



Locking Through History

Houseboating along the Erie Canal

Repurpose. Upcycle. Reimagine.

These are all new words getting thrown around the Erie Canal lately. Another word you don't hear too often between the Canal's 83 locks? Houseboat.

Last year marked 200 years since the historic Erie Canal's completion, and locals weren't the only ones to recognize the Canal's original purpose is obsolete.

"The Canal is definitely not used for commercial shipping anymore," Long Islander Glenn Staudigel says. "We only saw one barge the entire time we were on the canals. It's mainly used for recreation now."

In response, The New York Power Authority and the New

York State Canal Corporation launched a competition to reimagine the canals. Governor Andrew M. Cuomo's vision for this competition includes finding "visionary, implementable concepts and initiatives that promote the Canal System's heritage, foster economic development and tourism, and improve the Canal System's long-term financial sustainability."

Bob Stivers has the answer: rent his houseboat!

Full-Size Houseboating

Dubbed the Seneca Lake Houseboat and quite possibly the only full-sized houseboat in the region, this 67-foot boat is every bit the houseboat available at more traditional locales.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Like going up the Grand Canyon. I tell everybody about it and you've just got to get a group of people together and do the Erie Canal."

– Glenn Staudigel



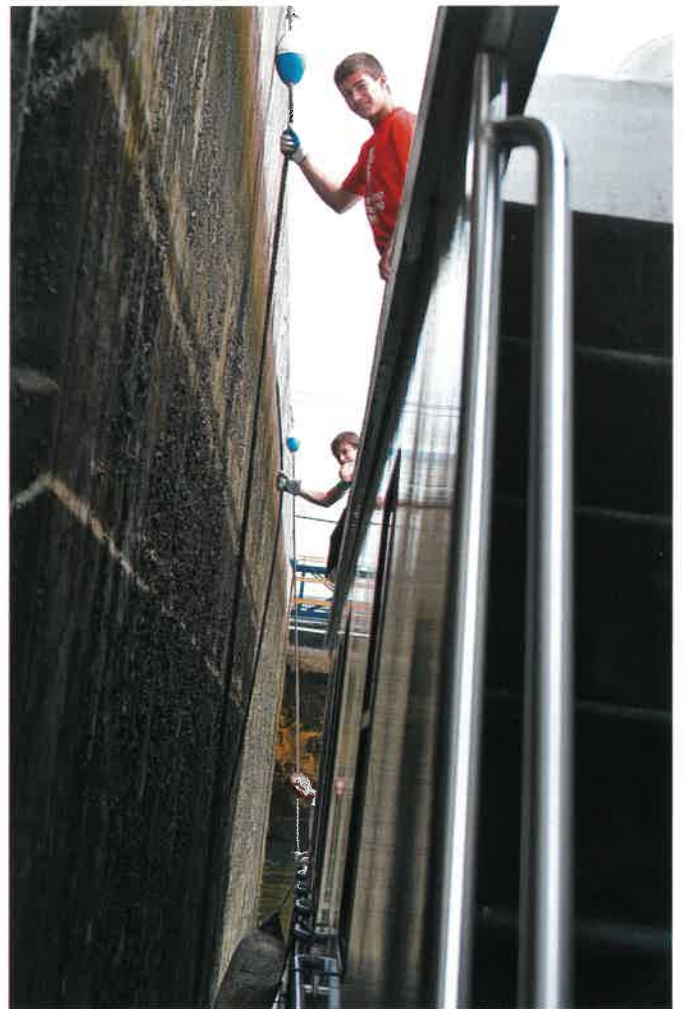
By Vanessa Oler

The interior has a saloon, full galley complete with all standard appliances, four state rooms, two full heads, central air conditioning and heat. Decks at stern and bow allow for grilling (yes, there's a gas grill onboard!), sunbathing and sightseeing. The upper deck measures a whopping 50 feet long by 15 feet wide and sports a service bar, hot tub, and water slide.

"We'd been running a few houseboats for a local company just to get their name out there for a few years. We finally purchased this boat in 2009," Stivers says, "then re-welded the entire thing and had it ready for the 2010 season. And people love it!"

Stivers and his team run several tourism sites and rental

We  Houseboat*ing*



hubs in the Seneca Lake area, but the houseboat is by far the most popular option.

"There are canal boats available to rent," Stivers states, "but you can only get four to six people on those. People with big families love renting the full-size deal. I give training to everybody who captains it themselves, but the best part of the canal is you can just parallel park it wherever you want instead of worrying about getting into a slip. I'm also available to captain it from village to village for families who want to explore more on land."

Exploring The Erie

Glenn Staudigel was one of those guys with a big family, but a life-long desire to explore the Erie Canal.

