

Mountains, memories and Merlot

The scenery is spectacular and the fishing great at the Swisha waterfront.

Drive up the Valley to walk in voyageurs' footsteps

BY PAULA MCLAUGHLIN

Where is this week's destination?

We're off to Rapides-des-Joachims, a tiny Quebec village on an island in the Ottawa River, about 220 kilometres west of Ottawa. It's more commonly known as "Swisha," an English mispronunciation of "Joachims." Isolated from the rest of Quebec, the only way to get there by car is to drive through Rolphton, Ont., a small town where I grew up. In Rolphton, turn right on Renfrew County Road 635. In 2.5 kilometres you'll cross one of Canada's few remaining single-lane interprovincial bridges and a minute later you'll be in Swisha.

I've never heard of the place.

Well, you should have. Swisha has a very rich past. It was home to First Nations long before Europeans started exploring the Upper Ottawa River in the 1600s. Swisha became an important fur-trading post when the Hudson's Bay Company set up shop at the foot of some rapids here. Voyageurs had to shoulder backbreaking loads through what is now the town-site. Today, you can trace the voyageurs' footsteps on a series of walking trails across the island. Look for signs near the waterfront. My favourite walk is one that takes you from Rue Principale to the headpond of the nearby Des Joachims hydro dam. It's about a 40-minute hike through the bush, most of it uphill. I can't even imagine how tough it must have been for voyageurs carrying heavily laden canoes on this portage.

What else should I know about Swisha?

By the 1870s, there was a substantial lumber industry in the Upper Valley. Steamboats making the 65-kilometre trip up the Ottawa River from Pembroke had to stop in Swisha due to the rapids. Through-

out the next century millions of logs were floated or trucked out of the area. Surrounded by seemingly limitless stands of red pine, logging is still important here and the Commonwealth Plywood mill is a major employer.

Anything else to see in Swisha?

The Laurentian Mountains — lined with towering pines and granite cliffs — form an impressive backdrop to the mighty Ottawa River. Swisha is a gateway to vast tracts of wilderness. People come from all over the world to hunt deer, bear and moose. Fishing is a major draw too and Swisha offers a boat launch and free boat docking.

This place sounds picture-postcard pretty.

Sure is. Looking down the river, the view is spectacular. The mountains here are home to one of Canada's rare eagle preserves. Earlier this summer I spotted one of the big birds who, like the tourists who flock here, fish the Ottawa for pickerel and pike. The one I saw swooped across the river in a matter of seconds — impressive!

Seems like artist-inspiring stuff.

It is, and capturing that beauty is what happens at the Gallerie Gallera art studio and gallery just opposite the waterfront. The gallery displays the work of several Valley artists. You can revel in the beautiful photography of Rolphton's Robert Mirault. His photos capture wildlife you might be lucky enough to spot in the Swisha area — eagles, loons, owls, moose and more. Artist-in-residence Tina Michaud leads "Art You Can Walk On" workshops every summer where participants create colourful floor cloths. As well, Joyce Burkholder runs three-day "Adventure Painting" workshops where she



PHOTOS BY PAULA MCLAUGHLIN, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN
The Pointe aux Pins lodge houses the Gallerie Gallera art studio and has rooms and log cabins for rent.

takes people out to literally paint the town. The gallery is housed in the historic old bar of the Pointe aux Pins lodge. The century-old building's fireplace is said to be made of stones salvaged from the Hudson's Bay post. Check out gallerygallera.ca and phone (1-613-586-9367) in advance to make sure the gallery is open when you visit.

Are there any local shops?

The Epicierie des Joachims, on Rue Principale just west of the boat launch, is a popular place. You can get gas and groceries, bait and beer. It's also a Quebec liquor outlet with a decent choice of wine. Take home a souvenir of Swisha. I suggest a Baron Philippe de Rothschild Merlot for \$12.95.

Is it time to head back to the big city?

Yes. Retrace your route back to Rolphton. Just before County Road 635 meets Highway 17, glance over your right shoulder. You'll be looking at pine trees and soaring hydro towers, but what you are actually seeing is a ghost town. That busy

where. The lot where my house once stood is overgrown with pine trees.

There's nothing left?

Nothing concrete in the colony, but you still can get a real feel for the place at the School House Museum in Meilleurs Bay. Stop in — it's just a couple of kilometres east along Highway 17 on the way back to Ottawa.

What's the museum's connection with the colony?

Many of the buildings were trucked away to locations throughout the Valley and the museum is where the colony church wound up. The museum tells the colony's story from the time of the dam construction to when the houses were removed. Look for a picture of House No. 20. That's where my family lived and that's where my wedding reception was held (in my parents' basement). I was one of the last people to be married in that little church before it became a museum piece. The School House Museum also has exhibits about Swisha. During the summer the museum is open Fridays through Tuesdays from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$5 for adults and \$3 for ages eight to 17. Children under 8 are free. See <http://brightideas-software.com/schoolhouse/>.

Any last suggestions for the trip home?

Continue east on Highway 17 for another 11 kilometres. That will bring you to Deep River's Laurentian View Dairy. Buy a milkshake and head east again on the highway. A kilometre or so later, turn left at the stoplight onto Deep River Road. Stay on this street until you reach the river and the town's newest attraction, Riverbank. It's a shoreline walking trail where you are sure to see boats of all shapes and sizes. Riverbank has plenty of benches and a few picnic tables where you can sip that shake.

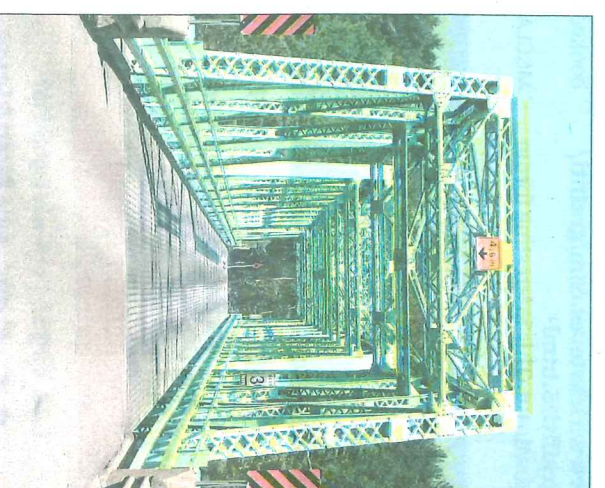
Paula McLaughlin is a retired Ottawa Citizen journalist who kayaks near Swisha every chance she gets.



The Rolphton Community Church was put on a flatbed truck and moved along Highway 17 to its new home as part of the School House Museum at Meilleurs Bay.



Rapides-des-Joachims is criss-crossed with walking trails. Grab some bug spray and overlo-



This single-lane bridge is the only way to reach the island.