

Chi-Cheemaun Ferries Gap in Niagara Escarpment

Photos by Mike Davis

People may be surprised to learn that the Niagara Escarpment extends beyond Tobermory at the northern tip of the Bruce Peninsula. It reappears in Lake Huron as Manitoulin Island, which is claimed to be the largest fresh-water island in the world. Accessible year-round by a bridge from the mainland near Espanola, the most direct way to reach it from Tobermory is by ferry in season, from early May to mid October.

The name of the ferry is M.S. Chi-Cheemaun, which means “big canoe” in Ojibway. It takes about 1¾ hours to cross the 28 miles or 45 km between Tobermory and South Baymouth on the island. When the ship is full of vehicles, it takes a half hour to load and unload them. During the high season, mid June to early September, there are four departures a day from each harbour.

During the voyage, people leave and lock their vehicles, going up on the decks to explore the ship and enjoy the views. Facilities include a cafeteria with hot meals, two seating lounges, a bar, gift shop, children’s play room, video arcade and

a dining room for popular sunset dinner cruises.

Dogs are allowed on board on leash, but only on the outside lower decks. Other animals remain on the vehicle decks. On the day these photos were taken last summer, the captain confided that a horse was on board, while two semi-trailers full of cattle had been on board the day before. Other interesting loads have been turbine windmills that are now on the island, prefab homes, and full logging trucks.

Unexpected Incidents

Captain Kerry Adams is one of two captains serving the ferry. His co-captain, who divides the shifts with him, is Robert Schreiber. Adams has

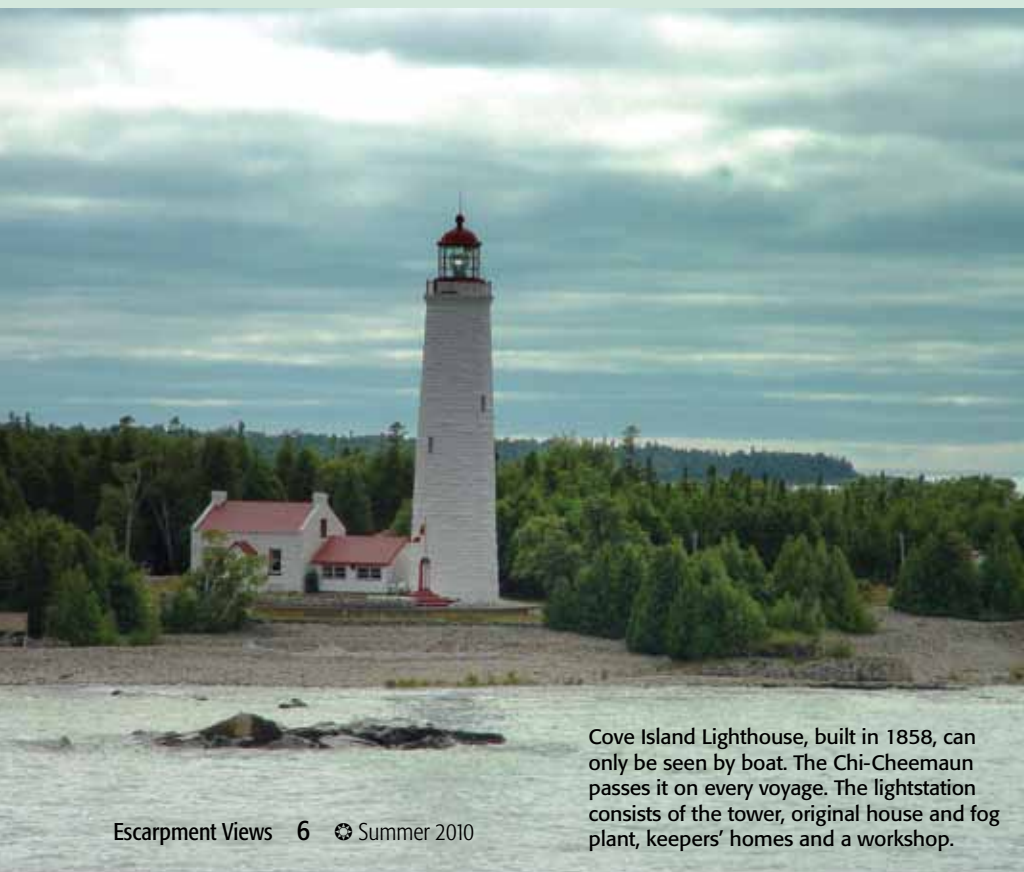


Captain Adams taking Chi-Cheemaun into South Baymouth, Manitoulin Island.



