

Travel

**Charming nooks and crannies away from the big cities**

Jane Stewart. 4 September 1999

Winnipeg Free Press

SOUTHERN ONTARIO remains, for me, a great summer and fall holiday destination. If there is a possible downside, it's driving on the highways near the cities, but apart from that, there's so much to do, and enough places to avoid any activity, that it's still worth a visit.

There's an incredible variety of activities, terrain and communities in southwestern and central Ontario. During a recent trip with my daughter, we investigated a few places that may not be on the usual visitor's list: St. Catharines and its environs, Southampton, on the shores of Lake Huron, and St. Marys, a busy but small town between London and Stratford.

Our trip started in St. Marys, known as "The Stonetown" because of its beautiful old limestone buildings, the stones all quarried locally. While most tourists head for nearby Stratford, albeit a pretty spot and home to the Stratford Festival, St. Marys is worth a visit. In fact, many people stay in St. Marys even if they are attending the festival. There are bed and breakfast accommodations as well as more expensive, luxurious accommodations such as the popular Westover Inn. Since my parents now live there, in a century-old farmhouse, we were able to enjoy the town from a "local's" perspective.

Although the townspeople generally don't participate in tourist activities, they certainly promote the opportunities, including a walking tour of the town's historic homes and buildings. St. Marys is full of 19th-century architecture, from a century-old Opera House, now housing apartments and businesses, to five historic churches, the earliest built in 1858. The Tourism Office in the historic railway station gives out booklets with a copy of the suggested route.

St. Marys also has a couple of walking trails in and around the town, including the two kilometre Grand Trunk Trail that takes you over the Sarnia Bridge. Recently restored, it gives a wonderful view of the old town and the Thames River. There are some more challenging walks through fields and hills on the town's outskirts. Technically these are not for public use, being owned by the local cement company, but they are

certainly used by locals, especially those with dogs, and are easy to follow without real risk to life or limb from any quarries.

Quarries are definitely part of the local landscape, a necessity for the survival of the cement plant and, it can be assumed, for the local economy. One old quarry now is the largest outdoor swimming pool in Canada. It's definitely a popular spot among the locals, not just tourists. Another spot sure to be popular among locals and tourists is the newly opened Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

Leaving St. Marys, we headed northwest to Southampton, driving through farmland and pretty towns. Although it's virtually impossible to escape evidence of human life, this region of Ontario is peaceful and the driving relatively sane. Once you reach Southampton, the pace picks up, but the focus still is on summer holiday fun.

Southampton, from a visitor's perspective, is a busy cottage town, with lots of recreational opportunities and even some entertaining educational options. The Bruce Country Museum, for example, was a delightful diversion, with enjoyable displays of local interest, particularly on the once-thriving furniture business and a marine gallery. During our visit there was a good, hands-on travelling exhibit on medieval times.

The museum is housed in a series of old buildings, including a one-room schoolhouse that children enjoy almost as much as they love "Grandma Greathead's Suckers" sold in the gift shop. The suckers are made by the granddaughter of Almeda Greathead who started making the suckers one Halloween around 1920.

Southampton, the oldest port on the Bruce Coast, has long sand beaches where you can savour the world-renowned sunsets over Lake Huron. We also spent an afternoon lazing on the beach, enjoying the feel of the warm sand and the not-as-warm water while we swam. If we'd had time, we could have played tennis, walked along the 14-kilometre Saugeen Rail Trail, golfed, paddled, had a tour of the Bruce Nuclear site and gone for bird watching excursions. There's always a "next time."