

A Sea of Possibilities on the Saint John River



By Glen Cairns

Cruising on Canada's East Coast, at least for those who have never been there, can conjure up images of fierce tides and dense fog. While these conditions do exist at times, they can be managed with prudence and planning. However, there are two large cruising areas that are as inviting as any protected inland lake or river. These are the Bras d'Or Lakes region of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia and the Saint John River in New Brunswick. Although the Saint John River runs for over 400 miles from its headwaters in the mountains of northern Maine, it is the approximately 75 miles between the river's mouth at the port city of Saint John on the Bay of Fundy and the head of navigation at Fredericton, that attract the boater's attention.

Yachts coming north from the US East Coast can reach the city of Saint John in a series of day sails, making the area the most

accessible in the Maritimes. Over the years the Cruising Club of America has made a number of flotilla cruises to the river. Yachts coming around from Nova Scotia can depart from Yarmouth and make for Grand Manan Island a distance of about 70 nautical miles. From there it is only 50 miles to Saint John. Many yachts choose to stop at Dipper Harbour, a well-protected spot just 20 or so nautical miles from the city.

The first step for any yacht visiting the Saint John River to transit the famous "Reversing Falls". With 20 plus foot tides in the harbour, the tidal flow over a ledge in the narrow gorge makes for dramatic viewing on the full ebb or flood. Boats usually wait for their chance on the floats at Market Slip on the east side of the harbour. Although located handy to the downtown shopping area, the float is rather exposed to wind and wakes. Some boats choose to overnight nearby in Dipper Harbour and time their arrival at the Falls for slack water. The exact time for slack water varies somewhat with conditions, so check the tide tables and pilot book for details. Local boaters will also be helpful.

Before getting into all the things that the Saint John River has to offer, I should point out a couple of things it doesn't offer. The first is fog, at least not the pea soup variety for which the Bay of Fundy is famous. The other is tide. Above the Reversing Falls at Saint John the tidal effect (seldom more than two feet) rapidly diminishes and the current, such as it is, always flows downstream. The boating season begins in May, but can be affected by the strength of the spring flow on the river. Called the Freshet, this rise in the river level comes from snowmelt in the hills of New Brunswick and Maine and varies in strength from year to year. If you are planning an early visit, check with local operators as to conditions. By June things settle down and the boating season continues into the autumn. Indeed, the river takes on a truly spectacular aspect during the fall colours in early October.



While the 75 miles between Saint John and Fredericton make for any easy weekend cruise, there are many side trips which can occupy you for as much time as you have available. Ernest Hamilton, a Saint John yacht broker, has been cruising the river,



wind and weather.

Once clear of the “Falls” there are several options for dockage and if you plan to visit the city it is best to do so by cab from one of the marinas. The Royal Kennebecasis Yacht Club and Rothesay Yacht Club both have excellent facilities and welcome visitors, although it is best to call ahead. On the northeast corner of Marble Cove is the Saint John Power Boat Club. The Saint John Marina has 150 berths and is located on the western shore. They have recently expanded their breakwater by 300 ft. for dockage of larger vessels up to 11ft draught. This is a full service yard and the only one on the river. At Grand Bay-Westfield the Brundage Point River Centre has new, and free, docking for small craft.

Moving upriver from the city, choices abound for anchorages. McCormack Cove on the south side of Kennebecasis Island is a lovely quiet spot open only to the south. Also on Kennebecasis island is Vance’s Beach where boats can go right up to the shore. Both of these places are close to Saint John.

Your first opportunity for a side trip is Kennebecasis Bay. Here you can find a peaceful anchorage in Forrester Cove. Further east the bay becomes a river and is navigable by small boats as far as Hampton. Heading north your next side trip is at the end of Long Reach where you can continue into Belleisle Bay. Near the entrance of the bay is Kingston Creek, a beautiful and sheltered place to spend the night. Further up the bay on the north side is Jenkins Cove, a quiet harbour with a distinctly pastoral setting. Heading north on the river you can reach Lake Washademaok (these names will roll off your tongue after a week’s cruising). Here, Cambridge Narrows marks the limit for any boat with more than a 45’ mast, but smaller boats have no trouble going farther east, and even through the aptly named “Narrow Piece”.



Saving the biggest for last, a short cruise up the Jemseg River takes you into Grand Lake. This is a big body of water, so keep an eye on the weather. The most popular destination on the lake is Douglas Harbour where the Fredericton Yacht Club maintains a wharf. At the eastern end of the lake the Salmon River is navigable as far as Chipman.

About halfway between Fredericton and Saint John is the little village of Gagetown. Located on the west side of Gagetown Island, the Gagetown Marina has easy access floating docks with room for visitors. The marina also has that most sought after of amenities, the “dockside pub”; in this case it’s called the Old Boot Pub. A great spot for a lunch stop or overnight anchorage is located at Grimross Island nearby; this is another spot where boats can put their bows on the beach.

