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An Island Unto Itself, Loved for What It Lacks

By JODI WILGOREN

PELEE ISLAND, Ontario

PEOPLE come to this unassuming outpost in Lake Erie's western basin as much for what it lacks as for what it has.

No train tracks or stop lights. No bicycle locks. No high-speed Internet, no cable television, no newspapers. Neither yacht nor country club, though a woman recently posted a notice in the community bulletin, *The Grapevine*, inviting neighbors hoping to improve their tennis game to use the court on her property, "Just close the gate behind you when you are done!" she said.

"We don't do anything, which is just lovely," said Wendy Edwards, a pediatrician from Chatham, Ontario, to explain a typical weekend at the tiny cottage on the water her family has owned for a quarter century. "We just exist."

Located 15 miles offshore - 90 minutes or so by ferry from Leamington, Ontario, or a 12-minute flight from Sandusky, Ohio - Pelee (pronounced PEE-ly) is a laid-back, little-known, relatively low-cost and definitively low-key spot that remains today what was promised in an 1890's tourism brochure: a getaway. The 28-square-mile island is flat for easy cycling along its paved and packed-dirt roads, with accessible, if buggy, nature trails where butterflies and rare birds abound and sandy beaches with spectacular sunsets welcoming the public just a few steps from the street.

But be sure to bring your own towels. And snacks. And sunscreen and shovels and summer reading. And if you like to lounge on a chaise, well, you might be out of luck. There is no one hawking rafts or beach balls or water wings anywhere in sight.

"We're going to drink and we're going to beach and we're going to boat," said Dave Clarke, 50, a beer distributor from Tecumseh, Ontario, who has been visiting Pelee since childhood and one recent weekend brought his cover band, the Dave Clarke Four, and its fans, most blood-related, over for a gig at the Pelee Island Hotel & Pub. "That's what it's got: It's got nothing. That's what I like."

Still Canada's southernmost inhabited spot, Pelee was first leased to Thomas McKee, the son of an Indian Department official, by the Ojibwa and Ottawa tribes in 1788. William McCormick bought the island in 1823, and the population peaked at 800 at the turn of the century. It continues to boast 800 of Ontario's 2,600 native plant species, and searching for the endangered and elusive blue-racer snake is a popular pastime. On the northeast tip is a stone lighthouse, which was built in 1833, and was restored in 2000. It's a nice place for a picnic except when the fish carcasses that have washed ashore begin to ferment.

Today, year-round residents are dwindling - "last winter we counted 176," said the mayor, Bill Krestel

- but a dozen new homes are under construction and dozens more lots are for sale, drawing mainly Ohioans looking for summer retreats. Some residents hope that a golf course and 500-boat marina under discussion with developers will draw an influx of tourists.

"The things I see out my back door, you're never going to see in the city," said Mr. Krestel, who is also a telephone repairman and the caller for Wednesday night Bingo, when 100 people pay 10 cents a card in summer. "We've got a lot of stuff here that no one has anywhere else. We want to keep that. But we want to have more."

The ferry sold 110,000 tickets in 2004, with the biggest crowds for the May Bird-a-Thon, where 140 species have been spotted, and the fall pheasant hunt, when exotic dancers are imported for evening entertainment.

But Nantucket this is not. The handful of restaurants are mostly of the fish-and-chips, beers-and-burgers variety, although the Tin Goose Inn does offer white tablecloths laden with goose liver *pâté brûlée*, escargot fondue, pork Québécois and bouillabaisse. Over all, there are only about 75 rooms available nightly on the island, most at tiny bed-and-breakfasts, and many of those are reserved in advance by attendees at the near-weekly weddings at the Pelee Island Wine Pavilion.

Wine-making began on the island in 1865, and its vineyards today produce 17 different grapes, which become 30 blends. With tours three times a day and tastings, the winery is typically the island's most (well, only) crowded spot. Out back on weekend afternoons, tipsy middle-aged tasters boogie to live classic-rock crooners; the deli hut offers frozen burgers (beef, veggie, buffalo, venison), dogs and shish kebab that visitors cook themselves on communal grills.

