

# ISLAND GET AWAY

WALK ON WATER TO VALCOUR, WHERE HISTORY  
AND NATURAL BEAUTY ARE THE MAIN ATTRACTIONS



BY LUKE CYPHERS  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

## IS IT SAFE?

It's a rational question. The thought of stepping out onto a vast expanse of ice, which not long ago was an inland sea of liquid water—really deep, really cold water—inspires all manner of worst-case participles.

Cracking. Falling. Freezing. Sinking. Drowning.

But that view! Right there sits the Bluff Point Lighthouse, its bright red roof in lovely contrast to the evergreen trees surrounding it, the pristine blue skies above it, the snowcapped Mount Mansfield behind it, and the frozen white Lake Champlain before it—a postcard that shouts, “Welcome to Valcour Island!”

The beacon beckons, and the angst subsides the second you step onto the ice from the Peru dock. The lake is as solid as concrete, completely unyielding under the inch or so of fresh powdery snow. Poke a walking pole into an abandoned fishing hole the size of a chowder bowl, feeling for the end of the ice, and you get almost to the hilt. The ice is at least 25 inches thick, strong enough to bear not only your weight but that of several fully loaded Ford F-150s.

Yes, it's safe. Safe to enjoy the increasingly rare treat of walking right into the Valcour Island postcard, walking to an odd little corner of the Adirondack Park, walking through history, walking on water. Really deep, really cold water.

### VALCOUR ISLAND IS A HANDSOME PLACE,

a mile wide and two miles long, with nearly 970 acres of forest, wetlands, wildlife, beaches, cliffs and one-of-a-kind vistas.

Winter, at least a traditionally cold winter like last year's, is an ideal time to appreciate Valcour, because the ice offers access unavailable the rest of the year. The island has no public ferry service, so if you don't own a boat or know someone who does, you're out of luck. Except when the ice is solid enough to walk on.

That was once a given. National Weather Service records show Lake Champlain failed to freeze over, or “close,” in only seven winters from 1816 to 1950. It's failed to close seven times in the past decade alone.

Luckily, Valcour Bay, a 2/3-mile-wide channel that offers the best access to the island, is narrow enough to freeze most years, though the window is often short.

“For whatever reason, there's less ice now,” says Roger Harwood, who lives just across Valcour Bay from the lighthouse, which he has helped restore over the past three decades.

Those lucky enough to amble across the ice have an easy journey to what's historically been a contested space. Samuel de Champlain, when he first came upon Valcour in 1609, wrote in his journal that the island was uninhabited because of long-running conflicts between the Native American nations.



Later, the French and English battled over it, with the French winning the naming rights but losing the war. That was followed by a kerfuffle between the English and some ragtag colonists.

Benedict Arnold schlepped here—and for his efforts became a hero—for a time, anyway. On October 11, 1776, with the British sailing down from Quebec in an effort to control all of Lake Champlain and the upper Hudson Valley before winter set in, Arnold led a fleet of Yankee gunboats hastily built earlier that year in

**Roger Harwood, right, led efforts to renovate the interior of the Bluff Point Lighthouse after decades of abandonment and vandalism. It now serves as a museum. PAGES 30–31: The author on frozen Lake Champlain.**

OUT ON THE ICE, AT THE LOWEST ELEVATION WITHIN THE BLUE LINE, THE CHAMPLAIN VALLEY INSPIRES THE SAME FEELING OF LIMITLESSNESS AS A VIEW FROM THE TOP OF A HIGH PEAKS SUMMIT.



Whitehall to engage the Redcoats in Valcour Bay. The rebel flotilla got pounded but slowed the British advance enough to convince the Brits to go back to Quebec for the winter. That in turn allowed the colonies crucial time to gear up for major fighting in 1777, including the Battle of Saratoga, which turned the tide of the Revolutionary War. (A side note: After the hammering at Valcour, Arnold and most of his men sneaked past the British ships in the dead of night. They regrouped eight miles to the south on Schuyler Island, named for a Dutchman whose great-granddaughter Elizabeth Schuyler would marry Alexander Hamilton and, more recently, become an iconic Broadway and hip-hop character. Valcour's history can't stop, won't stop.)

