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September/October 2003

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Champlain by Kayak

Paddle your way to some of the best views of Vermont's great lake.

story by Ann DeMuth

Lake Champlain covers more than 117 miles from north to south. To the west of the lake, the Adirondacks create a spectacular natural boundary; to the east, the distinctive Green Mountains rise majestically. In and around the lake itself, islands, beaches, sheer rock cliffs, and coves form the beautiful backdrop that only gets better when you view these features from a kayak.

Once the lake has warmed up in early summer, a community of Vermont paddlers comes out of hibernation. The Champlain Kayak Club kicks off the season with an annual meeting that includes programs for paddlers of all skill levels. The club offers day paddles, overnight camping trips, and skill seminars, all led by volunteers. And you won't want to miss the informal Wednesday evening paddles, which are launched from different access points around the lake.

One of my first paddles with the club a few years ago took me to the southern part of the lake, through the Dresden Narrows. It was a calm, sunny, spring day. The water was flat, giving the lake a lazy river feel as we paddled through the wetlands, a paradise for birders. As we approached the Narrows, the topography drastically changed. Sheer cliffs loomed up and we paddled through the opening as if it was a narrow river that cut its way through a canyon. We put in at South Bay, just North of Whitehall, N.Y., and paddled north, surrounded by mostly Nature Conservancy land. In a word, it was awesome.

Tom Hengelsberg, a trip coordinator for the Champlain Kayak Club (CKC), says "One thing I can say with great enthusiasm is that I've never had a bad paddle on the lake." And, Hengelsberg adds, there's something for everyone on the lake. "You get in the boat, and you look around, there's always something that's really interesting. You discover what the special things about that place are."

For example, he continues, "the relationship of the water to the shoreline is part of the beauty of that (Dresden Narrows) trip. You can almost see this sort of crevice existing there. On the Vermont side, you have this really, really old limestone, and on the other, you've got the much newer New York granites and decomposed red granite that forms the sand, and it all comes together right there." Here are several more great Champlain paddle trips.

Heading north up the lake from Dresden Narrows, you'll find the favorite areas of CKC member Larry Keyes. One paddle takes you from Mount Independence in Vermont to Fort Ticonderoga in New York. "When they are re-enacting a battle at Fort Ticonderoga, you can see hundreds of troops through the cannon smoke from the shores of Mount Inde-

PHOTO: JOE BRZOZA

Point your bow forward and go enjoy a paddle trip on Lake Champlain.

