

Journey by boat and bike along the Erie Canal: Macedon-Fairport-Pittsford

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I am at the helm of a 41-foot canal boat, a boat so enchanting and lovely, it turns heads and evokes waves, smiles, and snapped photos as it chugs pleasantly along at a top speed of 6 mph.

From this vantage point, I finally understand this marvel of engineering, of grit and ingenuity, of how vast and marvelous the [Erie Canal](#) (http://www.examiner.com/topic/erie-canal) was, and the vital role it played in the United States' emergence as an Industrial giant in the 19th century and a dominant economic power in the 20th century.

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There is simply no place in the United States like the Erie Canal, and no experience like having your own self-skippered canal boat - our floating home for the week - and bicycle with which to explore the towns that developed with the canal, and the countryside

It is extraordinary and thrilling to travel on the nearly 400-miles long Erie Canal that slices through New York State and played such a vital part in the nation's history. especially as we go through locks and under bridges that must be lifted for us to pass.



http://www.examiner.com/sites/default/files/styles/large_lightbox/hash/1342029324_1706_Erie%20Canal_062412_1168e3%20%28c%29%20Karen%20Rubin-Fairport.jpg

The Canadice, our canal boat and floating home for the week, at the dock in Fairport, one of the charming towns along the Erie Canal.

Photo credit: © 2012 Karen Rubin/news-photos-features.com

Most of all, it lets us explore and discover these small villages and towns that developed because of the Erie Canal - the factories and businesses that developed to cater to the canal and the innovators who developed new products and processes they could get to market because of the canal- and how it has all undergone a dramatic transition, just as the Erie Canal has changed from a commercial artery to recreation.

This is a true adventure. One where there are new discoveries, new insights, new perspectives formed with every new encounter.

Setting off on our first morning, I have rarely felt that exhilarating sense of being so fancy free - to not have a set itinerary or schedule but to have the power and ability just go where your curiosity leads. It is a marvelous.

We can go east or west from the [Mid-Lakes Navigation](http://www.midlakesnav.com) (<http://www.midlakesnav.com>) marina at Macedon, where we have chartered the Canadice. Sarah Wiles, whose family owns the company, tells me that going west there are more towns to visit, more heritage to be seen, and more of the original canal. (Original? What does that mean?).

What is more, I have the idea of possibly going as far as North Tonawanda, the closest port from which we can get a taxi to visit Niagara Falls. That is, until I consult the chart they have provided which places that distance at a total of 18 hours of boating, which would mean 6 hours a day for the three days we would allocate, and then the same back.

But our objective (yours might be different) is to bike as much as we can along the canal, and see as much as we can.

That is one of the benefits of this style of travel - it can be as active, or as sedentary, as you like.

Who could imagine this is New York State? The Erie Canal is a triumph of human engineering, sweat and smarts, which helped spur the US into an industrial and economic power in the 19th century, made US an industrial giant and connected the East and Midwest.

Today, the barges and packet ships are rarities; the canal is mainly populated by pleasure boaters, kayakers, canoers, and along one side, a 376-mile long Erie Canalway Trail, a bikepath (mostly unpaved gravel), where the towpath had been. In the west, where we travel, this section is the Erie Canal Heritage Trail, 114-miles from Buffalo to Newark, with some of the most historic sections of the canal, including 16 lift-bridges and 7 locks.

The Canadice

It all seems so far away and long ago, but it was only yesterday, that we traveled seven hours by Amtrak from Penn Station in New York City to Rochester, and then 20 minutes to Macedon where Mid-Lakes Navigation has a full-service marina.

Between admiring the stunning scenery along this rail route - we follow the Hudson River until Albany, then travel alongside the Erie Canal going west for much of the way to Rochester - I review the material that Mid-Lakes has sent me - an operating manual for the boat, and brochures about the various places we might visit along the canal.

I think to myself: they are going to let me pilot this boat? They don't even require any experience (though they do ask if you have any).

I became enamored of the idea of a houseboat on the Erie Canal after doing a barge hotel canal cruise in Burgundy, France, and biking along the towpath there, and before that, riding part of the bikeway from Waterford, near Albany, where I spotted, for the first time, the loveliest canal boat. I learned that you can bike nearly 400 miles alongside the Erie Canal on what used to be the towpath, and I figured that a houseboat would be an excellent way to travel between points.

