



Manitoulin's Niagara

To sail on the ferry from Tobermory on the Bruce Peninsula to South Baymouth on Manitoulin Island an hour and 45 minutes away is to embark on a grand adventure into ancient

geological history: the stunning, seemingly forever-unchanging landscapes of this region were formed as the weathered edge of a warm, shallow sea that covered North America about 450 million years ago. As the primeval saltwater sea dried up, the erosive forces of water and wind gradually exposed the Niagara Escarpment. It is a remarkable ridge of rock that stretches in a horseshoe shape from New York State up the Bruce Peninsula in Ontario, diving under the water at Tobermory to resurface across Manitoulin Island before arching downward to Michigan and Wisconsin.



Escarpment Trails

WORDS & PHOTOS BY ISOBEL HARRY EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

▲ The East Bluff is a magnificent Niagara Escarpment landmark at Gore Bay. A refurbished boardwalk and new trails lead hikers to two high viewing points that overlook the town, the bay and the North Channel.



▲ According to Manitoulin biologist Judith Jones, Scott’s Bluff in Evansville is a perfect illustration of the *cuesta* nature of the Island, with “long, gentle backslopes dipping away from a high ridge” over flatlands or expanses of water.

► Bridal Veil Falls plunges 20 m from the Niagara Escarpment edge into a popular summer swimming hole surrounded by forest trails along the Kagawong River.

Known as *Mnidoo Mnising* in the Ojibwe language (Manitou or Spirit Island), Manitoulin Island has been the home of the Anishinaabek for at least 10,000 years, when the dense glaciers of the last Ice Age were melting and North America became more hospitable to human habitation. The last significant shaping of the Niagara Escarpment took place then. The vistas on approaching

the Island are virtually as seen by the first inhabitants those thousands of years ago.

The challenges of getting here quickly, the longer distance compared to other tourist destinations in the near north, the small population relative to the size of “the world’s largest freshwater island” have ensured that built development remains minimal and that nature’s original gifts of ancient rock and rich biodiversity

remain abundantly visible.

“All of Manitoulin Island is a *cuesta*,” explains Manitoulin biologist and environmental consultant Judith Jones. “In geological terms, the Island is a series of steep Escarpment slopes facing one side, usually north, with a gentle slope on the other, usually south, side. On the Island, you might see a high bluff from across a wide plain or expanse of water, like Scott’s Bluff in Evansville and the East and West Bluffs in

Gore Bay, or walk the alvars at Misery Bay Provincial Park. Both illustrate the long, gentle backslopes of a *cuesta* dipping away from a high ridge.”

The cliffs on the northern edges of the Island are the more salient of the Escarpment features on Manitoulin: at Cape Smith and Bebamikawe Memorial Trail in Wikwemikong Unceded Territory, Ten Mile Point near Little Current, