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**COTTAGE COUNTRY AN OCCASIONAL SERIES HIGHLIGHTING ONTARIO'S SPECIAL SUMMER PLACES**

# It's all about the beach in Port Stanley

**Moderate climate means friendly town gets to enjoy 'more summer'**

Aug 15, 2009 04:30 AM

**LIZ FLEMING**  
 SPECIAL TO THE STAR

PORT STANLEY, ONT.—Ask Bobbie Robinson what she loves best about living and summering in Port Stanley and she'll tell you, "We get more life here – more summer and less winter, which means more time to enjoy the beach lifestyle."

The moderating effect of Lake Erie and the fact that Port Stanley is significantly farther south than cottage areas in the Kawarthas or Muskoka, mean that the ice and snow melt sooner, allowing beach lovers weeks of extra sun and sand.

It has been an irresistible drawing card since the early 1920s when Port Stanley, known as the "Coney Island of the Great Lakes," boasted a lakeside swimming pool, bathhouse, Ferris wheel, roller coaster, waterslide, outdoor theatre, and incline-rail to nearby Picnic Hill.

Home to the Stork Club, one of Ontario's most famous dance halls, Port Stanley drew thousands of tourists each year from 1926-1979 to hear Big Band stars like Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and London, Ont.'s Guy Lombardo and His Royal Canadians.

Although the Stork Club was demolished in 1979, the pool now lies under several metres of sand, and there isn't a roller coaster or Ferris wheel in sight, Port Stanley with its gentle climate and outstanding lakeside location remains one of the great Ontario getaway destinations.

Railroad enthusiasts can experience a trip in an authentic 1940s London & Port Stanley railcar. The narrated ride covers 11 kilometres of track with a photo-op at the turnaround point, and special trips feature murder mystery dinners, kids' events, and performances by Elvis, Buddy Holly, Patsy Cline and Johnny Cash impersonators.

The L & PS is just the beginning of the entertainment in Port Stanley. The 140-seat Port Stanley Festival Theatre's five-show lineup – mostly Canadian – is a real find. You'll be impressed by the top-quality directing and performing and by the \$28 ticket price.

Explore art studios and stores, as well as Spicer's Bakery (try a ginger cookie) in Port Stanley, and Blue Lavender Farms (delicious lavender-based jams, jellies and herbs) Jaydancin (all-natural soaps, creams and cosmetics), Anything Used (famed for their Spartaberry candles) and Heart Angel (funky gifts and art) in the nearby town of Sparta.

Have a Cornish pasty for lunch at the Sparta House Tea Room and visit Bill Fishleigh, curator of the Sparta Museum.

Winter Wheat, a studio/store "healing garden" and showcase for the work of Canadian folk artists Lynn Ogletree and Mike Roberts, is a must-visit.



LIZ FLEMING PHOTO  
 Whimsical clocks and a sense of timelessness greet guests to Winter Wheat, a studio/store "healing garden," and showcase for local artists.

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Greeted by a stand of trees, all sporting clocks made of found objects, and a sign that reads: "This is the place where time stands still," guests linger in the rambling shop filled with Ogletree's primitive-style paintings and folk art from around the province, then take free coffee and cookies to the gardens to admire Robert's whimsical sculptures, made from everything from bedpans to brooms.

Buy anything you see, but there's no pressure. The genuine sense of welcome is worth the drive in itself.

Speaking of the drive, you'll be pleasantly surprised to discover that, from downtown Toronto, the trip to the sandy shores of Port Stanley is less than two hours.

That beach remains the biggest tourist draw, with everything from secluded sunning spots, to beach volleyball nets and arguably the best beach bar north of the Caribbean.

GT's, famed for its Lake Erie perch dinner and other roadhouse-style treats, features live bands on weekends, free volleyball rentals and full service to its beachside lounge chairs.

Making a weekend of it? You'll find two hotels listed with the prestigious Ontario's Finest Inns – the Kettle Creek Inn and the Inn on the Harbour.

Both small and upscale, the Harbour Inn boasts water views, while the Kettle Creek Inn features the work of a different local artist in every room and serves perch tempura and other appetizers that are to die for. The Windjammer is another good choice – for an overnight as well as its great, ultra-fresh dinner menu. Great accommodation, fresh perch, sandy beaches, fascinating shops and top-quality theatre – Port Stanley hardly needs more to recommend it as a vacation destination. But its most compelling feature is an overwhelmingly friendly attitude, best illustrated by the lift bridge in the town centre.

When the bridge opens for passing boats, stranding drivers, the Port Stanleyites wave at the boaters, and each other.

Even when a mechanical failure froze the bridge in the up position for several days, locals weren't annoyed. Instead, they quickly printed T-shirts that read: "Port Stanley...where only the bridge is stuck up."

*Liz Fleming is a St. Catharines-based freelance writer.*



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