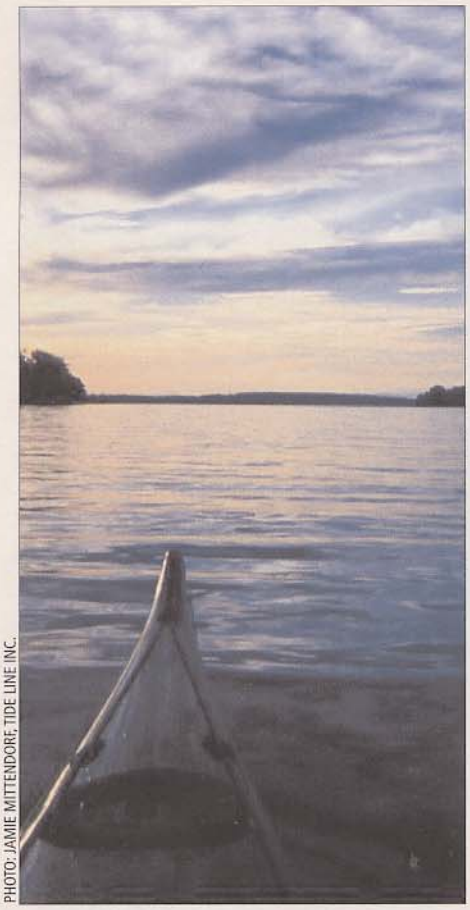
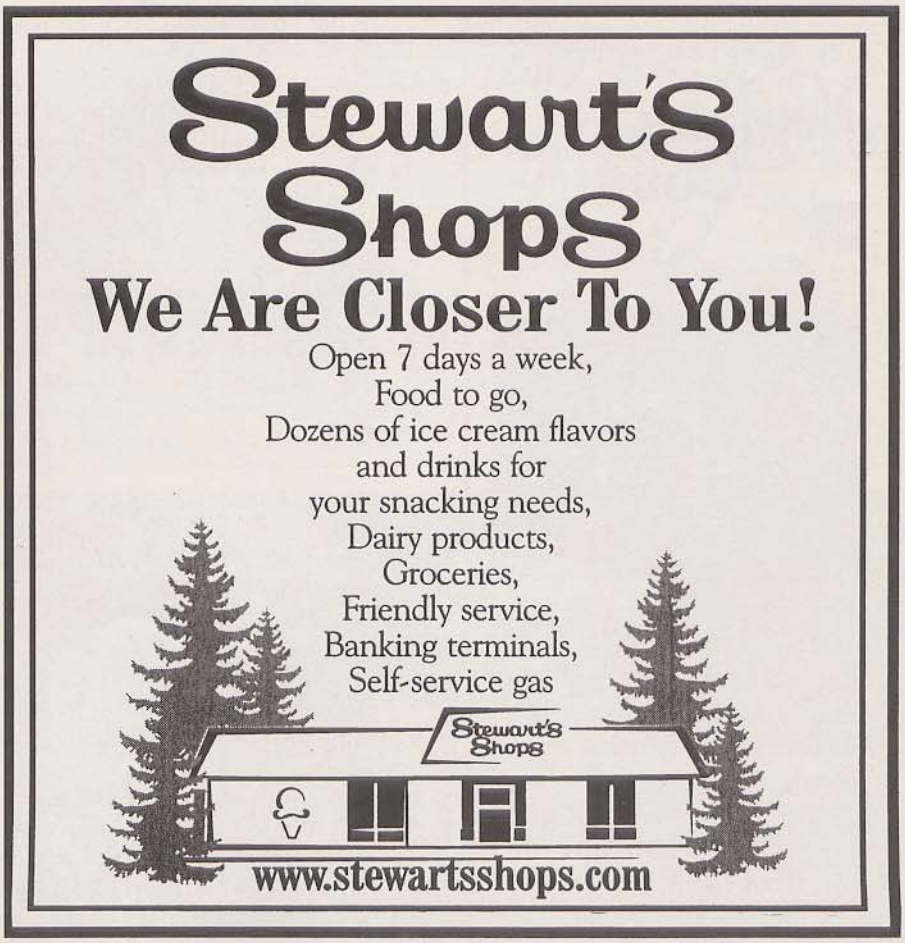


PHOTO: JAMIE MITTENDORF, TIDE LINE INC.

pendence on the Vermont side," Larry says. Launch from the marina and paddle across to Fort Ticonderoga. On the paddle back, Larry suggests going up the East River, "a lovely estuary with lots of wildlife and birds."

Farther north, another favorite historic paddle of Larry's is to launch from the fishing access at Chimney Point, just below the bridge. There's a museum there with exhibits on the history of the area. Paddle under the bridge and over to Crown Point, on the New York side, and explore the fort, a key Revolutionary War site. From there, head north to Port Henry, where there's a town park with a good, sandy beach for swimming. Paddle back to DAR State Park on the Vermont side for another good swim, and then paddle along the shore back to Chimney Point.

Uplake of Vergennes, you'll find the dramatic Palisades, which are sheer rock cliffs. With spring's snowmelt, you may find a waterfall, and chances are you'll see peregrine falcons, ravens, and possibly bald eagles flying overhead. One put-in option is at the Fort Cassin Fish and Wildlife Access in Ferrisburg. The Palisades loom ahead as you paddle across the lake. If you paddle south



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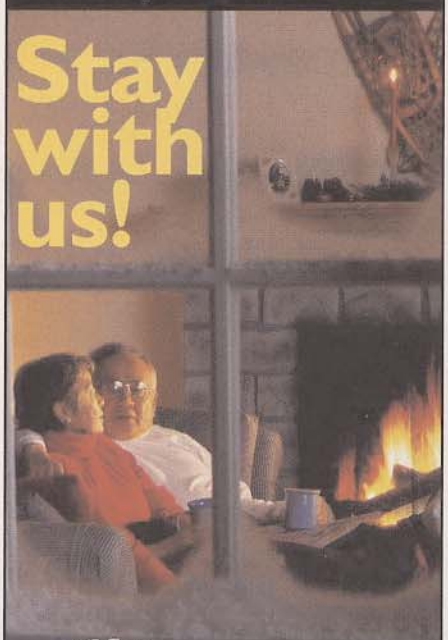

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Guard against Champlain weather changes by bringing rain gear and wearing a flotation vest.

from the access, you could stop by North Harbor and explore the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum. You could also slip into Otter Creek for a nice flatwater paddle with great blue herons and osprey in sight.

Up the shoreline is Kingsland Bay, which Vicky Loven, a member of the CKC, finds "fantastic for a paddle." The cedar woods and cliffs make this her favorite spot on the lake. One side of the bay hosts the 1790s Hawley House at Kingsland Bay State Park, and the other side has the Kingsland Bay Natural Area. Liz Lee, also a member of the CKC, recalled a paddle down Little Otter Creek, which is just up the shoreline from Kingsland Bay. It was an early-spring paddle and the lake was so high with snowmelt, kayakers could paddle across the access road.

The fish-and-wildlife boat launch on Bay Road in Shelburne Bay lends itself to myriad paddling options. Heading south, you can wind your way through Nature Conservancy land on the La Platte River. When the water's high, it's hard to tell where the river is as you paddle through a flood plain amongst the trees, and if you paddle under and beyond the Route 7 bridge, you might be able to play in a little whitewater. When the water's low, you may have to climb over downed trees or your kayak may bottom out. There's a bit of a Louisiana bayou feel to the river as you wind through the trees, and it always seems as if there should be a juke joint just around the next bend.

Heading north from the fish-and-wildlife access, you pass the town moorings nestled in south of Allen Hill. If you hug the shore on most Wednesday evenings during the warmer months, you'll see the Lake Champlain Yacht Club sailing races. Depending on the wind conditions, the bay can be filled with brightly colored spinnakers. Just before Shelburne Point, you pass the Shelburne Shipyard. Rounding the point, you get a spectacular view of the Adirondacks and Juniper Island, all the more spectacular if you hit it at sunset. Turning to the east, you get a good view of Burlington and the Green Mountains, and if the wind's from the north, you can do some nice surfing back to the fish-and-wildlife access.

Burlington has plenty of paddling access. Oak Ledge Park and Perkin's Pier are convenient spots, while Leddy Beach and North Beach require a bit of a carry but offer some great surfing depending on the wind conditions. There are also many lunch or brunch stops. Lone Rock Point offers some rugged rock cliffs and views, and is a good spot to be at as the sun sets over the Adirondacks and the full moon rises over the Green Mountains. Afterward, paddle back through

Still More Access!

In addition to the areas mentioned in the text, there are countless other access areas and day-trip options on Lake Champlain. For example, how about an extended trip? Joe Mullen of Florida took a five-day paddle with a friend last summer and covered about 100 miles. They occasionally stopped at lakeside restaurants and spent nights camping out. One favorite spot was Valcour Island. "While on Valcour, we explored and walked around the whole island. What a great and beautiful place. I've paddled in a lot of places and I found Lake Champlain and the Paddlers' Trail to be one of the top places to paddle and the *Paddlers' Trail Guidebook* is great."