The town of Oromocto is located next to the 420 square miles of the Camp Gagetown Canadian Forces Base, and has all the conveniences and services you might need. The Oromocto Boat Club has docks and a launch ramp. The Oromocto River makes for a nice tree lined diversion and is especially beautiful during the fall colours.

Once you reach Fredericton, powerboats can tie up downtown at the Regent Street Wharf, which is managed by the Capital City Boat Club. From here all the sights of this pleasant university and government town are within walking distance. In the tourist season you can check out the colourful changing of the guard at Officer’s Square. Arrive mid-September and you will be able to enjoy the five-day long Harvest Jazz and Blues Festival, which has grown into a major event in recent years. September and even early October are beautiful months to explore the river with lots of clear skies, cool evenings and some of the best Autumn colours you’ll see anywhere.

Steamboat Landings

Before the coming of the railway, or even passable roads for that matter, the river was the highway for just about everything. Each town or village had a landing where steamboats large and small called, moving people, produce and supplies. There were dozens of these wharves along the river and many of them survived into the modern era. In the late 90's when the Federal government was divesting itself of what it deemed as non-essential wharves and small boat harbours, the St. John River Society became the custodian of 13 of the old steamboat landings. Established in 1992, the Society is dedicated to the promotion and appreciation of the river. Today these Landings provide public access to the river and a free place to tie up for yachts. The Society's web site has a list of these wharves and lots of other information of use to boaters. www.stjohnriver.org



This has been just a glimpse of what the Saint John River has to offer. Check out the tourism and service industry websites listed in the side bar for more detail. I also recommend you spend a little quality time with Google Earth, to get a feel for the river and the sights that it holds in store.

Marinas and Launch ramps:

Brundage Point River Centre

4 Ferry Road, Grand Bay-Westfield, NB,

Ph: 506-738-6406

Email: rivercentre@towngbw.ca

Web: www.town.grandbay-westfield.nb.ca

Centennial Park Sailboat Marina

1439 Route 105, Unit 1, Mactaquac, NB, E6L 1B5

Ph: 506-363-4747

Email: macataquacpark@gnb.ca



Chipman Marine Wharf

10 Civic Court Unit 1, Chipman, NB, E4A 2H9

Ph: 506-339-6601

Email: villchip@nbnet.nb.ca

Gagetown Marina

50 Front Street, Village of Gagetown, NB, E5M 1A1

Ph: 877-488-1992 or after hours 506-261-2309

Email: nancy@gagetownmarina.ca

Web: www.gagetownmarina.ca

Mactaquac Marina

119 Holyoke Lane, Keswick Ridge, NB, E6L 1V7

Ph: 506-461-2349

Email: jewettl@nbnnet.nb.ca

Oromocto Boat Club

2 Wharf Road, Oromocto, NB, E2V 2R6

Ph: 506-357-7374

Email: blaisyva@nbnnet.nb.ca

Web: www.oromoctoboatclub.ca

Capital City Boat Club

Regent Street Wharf

516 Queen Street, Fredericton, NB, E3B 4Y9

Ph: 506-455-1445

Email: info@capitolcityboatclub.com

Web: www.downtownfredericton.ca

Rothesay Yacht Club

8 Wharf Road, Rothesay, NB, E2E 5X1

Ph: 506-847-7245

Email: kriver2@nbnnet.nb.ca

Web: www.rothsayyachtclub.com

Royal Kennebecasis Yacht Club

1042 Millidge Ave., Saint John, NB, E2K 2P6

Ph: 506-632-0186

Email: manager@rkyc.nb.ca

Web: www.rkyc.nb.ca

Saint John Marina Ltd.

2050 Westfield Road, Saint John, NB, E2M 6H2

Ph: 506-738-8484

Email: saintjohnmarina@rogers.com

Web: www.saintjohnmarina.ca

Saint John Power Boat Club

100 Kennedy Street, Saint John, NB, E2K 1C4

Ph: 506-642-5233

Email: bernie_boating@hotmail.com

Web: www.kennebecasis.cps-epc.org

St. John River Society

Ph: 506-450-8709

Email: admin@stjohnriver.org

Web: www.stjohnriver.org

This is not a complete list by any means. For more information on boating the Saint John River here are some useful web sites:

The Atlantic Marine Trades Association publishes the "Atlantic Boating Guide" check out www.maritimeboating.com

Quite a bit on the Saint John River at: www.maineoastguide.com

Great aerial photographs of marinas at www.marinas.com

Hydrographic Charts for the St. John River from Fredericton to Saint John are 4141 and 4142. www.charts.gc.ca

Photo Captions

Photo 1 - Regent Street Wharf home of the Capital City Boat Club. (credit: nbtourism)

Photo 2 - The Reversing Falls in perfect conditions. (credit: msy.cs)

Photo 3 - Oromocto Marina. (credit: nbtourism)

Photo 4 - Glooscap II at anchor. (credit: msy.ca)

Photo 5 - Visiting yachts at Gagetown Marina (credit: Gagetown marina)