It turns out that the canal boat that so enchanted me was built by Mid-Lakes Navigation. They have built 19 of them and have 10 in their own fleet, and have sold off others to other companies like the one in Waterford.

We had trepidation about navigating the boat - a 41-foot long houseboat, like a floating RV - docking and most intriguingly, going through the locks along the canal.

But when we arrive on a Saturday afternoon, Matt spends two hours orienting us to the boat - every aspect about operating it, plugging in to electricity and water; how to turn on the engine, the stove, the shower, flush the toilet; how to recharge the batteries by running the engine in neutral; how to operate the radio and the correct protocol when contacting bridge and lock operators to request passage (Request passage?).

He also reviews the route we say we want to take, and finally, takes us on a "shake-down" cruise that includes going back and forth through a lock located just around the bend from the marina, and practice how to make a 360-degree turn. They provide a chart book (we can buy our own, as well), and a handy sheet that lets you approximate how many hours between ports. These become our Bible, and pretty soon, I get the hang of how to read them properly.

There is also a logbook, which we are asked to keep, which we can consult about previous travelers' recommendations of what to see and do, where to eat.

He also gives us a checklist that reminds us of all the key points he has reviewed, plus telephone numbers in case we need to contact anyone (he can trouble shoot by phone, and even hop in a car and get to us if necessary). "Don't worry, we won't leave you," Sarah Wiles tells me.

Her other key advice: "Don't approach anything faster than you would care to hit it." In other words, just slow down if you are unsure.

The steel-hulled boat is powered by a 50 horsepower diesel engine; its top speed is 6 mph, and it weighs 11 tons "so you can't get into trouble."

The canal boat is outfitted with just about everything you might need - from ponchos to potholders to paper towels. There is even a grill and BBQ tools and canisters of propane. There are safety devices, a tool kit, even a sewing kit. (They send you a list of what's on the boat, and what you should bring - such as hats, sunscreen, insect repellent; add to that list DVDs and computer.)

Our boat, the Canadice, is 41 feet long and can sleep 4 people (one double bed and two bunk beds in the galley; a well designed galley kitchen with small refrigerator and freezer; a shower; a table and sitting area in the bow), suitable for a family; the largest Lockmaster can accommodate 6 adults.

Mid-Lakes even provides beach bikes, but if you are serious about biking the towpath (as we are), you will want to bring your own (hybrid or mountain bike tires for the gravel, grit, pebble and sandy surface), but you can also arrange to rent bikes (TowPath Bike, Pittsford, \$40/day, \$100/week; open year-round; towpathbike.com (<http://towpathbike.com>)).

Since we have arrived late in the afternoon, and it is already early evening after our orientation, we stay the night in the Mid-Lakes marina, settling in comfortably into the Canadice.

Mid-Lakes even arranges for us to have the use of a car so we can go to Walmart (open 24/7) to pick up groceries, and have dinner (at Flaherty's, an Irish pub).

Sunday: Macedon-Fairport-Pittsford

Sunday morning we linger a bit, taking our time to get organized (still a little nervous to get under way), we use the facilities at the marina (a very pleasant shower room; if you want, there is also WiFi in the marina).

But by mid-morning, we unplug and untie and we are off! Neil makes the hard right turn out of the slip and we make our way the short distance to the canal, blasting our horn (5 seconds), as we were taught, to alert any boats on the canal: We are coming!

We turn to port (west) onto the Erie Canal, and we are off.

We are nervous when we depart, but very soon, it feels comfortable. The canal is calm and flat, and for the most part even straight and wider than I expected.

It doesn't take long before we realize how easy it is to pilot the boat, how responsive the tiller is, really, to little touches here, a tiny shove there, to keep it going straight or turning into the slight bends in the canal.

I have a comfortable perch from the helm to sit – a rail makes for a backrest. I sip coffee as we chug along.

I can see over the front, and can stand on a step for even better visibility. There is a breeze – even though it is quite hot today, it is comfortable.

Within moments, the thrill of what this is all about floods over me: This is a real adventure, where you have to do everything yourself, not have it done for you, make decisions.

The very idea of setting off without an itinerary or a schedule (though you wind up having one because you have to calculate amount of time to get to port, and get in), not knowing what is ahead or what will greet you. I rarely have felt this fancy free.