The island spent the next 200 years in mostly private hands, used for farming, Great Camps and children's summer camps.

In the 1960s, the state of New York began acquiring properties on the island, with plans to turn it into a recreation area, including a massive marina on Valcour's northern shores. In keeping with the island's history of skirmishes, local opponents concerned about the project's size and environmental impacts scuttled the idea. The state completed its takeover of Valcour but changed course, building nature trails and campsites, and placing the entire island within the boundaries of the Adirondack Park in 1973. The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) now controls the island, which is designated a Primitive Area.

Harwood says the move likely saved the island from runaway development. A former Valcour Great Camp owner once told him, “If they hadn't done what they did, you'd have camps every 50 feet and sewage nightmares.”

Now, “a lot of people can recreate here for free,” Harwood says. “It's a gem.”

A retired industrial-arts teacher at Plattsburgh High School who spent years diving in Lake Champlain, observing historical relics, Harwood has much to do with the island's preservation. It begins with the lighthouse, which opened in 1874 and was functional through the 1920s. Along with two dozen dedicated

volunteers and the cooperation of the Clinton County Historical Association (CCHA), which has an easement to maintain the structure, Harwood led efforts to renovate the interior beginning in the late 1990s, after years of abandonment and vandalism. The U.S. Coast Guard relit the beacon in 2004, restoring the building to its original function, and from 2012 to 2014, the DEC rehabbed the roof and other structural elements, ensuring the building, which now serves as a museum open to the public on summer weekends, will stand up to the boreal elements for decades to come.

“The bottom line is that the lighthouse is now in better shape than when it was built,” Harwood says, “because it has modern materials that weren’t available then.”

Adirondack Architectural Heritage recognized this in 2019, presenting the DEC and CCHA with a joint award to “honor the extraordinary work done by both partners to preserve this National Register-listed building.”

Recently, Harwood and another group of volunteers mapped with GPS coordinates the sites of major homesteads, farms and summer camps, creating a brochure with QR codes and notes on the ruins, an essential guide to hiking the island.

On a winter’s day, a walk to the lighthouse is a reminder that natural beauty, civilization and history can all mesh. Out on the ice, at the lowest elevation within the Blue Line, the Champlain Valley inspires the same feeling of limitlessness as a view from the top of a High Peaks summit. The white drifts snaking across the ice for miles to the south are almost Antarctic, a picture of, to steal from Buzz Aldrin, “magnificent desolation.”

The gorgeous scene exacts a price. Frigid winds scour tiny snow crystals from the frozen lake and whip them into your face. Relief comes once you step on the island itself, up a series of dark gray rocks on the shoreline and into the shelter of the cedars on Valcour’s western edge. Here, spring is creeping in, with mud poking through the ice on some of the trails.

