

# explore™

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# THE LOW DOWN



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## SNORKEL SUNKEN SHIPS IN KINGSTON, ONTARIO

*Although known for the history at Fort Henry and the chance to visit Canada's oldest maximum-security prison, the city of Kingston, Ontario, might not be on your radar for outdoor adventures—and that would be a mistake*

BY FIONA TAPP







**T**he last time I took my son snorkelling, he was just six years old. We stood in water that barely came up to my thighs on a soft sandy ocean bed. Lying flat with our faces in the water, we pushed off and walked on our hands, kicking our flippers out behind us. It was the perfect introduction to the mysteries of the underwater world.

He loved it so much that we snorkelled every day of the vacation. Most days we took to the beach right outside our hotel in Curacao, before the grand finale, where we snorkelled with sea turtles at Playa Piskado. It's safe to say his snorkelling standards were set high. So, as we made the two-hour journey from our home in Ottawa to Kingston to snorkel in Lake Ontario, he had his doubts. In fact, as a now cynical 10-year-old and a *Shark Week* fan, he had already researched the body of water and declared, "Nothing cool lives there."

However, as we approached the boat, named *Dorothy J*, at Neptune & Salacia Diving, he couldn't hide his excitement. Bought by owners Martine Roux and Guillaume Courcy in the middle of the pandemic, the enterprise combines their passions for diving and exploring the waters in Kingston where the lake meets the St. Lawrence River. The *Dorothy J*, now a PADI-certified vessel, was once a fishing boat and later used for research by Fisheries and Oceans Canada. My son tried out a few alternative names for the boat and asked why they didn't change it. But as Courcy said, you cannot simply change a boat's name on a whim. "It would be bad luck."

After getting our equipment, mask, snorkel and fins, we made the 30-minute boat journey to the start of our adventure. The ominously named Dead Mans Bay piqued my son's interest. It sounded straight from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. He asked about the shipwrecks in the area and was transfixed by tales of underwater cemeteries preserving artifacts from the past as if frozen in place. Quite a few ships rest on the bed of Lake Ontario not far from where we sailed, including *HMS Prince Regent*, *HMS Princess Charlotte* and *HMS St. Lawrence*, all powerful British warships built in Canada during the War of 1812. They reveal the importance of this waterway and the arms race to control it hundreds of years ago.

We came to see the remains of the *HMS Princess Charlotte*. This spot, which was designated a Canadian National Historic Site in 2015, isn't a shipwreck—no storm or mutinous attack led her down to her final resting place. Instead, she was scuttled in 1833 when no buyers could be found.

We decided to pay the extra \$25 for a wetsuit, as even in summer Lake Ontario doesn't hit Caribbean temperatures. The water initially felt quite chilly at around 20 degrees Celsius, but as we are used to lake swimming in Canada, we quickly adapted.

Time has eroded away much of the three-deck frigate, but you can still see the ribs of this once mighty warship. Although the water can be murky, the belly of the ship is usually visible from the surface and comes into sharper focus if you dive down the three or four metres to float around among the planks of the lower hull.

I've always found snorkelling deeply relaxing. There's something about abandoning one set of senses that heightens the others. As my ears dipped under the water and all sound became muffled, I focused on the rhythmic vibration of my breath and felt as though I had entered a new realm, one separate and distinct from

