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Hotspots

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ADVENTURE**

magical **Lake
Champlain**

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A Lake Champlain charter reveals the wonder and charm of this magical waterway

by Eric Vohr

photos by
Michaela Urban

The Lake Effect

Two boats swing at anchor in Spoon Bay off Valcour Island

I grew up close to Lake Champlain, and while I only recently sailed her waters,

I spent many years exploring the wonders that lie along her shores. Fourteen miles wide, 125 miles long and up to 400ft deep, Champlain serves as the border between Vermont to the east, upstate New York to the west, and Canada to the north. Framed by the towering Adirondack Mountains on her western shore and the majestic Green Mountains to the east, there is no shortage of incredible vistas.

Photographer Michaela Urban and I began our sailing adventure in the historic town of Plattsburgh, New York, about halfway up the western side of the lake. Our trip happened to coincide with the annual celebration of the historic Battle of Plattsburgh, which was one of the deciding battles of the War of 1812. As such, there was quite a lot of celebrating going on in the form of events, fireworks and merry-makers running around in period costumes. We were tempted to spend a few days there enjoying the festivities, but we only had a week to go sailing, and the clock was ticking.

We chartered our Lagoon 39 catamaran from Navtours, one of the few sailboat charter outfits on the lake.

After the laborious process of provisioning (one of my least favorite aspects of chartering), we rewarded ourselves with a dinner at Plattsburgh's famed Blue Collar Bistro. If you like great food in a laid-back atmosphere, you'll want to check this place out. Make sure owner and Plattsburgh native Cindy Snow is working the bar. Not only will she keep you entertained, she's also a great resource for insights into where to go and what to do both in Plattsburgh and in the surrounding area.

We were sailing in September, which means we were a little off-season, as most sailors enjoy the lake in June, July and August. That said, September has the best winds and the least number of thunderstorms, the bugs are minimal and the water is still warm enough for swimming. Best of all, even the most popular anchorages are usually not full.

September also ushers in New England's famous fall foliage, and given the large number of sugar maples and other deciduous trees on both sides of the lake, this can be quite a show.

Our first night out, we headed to Deep Bay in Point Au Roche State Park, a short sail from Plattsburgh on the New York side. This gorgeous little protected harbor, framed in gray limestone, white pine and red oak, has a number of well-maintained mooring balls, which cost \$22 midweek and \$26 on weekends and holidays. Alternatively, you can anchor in either of the two neighboring bays to the south, one of which has a beautiful long sandy beach. The park also has a great network of biking and hiking trails to explore. We'd brought along a pair of Dahon folding bikes, which were perfect for the park's smooth, flat trails.

Our next stop, North Hero Island, is one of the Lake's largest islands. Primarily farmland and connected to the mainland by a network of bridges, the region has recently seen a boom in boutique vineyards making it a much anticipated stopover.

We'd made dinner reservations at one of the island's most famous and oldest Inns, the North Hero House, which offers unique food pairings with wines

FACT FILE

We chartered our boat from Navtours at the Plattsburgh Boat Basin. They are the largest charter company on the lake and have a good selection of boats.

NAVTOURS 514 382-4445, navtours.com

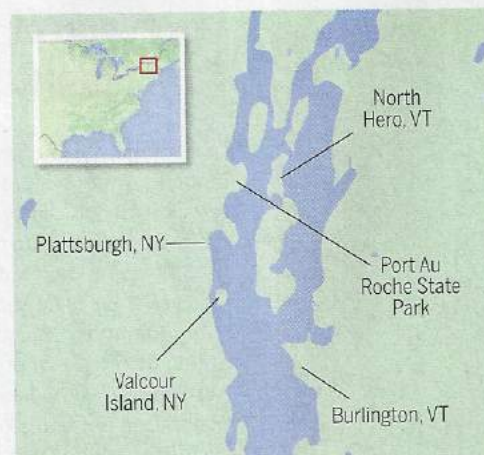
from one of the better-known vineyards, Snow Farms Vineyard, which was founded in 1992 making it one of its oldest vineyards. The climate here is surprisingly well suited for growing Pinot Noir and Riesling, as well as French hybrids, such as Vidal Blanc and Baco Noir.

Eager to try some of their wines, we made it to North Hero Marina just in time to shower, get dressed and head down to North Hero House for dinner. It's about 4 miles, which makes for an easy bike ride and a relatively long, but nice walk. There's not much of a taxi service here, but you could probably just stick out a thumb and hitch a ride—people are really friendly.

After having our fill of wine tastings and great food, we sailed to the south end of North Hero to meet some friends who live nearby for a little shrimp and pesto dinner on the boat. We supplied the grub, while they brought along a fine selection of Vermont's famous craft beers.

For those who are not familiar with Vermont, it is arguably one of the hippest states on the Eastern Seaboard. Over the years, it has been ahead of the curve on everything from abolishing slavery to allowing same-sex marriages. Vermont has also led the recent explosion of American microbreweries. If you're a fan of beer, you'll want to swing into Burlington (Vermont's biggest city on the lake) and check out the selection. The Burlington Boathouse is also a nice and friendly marina right in the heart of the city.

North Hero, Plattsburgh and Burlington, in addition to being somewhat in the middle of the lake (north to south), are also at its widest. As you head south, the lake gently narrows to a point where it is roughly half a mile wide.



