

# Our city on the bay

*Hamilton's waterfront is a haven for hikers, bicyclists, sailors and relaxing coffee drinkers*



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Sometimes I have to pinch myself to make sure I'm still in Hamilton.

The other week, a friend told me she had canoed to work at McMaster University. I don't know. I think she followed one of the old portage routes the Iroquois used 300 years ago to get to their classes at the Burke Science Building.

I wouldn't know how to canoe to work, and anyway, I don't have a lock. Maybe I could get one of those canoes with a removable front wheel.

One half of the city is giving a bikini wax to the Red Hill Creek. They're ripping out unsightly clumps of timber and leaf cover to expose the nice, smooth, dolphin-skin finish of asphalt underneath.

The other half is all but abandoning their cars by the side of the road, driver door still open, like people fleeing Godzilla. They don't want to drive any

more. They want to canoe to work. Or bicycle. Or jog.

Or walk around with ski poles. I don't know. I'm sure there's a perfectly good explanation for the poles. I just don't care to ask. I might be out walking along the trail at Bayfront Park when, don't you know it, around the bend comes Grizzly Adams in shorts, hiking boots, and Nordic walking picks, propelling himself forward like he's spearing fish with each step. I'm tempted to yell, "Avalanche!"

It's all backwards. You don't see ski poles on the slopes anymore; everyone's snowboarding. Now they're as common as ankle socks on the walking trails. But how can you answer your cellphone if you're holding ski poles?

Anyway, on Tuesday evening, I left my car, my canoe and my ski poles at home and bicycled over to the Hamilton waterfront. It was a lovely ride, and I did it without pedalling, simply by grabbing onto one Jeep-borne Italian flag after another and hanging on.

At the waterfront itself there were no cars allowed beyond a certain point, which is part of its charm. So I chugged along on my own steam. I was going at a pretty good clip when this guy who had to have been at least 65 sped by me on a mountain bike, leaving me to eat his backdraft.

Refusing to let that stand, I picked

up speed, but try as I might I couldn't catch him. I blamed it on my heavy jeans and the hair on my legs. He had the upper hand. Mr. Golden Ager was wearing bicycle shorts, and his calves were tanned, braided with muscles and smooth as oak.

"He waxes," I thought. "He waxes his legs. I mean, how much is the hair on his legs going to slow him down aerodynamically that he has to wax? Clearly, he's obsessed and can't stand losing." I spent the next hour scouring the waterfront looking for him so I could tell him that, but clearly he was too scared and obsessed to confront me.

At the waterfront, I met some friends at the new Williams Coffee Pub, where I chained my bicycle to another Italian flag. Italian flags were everywhere.

I read about it in the next day's sports pages and while the details are sketchy in my mind, I think it had something to do with Steve Yzerman scoring in extra time to lead the Italians to victory, ensuring them a spot in the finals at Wimbledon, where they should do well, being a strong clay court team.

This is the main reason I sometimes have to pinch myself to make sure I'm in Hamilton: Have you seen the waterfront this summer?

It's like being in San Francisco, but without the fault line and Golden Gate Bridge.

There are the trails. The HMCS Haida. The marine museum. The lovely coffee-pub setting. The walkers, inline skaters, ski pole hikers and bicyclists. The marinas, the sculls and canoes and kayaks and sailboats. The Hamilton Harbour Queen cruises. There's even a new trolley. You can ride it for \$2.

As my friends and I sat in the coffee pub and I told them repeatedly about the old cheating, obsessed guy who flew by me on his bicycle, we watched the sailboats out in the harbour.

It was idyllic.

Sailboats are like ducks. They seem so peaceful and placid floating along the surface. But out of sight there's so much going on — paddling feet in the case of the ducks and fighting crew mates in the case of the sailboat.

I remember when my uncle and his son, my cousin, took me out on their sailboat once. The way they shrieked at each other, trying to tack and make corrections in the sails, why, it was like Question Period. You'd never guess from shore.

People fished from the wharves and the piers, ate ice cream and just peered out to the horizon, maybe looking for China. The cruise ship went by.

I wanted to say, "Look, there goes the Robert E. Lee."

Earlier in the summer, I was out on the Hamilton Harbour Queen at night. It was a whole new way to see and fall in love with the city — all lamplit and silhouettes, distant gull cries and chilling imaginings of the bodies lying at the bottom.

I rode my bicycle home along James Street North and watched and listened to the Portuguese and the Italian factions playfully taunting each other across the street as the partying died down.

A little further along and to the west I could see through the window the filled seats of a Vietnamese restaurant, oblivious to the joy on James North.

As I got home, my neighbour was just pulling his canoe into the driveway after a long day at work in Prince Rupert's Land.

He waved hello and cautioned, "Don't tell me who won the game. I've got it taped."

Then someone drove by honking and whooping, the green, white and red billowing out the window. And my neighbour just threw up his arms.

Beautiful city.

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