turned on the a/c.

At 6pm we got the call and set off for our last piece of the canal. Going under the bridge made it clear that they had a crane lifting it for us. The following day we walked past and found there was another bridge being built adjacent to the broken one, so the latter was probably not being maintained.

We stayed a couple of nights in St Jean sur Richelieu, which was a nice little town. Les Halles de St Jean (the market) had a bunch of small stores that sold all the stuff you'd expect in French Canada – delicious pastries, cheeses, every kind of sausage you can imagine (and more!) And a small produce stall, so we (reluctantly) bought only what we could carry back to the boat. The marina had a decent restaurant, and a delicacy you don't often get in the US of A : “tartare” – raw meat or fish with vegetables and spices. We happen to like it, so it was steak tartare the first night, and the second night we took the tartare sampler (steak, salmon and tuna,) back to the boat.

Lake Champlain

St Jean was our last stop in Canada, as 20 miles south is Lake Champlain and the border, where we had to clear US customs. It was a sunny, hot Saturday, and we had lots of company. I had googled the border post, and found it was adjacent to the road bridge. They worked out of a trailer and there are a few floating docks for visitors. As we approached, we found a lot of boats lining up along the shore – they knew the procedure and were waiting for a slip to open up on the customs dock. We squeezed in to the line after a nice local guy on the next boat explained how it worked.

The docks were quite small, as were most of the other boats, which seemed to be Canadians visiting for the day or weekend. Fortunately, there was a T-head and it freed up just as we got to the front of the line, so we pulled up to that and our local advisor pulled in behind us. There was a strong crosswind and the docks were not very substantial, so by the time we were tied up the local guy had already gone to see the customs. It was an interesting operation. You are supposed to fly the yellow quarantine flag and only the captain should leave the boat to get clearance. There were no flags flying, and everyone on the boats piled off and went up to the trailer.

(There's a funny aside to this question of the flags. We always had clips that would attach a small flag to our VHF antenna, which is on the starboard side. I had been looking for a Canadian flag to put there, as that is the courtesy when travelling in a foreign country. Could not find one in the local marine stores; just Bermuda, pirate and/or cocktail-time flags. However, at Port Henry on the Lake, several days after our return to the USA, we happened to be buying fuel at a small marina and there it was – a small Canadian flag!)

Most of the other boaters at the CBP (Customs & Border Protection) post appeared to do this trip regularly, and they were in the CBP ROAM program and had an app [yes, there's an app for

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

this,] that they had used to get a clearance number. The CBP guys checked the number and sent them on their way in less than 5 minutes. I handed over the passports and had to wait half-an-hour! Another strange thing – they had a form for visiting boats: name, boat name/number, where you lived. Simple stuff to keep track of the daily visitors, but it was in French. I asked for the English version and they didn't have one!!

They finally allowed us to leave and we stopped for fuel, and headed down Lake Champlain, back in the good old U.S. of A. We stopped that night at Mooney Bay where we noted lots and lots of sailboats. The marina advertised itself as “3 miles from the interstate, and 1 hour from Montreal”. As you can't get a sailboat down the canals without un-stepping the mast, it seemed the Canadians kept their yachts in the U.S. Lake.

All the canals, Seaway and lakes are fresh water, so we didn't have to wash the boat every day, and hopefully all the barnacles fell off. The water in Lake Ontario and the west end of the Seaway is crystal clear, due to the zebra mussels, we were told. Despite that, our black hull looked filthy by the time we got to Lake Champlain, and despite a scrub in Ft Ann, it still looked dirty when we arrived home. There are one or two scratches from operator errors at the docks, so a good polish will be called for this winter.

We carried on south on a breezy day with spray flying, to Essex, where Ann had spotted an interesting Inn/B&B. The idea was to spend the first night (Sunday) on the boat and then the second at the Inn. Essex Marina was small and tight for squeezing our boat in to the back wall, but we made it. There is a ferry across the Lake from Essex, so there was some traffic and a few open shops in the village. It's actually quite charming, being full of original Edwardian and Victorian homes. (One of them is labelled as a “place to see” but, when I knocked on the door, the owner said it wasn't open to the public! I sent Google a message.)

Essex Inn was quite pleasant if expensive, and dinner was good but not spectacular. Breakfast in the morning turned out to be at the local café, not at the Inn. The ice-cream shop next door was also a local haunt, although on the second visit they were out of our favorite flavor. When we returned to the Marina, the manager told us we might like to stop at the Red Mill on our way south, which resulted in a search through the guide books and online, as it was in a resort that wasn't noted anywhere as a cruising stop. Basin Harbor is in its 133rd season of golf, sailing, swimming, tennis, and all the other things you do when vacationing at the Lake, and their dock guys said it was fine for us to tie up while having lunch. It was a great lunch experience and we wandered back via the main lodge to see how it looked – not a budget operation!

Lake Champlain is 120 miles long, and the southerly 40 miles is known as the “river” section, as it is quite narrow from Port Henry to Whitehall. It was a hotbed of Revolutionary War activity, as it was a strategic route north to Canada, so there are lots of Forts and other historic places to visit. The guidebook says to schedule a week to see the Lake, but we opted for 4 days and kept moving south. Fort Ticonderoga is perhaps the largest and best known of the historic forts. The river section was very interesting, with the occasional ferry and small town. We cruised through an area of reeds and passed a couple of strange boats that might have been built to harvest the reeds. There are several narrow cuts through the ridges and other wide basins.