The lighthouse itself is in fine con-

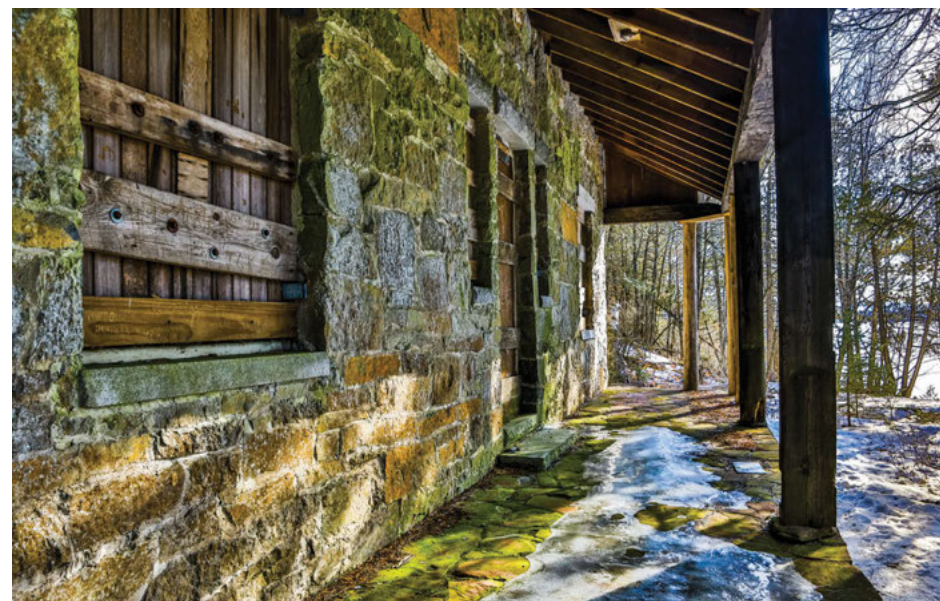
dition. The rooms where generations of lighthouse keepers and their families lived are cozy, bright and warm enough that a spider is building a web in a window well. The short climb to the light tower and out a crawl space to the observation deck reveals a spectacular view: Whiteface Mountain, its ski trails visible, dominates the west; Lyon Mountain’s broad shoulders spread along the northwest; and to the southwest, Poke-O-Moonshine Mountain’s rounded top feels close enough to touch. With no leaves on the trees, no bugs in the air and no people around, it’s the kind of bleak, wintry tranquility more associated with the back-

country than a place that’s a 15-minute drive from Plattsburgh’s Target.

#### THE FOURTH-LARGEST ISLAND

on Lake Champlain is big—bigger when the ice allows for circumnavigating the perimeter. Two stocky arms of land jut to the east and west, creating several bays along the island’s two-mile length, all accessible by the 7.5-mile Perimeter trail. Two other trails, Nomad and Royal Savage, cut across the island from west to east.

Near the lighthouse, the DEC’s Primitive Area labels seem absurd at first. There are campgrounds and trail mark-



Once a critical military site during the Revolutionary War, today Valcour sustains New York’s largest great blue heron rookery, and visitors can hike the island’s trails and explore the ruins of old farms, Great Camps and a former free-love commune.



WITH NO LEAVES ON THE TREES, NO BUGS IN THE AIR AND NO PEOPLE AROUND, IT’S THE KIND OF WINTRY TRANQUILITY MORE ASSOCIATED WITH THE BACKCOUNTRY THAN A PLACE THAT’S A 15-MINUTE DRIVE FROM PLATTSBURGH’S TARGET.

ers and an outhouse. Someone has fashioned a stone bench from chunks of the same Ordovician rock that makes up the island’s cliffs. Expensive waterfront homes loom just across the ice on the mainland. But then a pileated woodpecker, nearly as large as a crow, its red crest as eye-catching as the lighthouse’s scarlet roof, springs between cedars. Another, smaller woodpecker is hammering at old weathered timber a dozen or so feet from the frosty shoreline. Deer are evident everywhere, their sign abundant along the snowy trails, and a beaver lodge rises from a marsh just off of Bullhead Bay. Deeper in the island forest sits the state’s largest great blue heron rookery.

Yes, it is primitive.

The hiking on the Perimeter trail is fairly easy, even easier when you use the frozen bays to cut corners. The Nomad and Royal Savage trails are short but a bit more difficult, with snow drifting as deep as a couple of feet, and a few small hills to slog up. The high point at the center of the island is 148 feet, about 50 feet above lake level, and some of that altitude holds and gives way to spectacular three- and four-story-high cliffs on the south and east shores.

