



# Wolfe Island

SPECTRUM

**W**hat's this? An unspoiled countryside within a stone's throw of one of Canada's nicest small cities? Views over the water at every turn? The benefits of island living without the isolation? It sounds too good to be true, but sure enough, it exists. Wolfe Island, which marks the eastern end of Lake Ontario as it empties into the St. Lawrence River, has to be the perfect rural retreat.

"We're an island unto ourselves," remarks one proud resident, who gave up Toronto for 25 acres of picturesque pasture and maple bush, "And yet, we're within sight of downtown Kingston." Indeed, whenever the locals need an urban fix, they simply hop aboard the *Wolfe Islander* for the free, 20-minute ferry ride to the Limestone City. Just as quickly, they're back home. "We're so close, yet so far. It's the best of both worlds."

Named for the conquering general who led the Brits to victory on the Plains of Abraham, Wolfe Island was settled almost as soon as the international boundary between Canada and the U.S. was drawn down the middle of the St. Lawrence. From the beginning, it was an agricultural enclave, and remains solid dairy and beef country today. Despite the proximity of the city, Wolfe

Island is still largely self-sufficient—surrounded by water, it has to be—and has been slower to embrace change. While Kingston malls and suburbs have sprawled along the mainland shore, Wolfe Island has yet to see its first fast-food joint. "That's the way we like it," says the owner of one of a growing number of B&Bs. "And we hope it stays this way."

Even so, island life is no longer exclusively devoted to agriculture. Several generations ago, scores of local farm families sold off their waterfront to make way for summer cottages and to this day, the population swells come Victoria Day weekend. Enchanted by the relaxed pace of life, many of the weekenders have winterized their summer homes for year-round use. Meanwhile, a different kind of newcomer has arrived in recent years—the ex-urbanites, faithful readers of *HARROWSMITH COUNTRY LIFE*, eager to find a farmhouse to restore and a couple of acres to till. Many of them commute to Kingston daily. On any Saturday morning, you can find all three types of islanders shopping in Marysville, the little village at the ferry terminus. It's a poignant sight—you'd never know that a city of over 100,000 lurks on the horizon only a couple of kilometres across the water.

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**Founded** Settled by United Empire Loyalists at the beginning of the 19th century. Was a township unto itself, but was recently amalgamated with nearby Howe Island to become the Township of Frontenac Islands.

**Access** Most of the traffic arrives by ferry from downtown Kingston to the north end of the island. Less utilized is the international ferry at the south end, which crosses the St. Lawrence to Cape Vincent, New York.

**Population** About 1,300; doubles in summer.

**Principal Town** Marysville at the ferry terminus, population 400 or so.

**Urban Escape** Kingston 5 km; Toronto 275 km.

**Climate** Island location moderates winters a bit, and lake breezes are a god-send during a summer heat wave. So windy that this is prime yachting country.

**Garden Zone** 6A, the same as Toronto, but half a zone warmer than Gananoque, only 20 km east.

**Farmland** Here and there, the island boasts pockets of superb soil, particularly adjacent to swamps, but much of the land is marginal with a thin layer of topsoil over limestone bedrock. Shouldn't inhibit the hobby farmer, however.

**Real Estate** Not a particularly hot market. Waterfront cottage properties, which are generally cheaper than similar listings in the Thousand Islands, turn over more frequently than farms. Two hundred grand marks the threshold between adequate and more desirable listings.

**Health Service** On-island fire and ambulance service; medical clinic in Marysville. Nearest hospital is in Kingston. In case of emergency, the ferry responds immediately, no matter where it is on its schedule.

**Business Directory** There is no major employer on the island. Agriculture predominates, but tourism is growing steadily and will be all the more important once Big Sandy Bay, a heretofore unknown stretch of beach at the head of the island, is opened to the public.

**Shopping** All day-to-day sundries can be found on-island, particularly in Marysville. Some tourist-oriented boutiques have popped up here and there. Kingston offers a lively old-style downtown and any number of suburban shopping malls.

**Claims to Fame** Superb bicycling; superb sailing; superb views.

**Last Word** Bills itself as the largest of the famed Thousand Islands, but that's really a misnomer. Its agricultural character separates it from the cottage-country stereotype.