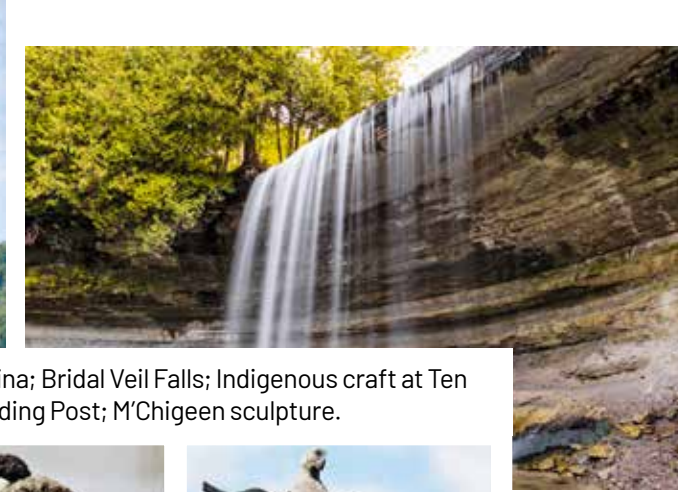


Escape to Manitoulin

Home to First Nations populations for many centuries, Manitoulin Island is rich in Indigenous culture

By Rob & Wendy Lindsay



Gore Bay Marina; Bridal Veil Falls; Indigenous craft at Ten Mile Point Trading Post; M'Chigeeng sculpture.



Last year, in the days before Ontario's COVID lockdown, we managed to get out on the road in a welcome break from the stay-at-home life of early pandemic restrictions. It was a mental as well as a physical change to leave the confines of city life for the expanse of rock, trees, and lakes on the largest fresh-water island in the world, Manitoulin.

We chose to drive to Tobermory, ON, on the tip of the Bruce Peninsula, to take the MS *Chi-Cheemaun* ferry to South Baymouth on Manitoulin Island. Another, longer, option is a six-hour drive (550 kilometres/340 miles) from the Toronto area around Georgian Bay to Sudbury and then south onto the island. In the past, we've also taken the ferry and driven across the end of Manitoulin along Highway 6 as a shortcut on the way to Thunder Bay and Winnipeg.

Some folks go no farther than the tip of the peninsula to camp at Bruce Peninsula National Park, with its many hiking trails and unique rock formations, and the beautiful beaches around its Cyprus Lake. Hikers also come to Tobermory to start their treks along the Bruce Trail, Canada's longest marked hiking trail, running roughly 900 kilometres (560 miles) to Niagara.

Arriving in Tobermory by car, you'll note that the ferry dock is well-signed. After checking in and parking in your designated lane, you'll have time to explore the shops and cafés and watch the action in the little harbour, as you must check in an hour before departure. Colourful rented kayaks dot the harbour and a steady stream of tour boats come and go. Many advertise glass-bottomed tours over Fathom Five National Marine Park, Canada's first such conservation area, where caves, geological formations, and more than a dozen sunken ships attract scuba divers. Another popular tour-boat destination within the marine park is Flowerpot Island, where waves and ice erosion have sculpted rocky pillars to resemble flowerpots.

Soon word spread: "The ferry is coming!" and cottagers and tourists began lining every dockside vantage point while passengers scurried to their vehicles. The *Chi-Cheemaun* is truly a spectacular sight, with its bow and funnel emblazoned with colourful Indigenous-inspired art. "Chi-Cheemaun" means "big canoe" in Ojibwe; true to its name, this big canoe holds 140 vehicles and 638 passengers. It's "visor bow" system makes it an engineering marvel. To the delight of onlookers and photographers, the entire bow begins to rise like a helmet's visor as the ship comes in to dock, and soon, vehicles are driving out of it. It seems only a few minutes before we're driving through the gaping maw and into the belly of the ferry.

We crossed the 40-kilometre (25-mile) stretch of Lake Huron between the Bruce Peninsula and Manitoulin Island in less than two hours. Along the route, a couple of photogenic lighthouses and many small islands kept photographers happy. The air felt fresh and pollution-free as we took a couple of brisk turns around

the deck. We had barely settled into reading our books when the call came: "Return to your vehicle."

The Great Spirit

From the minute we disembarked and began driving north on Highway 6, Southern Ontario seemed a world away. Roads on the island were narrower and winding, and the pace was slower. We enjoyed driving with the windows down and the wind in our hair. In some places, Manitoulin even seems an island that time forgot, with picturesque split-rail fences, the occasional deserted building, rocky outcroppings, and numerous stands of poplar, birch, and maple accented by green pines and spruce. It's no wonder, then, that it remains popular with landscape artists.

Thanks to the slower pace, the island also seems much larger than it really is: 176 kilometres (110 miles) long and from five to 80 kilometres (three to 50 miles) wide—approximately half the size of Prince Edward Island. For decades, it's been home to resorts and famed for its good camping and great fishing. In fact, more than 100

fresh-water lakes dot the island, including Lake Manitou, the world's largest lake on a fresh-water island—a fitting tribute to Manitou, the Great Spirit.

Indigenous Peoples have lived on the island for many centuries, and their residence is reflected in many of the village names: Sheguiandah, Manitowaning, Tehkummah, Mindemoya, Kagawong, M'Chigeeng, Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory—one of the country's First Nations reserves never relinquished to the Crown—is on the island's eastern peninsula; during the August long weekend, it's usually the site of a great international powwow that draws crowds from all over North America.