"We bike the whole island till we can't bike no more, then we stop at the winery," said Maria Connell, a lounge singer from Essex, Ontario, who makes day trips annually with her siblings and their spouses. "We have a bottle of wine, or a few bottles of wine, or eight or nine bottles of wine," Ms. Connell added. "We found out that when you drink too much wine, it's very difficult to drive a bicycle."

THERE is no village to speak of, though the Hotel, the bustling Westview Tavern, the bike-rental place and the Heritage Center Museum, bursting with artifacts and anecdotes, are just off the West Dock, where the ferry unloads passengers.

At the musty museum, a map charts hundreds of shipwrecks around the island and its neighbors, a small notebook shows a handwritten recipe for the original winery's 1890 vintage ("Evangeline": 3 gallons sugar, 4 gallons rye, 2 gallons water, among other ingredients). Just north of the dock is Down the Lane, a clothing boutique and gift shop with pricey bikinis, sandals, designer jewelry and Burt's Bees cosmetics; that is the only place that will feel familiar to those who frequent fancier islands. Next door is Cone Heads, the requisite ice cream stand.

Then there is Doreen's Artistic Glass, where \$10 buys an empty bottle of Miller High Life, Smirnoff Ice or Coca-Cola with the neck fashioned into sea creatures complete with glue-on google-eyes. Bait worms are also for sale behind Doreen's, and on a recent Saturday, a sign offered "free kittens - no refunds."

But for truly eclectic inventory, there's the Trading Post, where 600,000 items are crammed into six rooms of a ramshackle log cabin: Waterford crystal glasses, souvenir shot glasses, Cuban cigars and china teacups, T-shirts, candles, a lace runner embroidered with "If Mothers Were Flowers, I'd Pick

You" and a Queen Mother plate.

And to commemorate that visit to the lighthouse, there are lighthouse magnets, lighthouse Christmas ornaments, lighthouse wind chimes, lighthouse statues, lighthouse prints, lighthouse keychains, lighthouse lapel pins, a lighthouse cookie press, a lighthouse travel mug and a little rubber disc that keeps brown sugar soft and has an impression of a lighthouse on one side.

"People said 'Can you get this, can you get that,' and it went from there," explained Dick Holl, who has spent 54 of his 63 summers behind the counter at the Trading Post. "Someone asked today, 'Do you have aqua shoes?' No, I don't. Certain things I just don't bother with."

Like groceries. Mr. Holl sells pop and potato chips, but refuses to carry staples. The Co-op sells some groceries, and you can pick up cans of soup, boxes of macaroni and cheese, and pina colada or bloody mary mix at No Way Out, a hard-to-find T-shirt shop behind a house. There are a liquor store and a farmer's market twice a week. But most people lug coolers full of frozen meats onto the ferry and plan their pantries around frequent forays to the mainland.

A grocery is just another thing Pelee Island lacks.

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Simple Joys

THE most popular way to get to Pelee Island is by ferry (800-661-2220, www.ontarioferries.com) from Leamington, Ontario, a 90-minute ride that costs \$6.50 a person, \$3.50 for a bicycle, \$7 for a motorcycle and \$13.50 for a car. The ferry also runs from Kingsville, Ontario, and from Sandusky, Ohio - about an hour's drive from Cleveland or Toledo - but on a more limited schedule.

Griffing Flying Service (419-626-5161) flies three to five times a day from Sandusky, a 12-minute trip; the fare is \$40 each way.

You don't need a car. Bicycle rentals are \$16.50 a day, \$29 for a tandem, at Comfortech Bike Rentals (519-724-2828), near the ferry landing.

There are rental cottages, inns, B & B's and campgrounds on the island. Information on lodging is at www.pelee.org and at www.pelee.com.

The Anchor & Wheel Inn (519-724-2195) offers a Saturday night buffet (\$22 a person) including prime rib and mussels. Westview Tavern (519-724-2072) near the ferry landing and Scudder Beach Bar & Grill (519-724-2902) on the north shore have reliable pub fare and live music. A visit is incomplete without a stop at Pelee Island Trading Post (519-724-2030) and a tour and tasting at Pelee Island Wine Pavilion (519-724-2469), where you can buy your own lunch or dinner to grill.

The island has no grocery store or bank; it did recently get two A.T.M.'s.