The safety of hundreds of passengers is in Captain Adams’ hands as he docks on Manitoulin Island.

worked on this ship since 1998. Previously, he worked on the Great Lakes and on ships to the Arctic. He was born and raised in Tobermory; his father was also a captain. Adams has seen some interesting incidents on board but there has never been any loss of passengers.



Cove Island Lighthouse, built in 1858, can only be seen by boat. The Chi-Cheemaun passes it on every voyage. The lightstation consists of the tower, original house and fog plant, keepers’ homes and a workshop.



First officer Terry McMillan, left, and Helmsman Blaire Leeson on the bridge.

“In the fall sometimes it’s too rough and windy to sail,” he says. “We’ve had some situations where we had to turn back. Once we had to leave Tobermory and shelter under Cabot Head.”

There have been a couple of heart attacks over the years, but his crew has training in advanced first aid. Medical staff is always on call for “remote walk through” with crew. “There has always been



Chi-Cheemaun approaching South Baymouth, Manitoulin Island. In service as a ferry since 1974, she is also used for private functions while docked in Owen Sound out of season.

Fast Facts About Chi-Cheemaun

- Built in Collingwood in 1974 at a cost of \$10 million
- First voyage: Sept. 10, 1974
- Carries 140 cars & 638 passengers & 31 full crew; lifeboats for all
- Number of decks: 7 Levels for vehicles: 2
- Speed: 16 knots or 18 mph
- Length: 365' Width: 62.5' Weight: 6,990 tons
- Draft in water: 13'
- 2 Ruston diesel engines with combined power of 7,000 hp
- Bow Thruster that assists in docking, has power of 800 hp
- Bow visor hydraulic cylinders



Passengers enjoying a cool breeze in the sun on board the Chi-Cheemaun.

someone who answered the call,” Adams adds.

Barbara Pitre, one of two chief stewards working on Chi-Cheemaun, has some other tales from her 28 years of service. “One woman went into labour on board but didn’t deliver here,” she says. “And once an airplane crashed in front of the ship. We were first on the scene and were part of the rescue team.”

After hours, the crew performs weekly emergency drills and exercises on short notice to keep prepared for the unexpected. Other passengers create less serious challenges.

“Some drivers are a complete disaster at coming on and off the ship,” Captain Adams says with a grin. “Just about every day we’re pushing a vehicle off.”

Picture Perfect

Adams’ advice for passengers to enjoy the trip is “Make a reservation.” Beyond that, he suggests “If the weather is good, enjoy being outside on deck.” He points out Cove Island Lighthouse outside of Tobermory as important for sightseeing. It’s 152 years old and still in use, guiding safe passage through a dangerous strait between Lake Huron and Georgian Bay. The lamp was previously fuelled by sperm whale oil, then coal oil, then kerosene, and now by electricity, and is visible up to 25 km away.

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“If I had a penny for every picture taken of the lighthouse, I’d be a millionaire,” Adams says.

Otherwise there’s mostly open water until the ship nears Manitoulin Island, indicating just how large the Great Lakes are.

During the middle part of a routine voyage, Adams appears to stand back and let his first officers and helmsman sail the ship. Things change when the ship approaches harbour. The captain is more hands-on when docking, and has many details to attend to. In fact he’s the only one who remains on the bridge. His other crew disappear, to help passengers and vehicles disembark before new ones come aboard.

Adams is in complete control, checking instruments, adjusting controls and keeping a close eye on everything, even using binoculars to scan the shore before precisely nudging the ship into port with her



The massive door to the vehicle decks opens up in front of Captain Adams on the bridge as he docks at Tobermory.

thrusters. When the huge door to the vehicle decks yawns up at the dock, it’s an impressive sight.

Upon an announcement from the crew, passengers descend to the vehicle decks and wait for docking to complete. Engines are turned on and drivers try to steer carefully off the ship. If they’ve gone north, Manitoulin Island awaits. Going south, it’s Tobermory, the Bruce

and beyond. For part of each year, Chi-Cheemaun bridges the underwater gap in the Niagara Escarpment, bringing tourists north and helping commerce flow both ways. With the ferry, getting there is truly half the fun.

There is one main thing that Captain Adams wants people to know about Chi-Cheemaun. “They’re safe and well looked after,” he says. “We have a competent crew.” **EV**