Here the mighty Adirondacks come right down to the shore in the form of towering granite cliffs. After making it to this magnificent section of the lake, you can overnight either in Westport on the New York side or Kingsland Bay on the Vermont side (or both if you have time, as they are equally interesting).

In mid-19th century, Westport, like many other parts of the Adirondacks, was a fashionable summer retreat for the rich and fashionable New York and Boston crowd. With the advent of modern transportation, the Adirondacks lost much of its "upper crust" appeal, as the beautiful people wandered farther afield. But Westport still has a lot of charm, some great restaurants and the only professional theater in the Adirondacks, The Depot Theatre. The Westport Marina is also full service and has a nice family-style restaurant overlooking the water.

Sixty-four-acre Kingsland Bay State Park on the Vermont side features the historic Hawley

House, which was built in 1790 with stones from the ruins of Fort Ticonderoga. Recently renovated, Hawley House was once a popular inn for travelers from both sides of the lake, as there was a ferry that ran across from New York. During the War of 1812, the inn was used for housing the militia, and in the early 20th century it became a monastic retreat.

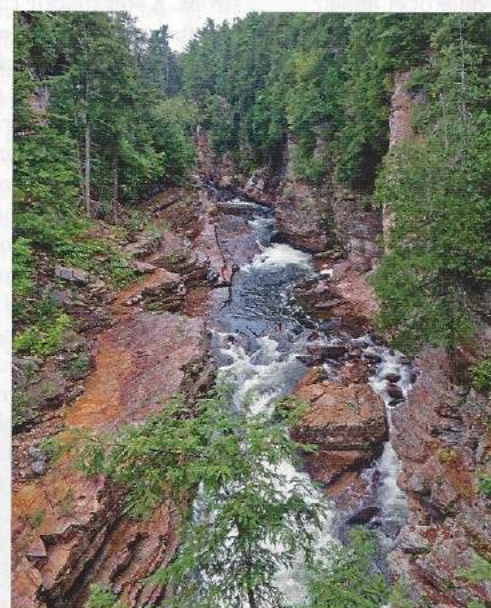
The last stop on our charter was Valcour Island, one of the most naturally beautiful spots we visited. Valcour also has some very well-sheltered anchorages that will protect you from almost any kind of weather, something we put to the test, as a fairly nasty storm blew through while we were there. (Although thunderstorms are less frequent in the fall, they do happen on occasion!)

The island consists of 1,100 acres of wilderness, with hiking trails that wander through aromatic autumn fields of goldenrod and blue asters under sheltering hemlock and white ash. These scenic walkways connect Valcour's many postcard-perfect bays and beaches with mysterious and inviting names like Smugglers Harbor, Spoon, Butterfly and Paradise. Much of the rock you find here was once part of an ancient reef formed nearly 500 million years when this region was at the bottom of an ocean. Cruisers young and old can spend hours here searching for fossils.

Interestingly, when we got back to Plattsburgh, we learned the previous day's storm hit town dead center in the form of a microburst that tore a number of boats off their moorings. There was quite a lot of wreckage and even some boats stranded near the shore. Needless to say, we were very glad this beast missed us

The author's Lagoon 39 at rest toward the end of the charter

Clockwise from right: The author at the helm; Michaela relaxes on the trampoline; North Hero House Inn and Restaurant in North Hero, Vermont; sights like Ausable Chasm in Keeseville, New York, dot the rugged countryside; the moon rises over New York's Valcour Island



and that we'd been able to hunker down safe and sound in Valcour.

After our debriefing in the charter office, we finished our tour with a couple of land-based trips, the first of which was to Ausable Chasm. Only 25 minutes south of Plattsburgh, this mini Grand Canyon carved by the Ausable River is two miles long and 150ft deep. You can walk or float through it, or you can strap on a harness and scale the canyon walls over the raging waters using cable traverses and bridges.

After that came a date with one of my favorite cities on Champlain, the wonderfully eclectic Vermont college town of Burlington, back at the lake's midpoint, where we stayed at the hip Hotel Vermont. As eclectic as Burlington, the hotel primarily uses Vermont products and Vermont themes. It also has great music on the weekends, a fantastic bar and restaurant, and a popular fire pit in the back courtyard.

It's easy and fun to get to Vermont from the New York side, as the Lake Champlain Transportation Company operates a number of classically restored antique ferries that cross at different parts of the lake. We took the Port Kent Ferry across, which leaves from Port Kent, about 25 minutes south of Plattsburgh, and takes you right to the center of Burlington.

Our vessel, the *Champlain*, is a classic 1930s wooden ship that once ferried people across the southern Chesapeake Bay. The captain let us ride with him in the old wheelhouse, which still has all the original brass fixtures and mechanical gizmos from the old days, as well as the traditional huge varnished wooden steering wheel.

There are many choices out there when it comes to picking a charter, and each has its special charm. For those who've never experienced Champlain, it's a unique alternative to some of the more popular charter destinations. Combine it with a tour of the Adirondacks and Vermont, and you have a winner of a vacation. My advice—go in the fall, it's much more laid back and if you're lucky enough to catch the fall colors you'll be mesmerized. **S**

Eric Vohr and Michaela Urban have a travel website and blog at travelintense.com