## When You Go

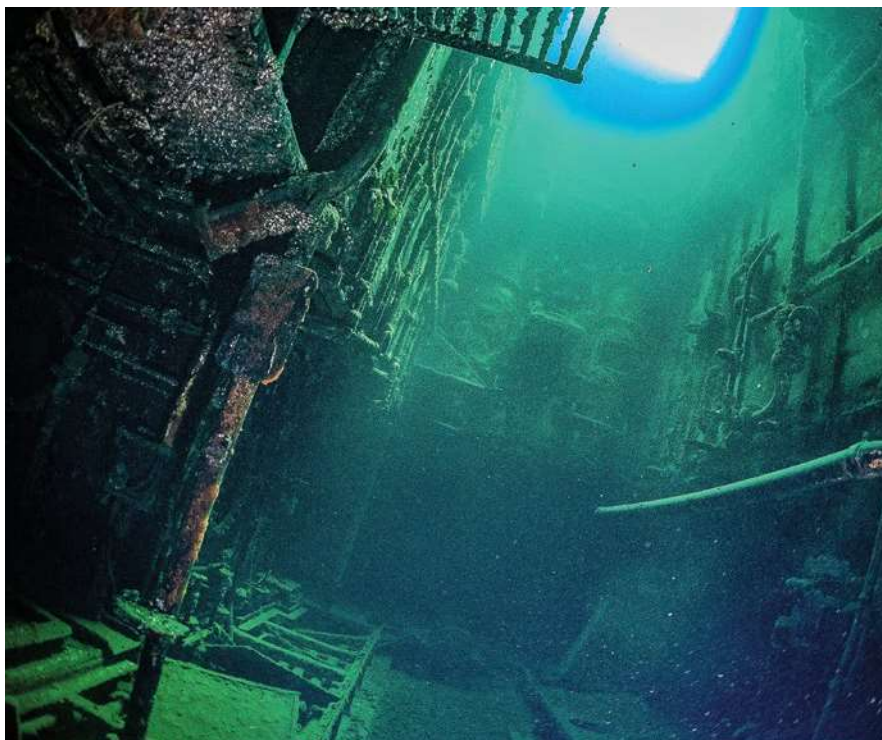
The best way to experience Kingston's shipwrecks is by going deeper and scuba diving the wrecks. Kingston divers are very enthusiastic about the waters here and say that the freshwater shipwrecks are some of the best spots to dive anywhere.

Between Kingston and Niagara, there are said to be more than 50 shipwrecks to explore with over 200 sunken vessels in total resting in the waters of Lake Ontario. Courcy calls these wrecks "the underwater museums of Kingston" and offers dives and courses from beginner to Divemaster level.

Learn more about Neptune & Salacia Diving at [neptunesalacia.com](http://neptunesalacia.com).

above the waves. There was something otherworldly about the ship below. Even though lives were not lost in this wreck, it still felt eerie, like a smeared window that you can't quite see through.

My son looked like a baby otter as he enthusiastically dived down below the



## More Activities +

The Kingston area has plenty to offer adventurers on land, too. Drive around 48 kilometres from downtown Kingston to the Frontenac Arch Biosphere, a UNESCO site that stretches from Kingston through Brockville. Here among more than 220 lakes, rugged terrain and rock ridges, you can take wilderness skills courses offered throughout the year or sea kayak along the waterways. [frontenacarchbiosphere.ca](http://frontenacarchbiosphere.ca)

Bring your bike to explore further or check out the K&P Trail, a 180-kilometre path covering both urban and rural stretches. You could also take the ferry from Kingston to Wolfe Island and follow the bike trails through picturesque farmland. [frontenaccounty.ca](http://frontenaccounty.ca)

On rainy days, visit The Boiler Room Kingston ([boilerroom.ca](http://boilerroom.ca)) for top-rope climbing and bouldering at Canada's highest indoor climb as you scale up a historic chimney—or head underground to discover Ontario's largest known cavern at Tyendinaga Caves. [tyendinagacaves.ca](http://tyendinagacaves.ca)

water, his little fins kicking behind him. The mask squashed his nose and made him look like a completely different kid—one free from cynicism. I flashed him an OK sign—a question, not a statement—and he splashed around to pull his snorkel free from his mouth before yelling out, “This is so cool!”

After an hour, we clambered back on board. I held a small collection of ocean debris including a bottle top and a piece of plastic in my hand. An important part of Neptune & Salacia Diving's mission is to ensure sustainability in these waters for years to come. That's why each guest is charged with cleanup duty to keep Lake Ontario beautiful.

It was astonishing how heavy and tired our muscles felt, as much from the adrenaline and excitement as from the actual physical exertion. Despite the humid day, my mouth chattered from the cold water as we pulled off our fins and masks and settled in for the boat journey back to the dock.

Back on shore, we filled our bellies with enormous wagyu burgers and garlic fries at Otter Creek Kitchen and swiped through the murky underwater pictures we took on my phone. The boy I saw in these photos had grown and changed so much since our last snorkelling trip. He looked relaxed and confident in the water, swimming away from me untethered. His long legs easily

propelled him as he fearlessly held his breath to dive down deeper and get a better look at the ship. Our roles on adventures are beginning to change. I am not always the teacher now; instead, we are becoming a team creating memories with every new shared experience. I can't wait to see what we'll discover next. ✕

*Kingston is located on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Huron-Wendat people.*

## Getting There

By vehicle, Kingston is 280 kilometres northeast of Toronto; 200 kilometres south of Ottawa and 315 kilometres southwest of Montreal. Arrive by air at Kingston Airport (YGK). [visitkingston.ca](http://visitkingston.ca)