A popular shop for Indigenous crafts is Ten Mile Point Trading Post on Highway 6. The variety is extensive and the view from the site's lookout is spectacular on a clear day.

Farther along Highway 6 is the village of Sheguiandah, known for its Centennial Museum, which traces the history of humans on the island. The grounds have several log cabins and antique farm machines in tribute to the pioneers. The museum building itself houses photos and records of the hardy lumberjacks, stalwart settlers, dedicated farmers, and enterprising shopkeepers who made the island their home. The museum also displays remarkable relics of the very first humans on the island. An archaeological dig in 1951 unearthed ancient spear points, hide scrapers, and other prehistoric tools, which carbon dating revealed to be more than 10,000 years old, leading to the Sheguiandah archaeological site and area being designated a National Historic Site.

Even farther along is Little Current, the largest town on the island and once a tiny Hudson's Bay Company trading post. All traffic from the mainland passes through Little Current and across its historic swing bridge. Built in 1913 for rail travel, the bridge now carries only vehicular traffic—except during the 15 minutes every hour when it swings open to allow numerous cruisers and sailboats to pass to and from the North Channel. ■

Photos: iStock/SkyF (marina); iStock/kristi138 (falls); Lindsay Editorial (craft, sculpture).



Lighthouse in Little Current; MS *Chi-Cheemaun*, the ferry to Manitoulin Island; St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church in Kagawong; the Little Current Swing Bridge.



Don't miss Turners Store, which has a small mini-museum. Turners has always sold an array of British imports and is famous as Canada's oldest nautical chart dealer. For more than 70 years, the vintage-look maps have been useful and accurate souvenirs for tourists and boaters alike.

Heading west across the island on Highway 540, we stopped in the centre where the road passes through the M'Chigeeng reserve. Here we found Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church, uniquely built in the shape of a teepee. Unfortunately, the nearby Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, like all the museums on the island during our visit, was closed. However, M'Chigeeng has Lillian's Crafts and Quill Basket Museum, which is well worth a visit. The front of the shop offers high-quality handcrafted leather products such as slippers, gloves, and moccasins, while the back of the building has a display of museum-quality pottery and porcupine-quill boxes.

Highway 540 next took us to the charming village of Kagawong. There on the government dock, we met our first "haweaters," Joanne and Al. The hawberry, another name for a hawthorn, grows on Manitoulin, and haweaters is a name for those born on the island. If you're lucky, you may find a jar of the popular hawberry jam on a gift-shop shelf.

Joanne told us the building on the main street now housing the artisan chocolatier kitchen and retail store Manitoulin Chocolate Works was originally a car dealership and garage owned and operated by her father. She led us down to St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church, a small, steepled white church on the shore of the North Channel. Once

inside, we soon saw why it's known as the sailors' church. The pulpit is a ship's prow, and anchors, fishnet floats, a ship's wheel, and other nautical items donated by parishioners decorate the sanctuary. A beautiful, nautically themed stained-glass window floods light into the interior. Outside, the illuminated red cross on the steeple can be seen in the dark by boaters.

Historic plaques explain that little Kagawong was once an important port. Farther along the shore, a tall limestone building attests to this. Formerly a pulp mill, it now houses the Old Mill Heritage Centre Museum. The mill once got its power piped through a large chute from nearby Bridal Veil Falls—a wonderfully picturesque and very popular destination that can be reached via hiking trail and offers plenty of spots where one can cool off on a hot day.

Indeed, there are numerous hiking trails on Manitoulin Island, with routes that can take from a couple of hours to a full day to hike. One of the most popular is the Cup and Saucer Trail that starts west of Little Current, off Highway 540. It leads to a dramatic 70-metre (230-foot) cliff with a breathtaking view over both the North Channel and

Lake Manitou. The island's reasonably quiet roads are also very popular with cyclists and motorbikers.

Al, a keen fisher and guide, accompanied us to the closest grocery store, 30 minutes away in Gore Bay, on the island's western tip. While there, he recommended that we stop by the marina, one of the largest on the island. Yachting is another of Manitoulin's main attractions, he told us, and Gore Bay is where many dock for easy sailing to the popular Benjamin Islands in the North Channel. At the dockside Marine Store, we discovered a delicious smoked-whitefish spread, a product of the local Purvis Fisheries and sold only on the island. We added it to our growing list of reasons to return.

Al also recommended driving up to the lookout on the edge of Gore Bay, where we got a panoramic view of the harbour and hills beyond.

On our last night before we headed back to South Baymouth to catch the ferry home, we sat on the lakeshore in the oh-so-dark night and marvelled at the endless stars so clearly visible. The sight was as impressive as the skies we'd viewed in places with formal International Dark Sky designations—yet another reason to return to lovely Manitoulin. ■



Getting There and Getting Around

Chi-Cheemaun Ferry Service: Reservations are essential, and face masks and other COVID-19 rules are strictly enforced on board. Plan your driving time carefully, as you must arrive an hour ahead of undocking and latecomers may be refused boarding.

The ferry runs from early May until mid-October. For reservations, phone 1-800-265-3163 (be prepared to wait up to 60 minutes on hold). Go to ontarioferries.com for more.

Museums and galleries: Manitoulin has many good museums and galleries, normally open from May to October. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions and extended holiday closings, none of them were open when we were on the island.

Photo: iStock/Ravi Natarajan (lighthouse); iStock/imagebob (bridge); Lindsay Editorial (ferry, church).