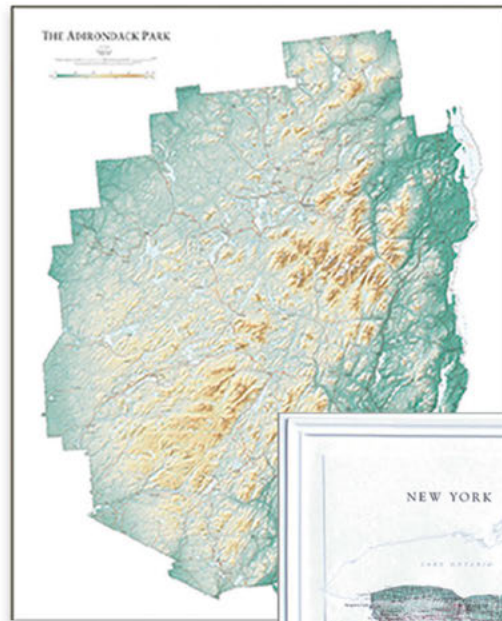
On windy days, there’s little to buffer the lake’s southerly gales for 100 miles. While the lake is freezing, that wind generates persistent waves that hurl slabs of ice against the shorelines, and coat drifted snow with quick-freezing water to create curvy, post-modern ice sculptures—eight-foot-tall Frank Gehry works tinged turquoise by the temperature and sunlight. The ice forms little caves, which, judging by the tracks in the snow, small animals use for shelter.

Ruins dot the island. Big clearings and decrepit orchards recall the agricultural past, such as the Harney farm near the north shore. With the help of Harwood’s GPS map, you can even find the location of the foundation of the Dawn Community House, all that remains of a short-lived Utopian free-love community that collapsed in 1875.

At the east end of the Nomad trail is the Nomad Monument, both named for a yacht that sailed on the lake for years in the first half of the | *Continued on page 50*

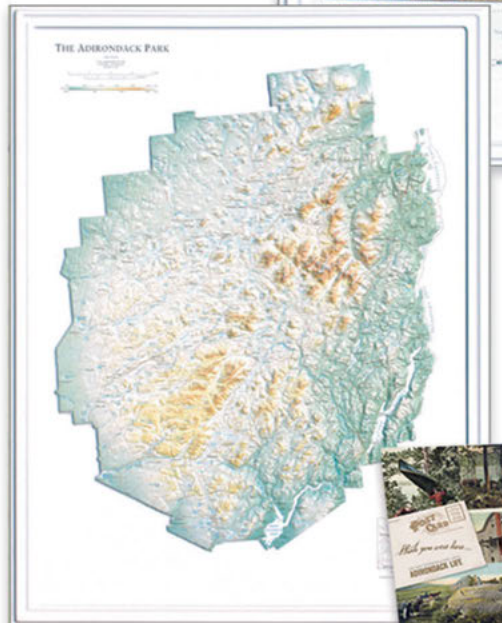
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20th century, always crewed by Canadian high-school and college students. The yacht's owner, Canadian Lt. Col. Gerald W. Birks, installed plaques to honor several of those yacht-crew members who lost their lives in World Wars I and II. The DEC says it's the only Canadian war memorial on U.S. soil.

At Tiger Point on the east side, there's the site of the Brown Ledge girls' camp. North of there, across Sloop Cove, stands a massive chimney from the Great Camp of George Hudson, a geologist whose century-old structure contains a specimen of every variety of rock native to the area.

The only intact building besides the lighthouse is the Seton House, a brawny boarded-up edifice on the island's southwest corner. The former Great Camp must have been a wonder in its day, with its stout timber porch, its Adirondack views and rock steps leading down to the waterside.

A surprising amount of old forest remains: some giant white pines and groves of tall cedars with the occasional massive hemlock. The trees are impressive, but in late winter, the lake ice itself inspires the most awe, and an Adirondack Park viewshed unlike any other. From the cliffs on the south side of the island, you can witness a miniature version of plate tectonics: ice sheets that have collided, creating fault lines and mini-mountain ranges rising two and three feet above the surface and stretching for thousands of yards into the main lake.

Down on the ice, especially near Valcour's eastern and southern shores, those tectonics are a bit nerve-wracking. The ice moans, a wave of whale song passing beneath you. It's unsettling to know the water is nearly 60 feet deep here, and just a little way to the southeast, reaches depths of more than 200 feet. The haunting sound morphs into something truly scary with a massive BLAM!—like a gunshot. You take it as a sign to head back toward terra firma.

Yes, it's probably safe, for now. But what you're standing on is a lot like our climate: moving, expanding, crashing, exploding, changing right under your feet.

Enjoy the journey while you can. ▲

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