As we sail along, I have reflect on how lovely this boat is: the gorgeous knotty pine wood detailing; the varnished wood seats and a railing that makes for a back rest as you hold the tiller, brass and varnished wood. Inside the cabin are beautiful knotty pine. It has a canvas canopy over the helm and even on a hot day, the breezes as we travel are delightful. The bow has screens with plastic and canvas that zip and snap easily so we can close everything up in the event of rain and a table that can even be moved inside.

The galley has stainless steel counters, a half-refrigerator, a stove and oven and sink. You can also convert a seat to two beds.

The designs for the boat came from Sarah and Peter Wiles' father, Peter Wiles, Senior, who was a key architect in the transition of the Erie Canal from commercial to recreational use. He had a small tour boat business on Skaneateles Lake and went to England to see the self-skipped canal boats that operated on the Thames, and brought back the concept for boats that he would design and build here. In all, Mid-Lakes has built 19 of the Lockmaster canalboats, operating 10 of them (the others were sold, some to other companies along the Erie).

He took the charm and the traditional design but adapted the boat to the Erie Canal, so the boats have a wider beam (roomier), are mostly flat bottomed and do not have a keel.

Fairport

After just under two hours of boating, we come to Fairport, our first town which we will visit.

Someone helps us tie up at the dock (one of the pleasures of this style of travel, there are usually people to help or advise you). Fairport is a most charming town, with shops and restaurants right along the canal. It is a picture-perfect model of revitalization.

Fairport did not exist before construction of the Erie Canal dried up a swamp and produced a "fair port" for travelers. "Commerce thrived as entrepreneurs turned ideas into products," says one of the best guides to this portion of the canal, "100 Must See Miles"

One of these products was Henry Deland's idea to produce baking soda from wood ash. The building right on the canal and next to the bridge, where there is now a delightful Towpath Cafe, one of the more delightful eateries along the canal (live music, too), and the offices of an engineering and landscape architectural firm, once was where Deland manufactured baking soda which was transported by canal to international markets.

Just up Main Street, on the south side of the canal, I find the Green Lantern Inn, which was the Deland Mansion, built in 1876. Deland has a Florida connection: after he made his fortune in Fairport, he bought land and founded Deland, Florida, in 1876, where he envisioned creating a citrus, agricultural and tourism center. He sold his northern business and hired people to clear land, lay out streets, erect buildings and recruit settlers, most of whom came from upstate New York; then he lost his fortune in an orange freeze in 1885.

The mansion is magnificent: Second Empire style with tower, porches, fireplaces, it was one of the grandest private residences in western New York. After several private owners, including the Clark Family, the Deland Mansion opened as the Green Lantern Inn sometime after 1928, and served as a restaurant, speakeasy, rooming house, banquet hall.

The mansion is across from the First Baptist Church, which was built at same time as Deland built his mansion. The Deland family donated its windows and paid more than one-third of construction cost, but stipulated that the door of church and door of mansion be directly across (now there is a small building in front of the mansion that obstructs; building is for sale).

Each of the canal towns has done a superb job of using historical markers and photos to illustrate the "then and now." As we follow them, it is like a story that unfolds.

At Fairport, there is a marker that shows how Old South Main Street "yields to urban renewal: Commercial block changes from necessities to niceties."

There is also a plaque honoring Peter Wiles, Sarah and Peter's father, for his leadership in developing the Erie Canal for recreational purposes.

On the north side of the canal, passed the railroad tracks, where freight trains rumble through frequently during the day, we find a shuttered factory still waiting to be "repurposed."

The beauty of the canal boat is that you can organize the day around what you want to do - whether it is to just hang out in a town - perhaps visit a museum. Our main purpose is to position us to bike the towpath. And so we tie up the Canadice at Fairport, take down our bikes from the roof, and head out about 7 miles to the next major town, Pittsford, along the canal bikeway. It is one of the prettier rides, with lovely homes on the canal.

We pass Perinton Park, a beautiful community park where there are tennis courts and is a lovely place to picnic.

Just before Pittsford, we cross over a mile-long section called "The Great Embankment." This is the highest canal embankment, actually built over the Irondequoit Creek which rushes through a tunnel under the canal.

In the earliest days of the Erie Canal, the embankment thrilled both onlookers and passengers as boats seemed to travel in midair over the mile-wide valley created by the Irondequoit Creek. The canal has been rebuilt three times since it originally opened in 1823. The original canal was a mere four-feet deep and 40-feet wide; three times it was enlarged, made deeper (first 7 feet deep and 70-feet wide, then 12-feet deep and 120-foot wide), and in many cases, moved entirely to make a better route as boats became motorized.