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

We stopped at Chipman Point marina for the night. The weather was getting unpleasant so we hastily docked at the T-head with the “transients welcome” sign as we couldn’t raise anyone on the radio. After the rain stopped, we went to find the manager and discovered the main building was an old stone warehouse 4 stories tall with the hoist still visible in the loft. The bathrooms, etc., were put together inside the old 2nd floor area, so the beams and stone walls could be admired. Very different and quite nice.

Champlain Canal

We then passed the “elbow of Lake Champlain” near Whitehall, which was so far from the wide part it was difficult to believe it was still part of the Lake. Whitehall was our first Champlain lock, with 10 more to go before we got back to Albany. The next stop was Fort Ann (maybe named after my wife?) It claimed to be the site of 5 forts over the revolutionary war period. It had a small floating dock at the canal-side park, but no electricity. No problem, our generator was still working, although it took a while to settle down to 110V (possibly a voltage regulator on the blink.) There was a convenience store at the nearby crossroads, and a Brewpub down the street, where the brewer made the beer in the basement. Interesting and quite tasty.

That afternoon about 4 or 5 boats passed us in a short period – only half of them remembered that the 10-mph canal rule is No Wake at docks or other boats. I glared at them all and most slowed down, and I yelled at one, as the canal was quite narrow and at 10 mph we were getting seriously bounced about. But they were almost the only boats we saw on our trip. We’d seen a couple on the Erie/Oswego going our way and a couple passed us going the other way. But we seemed to have the Champlain Canal to ourselves, apart from those few northbound travelers.

Next stop was Schuylerville, almost at the last locks. The restaurant at the marina was highly recommended, so we tried it and it was good! Then we walked in to the town center, what there was of it, and hiked home with 2 huge 2.5 gal jugs of drinking water. With the heat, we drank lots of water on this trip, and acquiring water is almost as big a problem as finding fuel. Next stop was Waterford, where we came back to the junction with the Erie Canal. We stopped on their dock for lunch and a stroll, then headed off to our last lock at Troy, which we had passed through 4+ weeks earlier on our way north. “No more locks” I said to the Troy lockmaster as we passed through, and his reply was “They all say that.”

Hudson, NYC, and Home

As we’d been so nicely treated on the way north, and as the Albany Yacht Club had been noisy, we continued to Coeymans (there is a yacht club at Castleton-on-Hudson, but they had an event and no space.) We had a spare day in the schedule, and rain was forecast (and arrived) the following day, so we elected to stop and use their brand-new laundry facility. We asked about walking to a store for milk, and the marina manager said it was a pretty long way but she’d pick some up for us on her way in to the marina – which she did. There was a big dockside restaurant at the marina which seemed to be packed with guests, which seemed strange as we were in the middle of nowhere, but then we remembered we were less than an hour from Albany by car. Travelling by boat can distort your perspective. The calamari were so good (it

A Little Looping: 59 locks, 1,500 miles, 9 ½ weeks

Peter & Ann Thornton Aug 2019

was a specialty – the waitress’ t-shirts had “Squid Squad” on them,) we went back the following day and collected some to eat on the boat.

Heading back down the Hudson, we stopped at Poughkeepsie Yacht Club, a small facility miles from the town but very welcoming, where we enjoyed the Brown Ale special (\$2) at their bar. Next stop was Croton-on-Hudson, where we found a useful Apple Farms produce market and a good ice-cream store/bakery. We finally arrived at Liberty Landing across from Manhattan where we spent a couple of nights and enjoyed half-price tickets for the theatre as rain was scheduled, (picked up at South St,) and next day a celebration dinner in town at Le Bernadin.

We spent several nights in NJ at Gerri’s home (again) with her friends, enjoying the beach, the food and the company, including an extra night as we couldn’t get a slip in Atlantic City due to a music festival. Two of her grandkids and their parents were staying at the beach, so she had a full house – especially the night Tina and John turned up to meet us again! The Lavalette beaches have been restored after hurricane Sandy with new dunes and barrier plantings. It is a beautiful summertime resort and the local bakery is special – Gerri told us the trick to getting our order without spending hours waiting in line.

Bad weather was in the forecast when we got to Atlantic City. We decided on a marathon 80+ mile day from AC to Delaware City, as we didn’t want to get stuck the wrong side of Delaware Bay. We arrived home a day later than our spreadsheet projected, after 9 ½ weeks, (due to the last-minute bad weather,) despite the various changes to the plan that we made on the trip. It’s worth noting that the actual loop only took 4-5 weeks; the rest was getting to Albany and visiting friends for a few days here and there.

Final Thoughts

We really enjoyed the Champlain Canal and Lake Champlain. If we were going to Montreal again, we’d forget the Erie Canal and just do a return trip via Lake Champlain. The Lake is varied and has lots of different places to visit. The Erie Canal gets pretty boring after a while, as there isn’t much variety of scenery or of the towns you visit on the way. The St Lawrence Seaway, apart from the Thousand Islands, we found to be just a big pain, as you’ll have already noted. Overall the trip was quite easy, as there isn’t much danger involved when you are entirely inland on canals and never more than 20 miles from a marina. Our boat problems were pretty normal for an almost 20-year-old cruiser, although we had plans to abandon ship and rent a car to get to Montreal if something serious failed! Our advice is – go do it! We had a great time.