"I've always wanted to explore the Erie Canal—to lock through—but never knew how to go about doing it," Staudigel relates. "I didn't know anybody with a boat who could do this. One year, we went to a boat show down here in New York City and as I walked in there's a big sign that reads, 'Rent Your Own Houseboat. Tour the Erie Canal.' So I walked right up and I gave them my credit card! My in-laws came over and asked, 'What are you doing?' I told them this was going to be our summer vacation and they thought I was nuts because I know nothing about running a boat this big. But I assured them it would be okay and they'd be able to show me!"

Staudigel rounded up the family, the in-laws, and a few cousins for their first trip through the canal nearly 17 years ago. His two sons – three and five at the time – had the trip of their life and begged to do it again the next summer.

"During that first trip," Staudigel laughs, "people along the canal kept asking for tours because nobody had ever seen anything that size on the canal. We said of course. I figured the more successful Stivers was with these boats, the better it would be for us as well because we'd be able to come back and rent them again.

"Everybody has a great time. Locking through is exciting! My 80-year-old mother-in-law was there in her gloves, holding onto the ropes and locking through. Then there are just parts of the canal that are unbelievably beautiful. And the towns you stop in—Seneca Falls all the way up to Fairport is the other one we go to—everything is terrific. It's great to be able to tie up for free and the boat is totally self-sufficient so any place you find that you can tie up to, you can."

Vacation Revisited

As the children grew up, the summer trip through the Erie Canal took a backseat to school trips, sports practice, and college visits. Then, about ten years later, the oldest son brought it up. The tradition was reborn!

"The moment we got off the boat for that trip," Staudigel says, "we turned around and said, 'Great, we'll take it for the same time next year!'"

Stivers obliged and bookings go quickly, sometimes years in advance. With more than 30 canal boat rental companies available on the Erie Canal alone, there are plenty of ways to get on the water. Stivers, though, hopes his submission to the Reimagine competition stands out and encourages more houseboats to put in on the canal.





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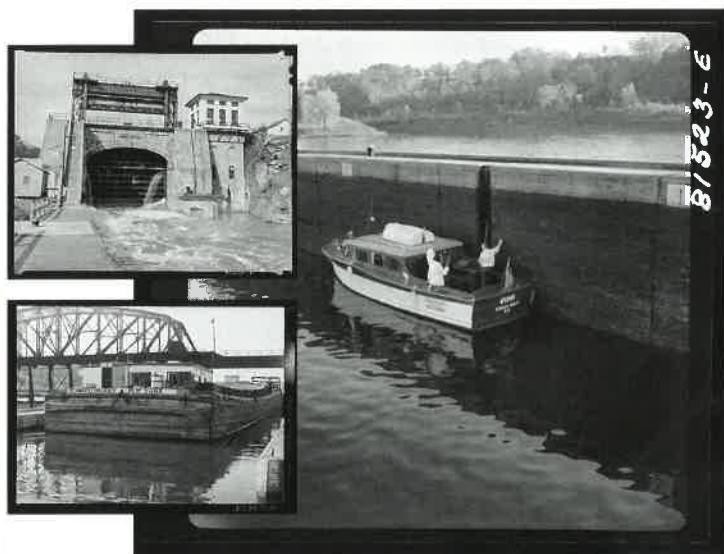
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History Lesson

Submissions were due to the Reimagine the Canal committee in January and included a wide variety of ideas, plans and projects. Originally conceived by New York politician DeWitt Clinton, this 363-mile canal links the Great Lakes to the Hudson River. Ships traveling from across the Atlantic into port at New York City could offload cargo or carry it themselves up the Hudson River, through the Erie Canal, and onto the previously landlocked Midwest. Cities now considered major centers of business and industry would not have been possible without the Erie Canal.

“At its peak in the early 1950s,” the Reimagine the Canal board says, “the Canal System was a significant contributor to the economic vitality of New York State. Today, the Canal System has untapped potential as an economic asset, for both tourism and recreational uses.”



Promoting The Canal

The competition is putting out a general casting call, as it were, for local visionaries from any background. Ideas can be as big as physical infrastructure projects or as simple as programming and marketing initiatives. Requirements are straightforward, asking all proposals to promote the Canal System as a tourist destination and recreational asset, sustainable economic development along the canals, the heritage and historic values, and the long-term financial sustainability of the Canal System. A jury of experts from fields relevant to urban and rural development, community engagement, and marine regulation will assist the Canal Corporation in creating a shortlist of finalists and making recommendations for the final awards. Preference is given to proposals that fully integrate and appreciate the historical significance of the Erie Canal.

“I can’t get over the amount of history that’s part of the whole canal,” Staudigel remarks. “You get to see Seneca Falls where the Women’s Movement took place and the factories that supplied soldiers with socks through most of our American wars. The houseboat we rented isn’t cheap, but the hot tub and the slide off the back is perfect for kids. For a family vacation, you just can’t beat it. When we started this whole thing, my sons were toddlers. Now they are in their early 20s and they still want to do it.” ■