This is our first introduction to the engineering of the Erie Canal. I really hadn't even thought of the canal as having a false bottom, that the canal is actually drained (around November 1), and refilled (around May 1) each season.

The Great Embankment is a revelation, but we will find even more dramatic examples of engineering, as we explore by bike and boat.

We return to Fairport, and prepare to get underway again - actually boating back to Pittsford.

It's just passed 6 pm when we leave Fairport.

But to leave Fairport, you have to go under a lift bridge, and Fairport's is very distinctive: it is constructed with no right angles.

There are 16 lift bridges on the Erie Canal, all of them in the west, and the eastern-most one is here at Fairport. The bridges are delights to look at - they have ornate towers and it is wonderful to watch how they work. (A site provides locations and information about the locks and lift bridges,

www.100megsfree3.com/wordsmith/statistics.html
(<http://www.100megsfree3.com/wordsmith/statistics.html>).

Matt has instructed us on the etiquette of using the radio to ask the operator to lift a bridge or open a lock. Some of the bridges are covered by operators handling multiple bridges, so you might be told to standby and wait for the operator to get back to the bridge.

The operator tells us we will have to wait a few minutes.

For the most part, we are lucky on our trip, there is not a lot of traffic so we are never stacked up. The operators also ask where you are headed so they alert the operators ahead. I figure out to call as we get near a bridge or lock, to get an idea of how fast or slow to approach.

It is just before 8 pm when we dock at Pittsford- I jump off with the line.

Pittsford

We tie up for the night at the newly refurbished Port of Pittsford Park, right below the Main Street Bridge (there is no charge; some of the ports along the canal charge up to \$15 to overnight).

By this time, it is nearly 9 pm on a Sunday and though Pittsford has some of the best selection in restaurants near the canal that we find of any of the towns, just about everything shuts down by 8:30 pm.

We stroll the charming streets (and there are some gorgeous residential streets as well), and see what an affluent community Pittsford is - like Great Neck is to Manhattan. It is loaded with doctors, engineers and professionals. Old money, and new money poured in over the last 15 years to revitalize the downtown area.

Pittsford was settled in 1789 by Revolutionary War veterans, but it was the Erie Canal that first brought

prosperity to the town, because it facilitated transport to market of tons of heavy gravel from the nearby hills.

We see stunning Victorian-era buildings - the Phoenix Hotel, built in 1812 in the Federalist style, 1812 to serve the Erie Canal and Turnpike trade, restored 1967 (now an office building which houses the Institute 4 Priority Thinking, offering Leadership Coaching, Organizational Development, and Ethics Education; across from the Town Hall, dated 1890. There is also the Canal Lamp Inn, a stunning Victorian, right beside the canal bridge. (Self-guided walk through Pittsford, villageofpittsford.org (<http://villageofpittsford.org>)).

Pittsford offers some of the best examples of a town that has "repurposed" from its industrial heritage: the silo for the Pittsford Flour Mill has been converted to an office tower; the Coal Tower has become a restaurant! Towpath Bike Rental shop was a hardware store. There is still a shuttered barn and factory which adds character to the waterfront.

At this late hour, we are guided by a resident to Pontillo's Pizza Place and bring our slices back to the canalpark to dine on a picnic table beside our boat.

We watch ducks that appear to be doing elaborate synchronized swim in the canal, when they believe no one is around to watch.

Staying overnight in the canalside park where we are docked (it is closed to all but the boaters after 10 pm), the setting is magical.

Just minutes after we finish our picnic dinner, get inside our boat and close the hatches, it starts to pour. We are cozy inside. We hear the patter of rain as we watch a DVD on our computer.

It's been a day of adventure and discovery, as perfect as can be.

The star attraction - and a major character - in this travel epic is the Erie Canal, itself. The historic markers we come upon are like chapters in the story, and as our trip unfolds, our appreciation of what the canal was, what it represented, and the impact it had, grows.

The Erie Canal journey by boat and bike continues..

Helpful contacts:

Mid-Lakes Navigation, 11 Jordan St., PO Box 61, Skaneateles, NY 13152, 315-685-8500, 800-545-4318, www.midlakesnav.com (<http://www.midlakesnav.com>)

Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor, PO Box 219, Waterford, NY 12188, 518-237-8643, ext 3110, www.eriecanalway.org (<http://www.eriecanalway.org>).

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