The Lake Champlain Committee (LCC) opened the Paddlers' Trail in 1996, said Lori Fisher, executive director of LCC, and it has grown to include 28 trail locations with more than 250 campsites on public and private lands along the New York and Vermont shoreline and islands. The Lake Champlain Committee serves as the "home" organization for the trail, holds free kayak demos each year, and produces the annual *Lake Champlain Paddlers' Trail Guidebook and Stewardship Manual* (available through an annual membership of $40 or more). The guidebook is an excellent resource. Along with the detailed charts and descriptions of camp and launch sites, it also includes information on safe paddling and trip planning, emergency contact numbers, history of the lake, information on fish, wildlife, and the birds you'll see overhead. Contact the Lake Champlain Committee at (802) 658-1414, or go to www.lakechamplaincommittee.org.

—Ann DeMuth

PHOTO: JOSEPH HEALY

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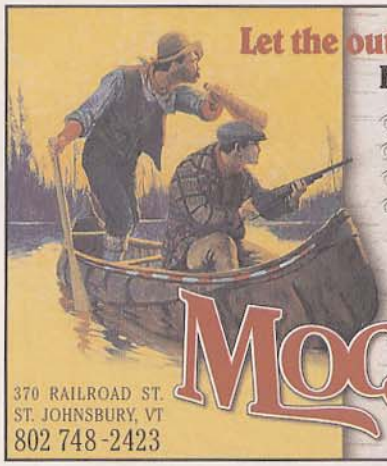

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Safety Note: Before paddling, check the marine forecast for weather warnings, wave height, lake temperature, and wind conditions. Check the weather radio or www.erh.noaa.gov/btv to get the Lake Champlain Recreational Forecast. Proper equipment, including kayak flotation. PFDs, sprayskirts, and (for a good part of the season) wetsuits or drysuits are a necessity. —*A.D.*

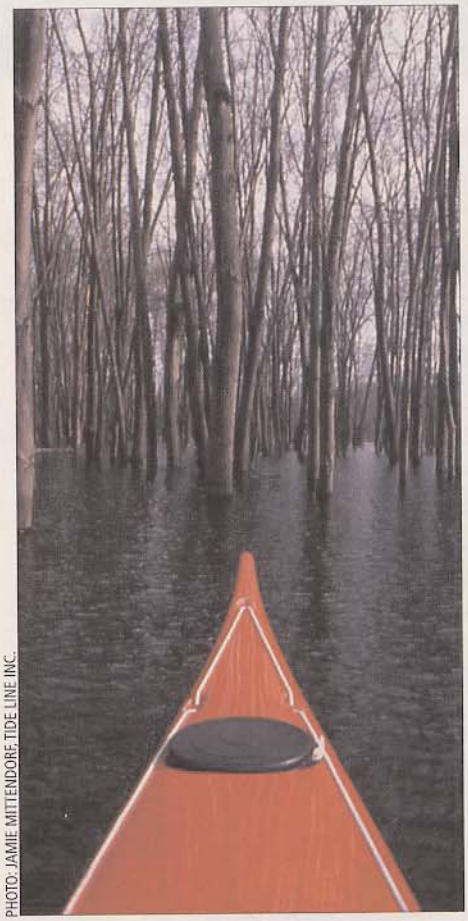

PHOTO: JAMIE MITTENDORF, TIDE LINE INC.

the Burlington Breakwater and head into town for some dinner and music.

And then there are the islands north of Burlington. Before you reach the Sandbar Causeway on Route 2, there's an access area across the road from the Sandbar State Park entrance. From there, you can take a flatwater paddle up the Lamoille River or paddle past Allen Point, the southern tip of South Hero, and through the cut in the old railroad bed now used for biking. Once through, you'll see Stave and Providence Islands. If you head north from the access site, you can paddle into Keeler Bay past Cedar and Fish Bladder Islands. Keeler Bay and Grand Isle State Park also have access areas that make good starting points.

Linda Samter, a CKC member, says, "To explore Lake Champlain's Inland Sea, head over to the Keeler Bay Fish and Wildlife Access off the north side of Route 2. Launch your kayak and head north along South Hero's east shore. For novices, a short paddle can consist of a loop around Kellogg Island to Kibbie Point, Paradise Bay and back." Another destination in the Islands area is Isle La Motte, home of the oldest fossil coral reef known in the world.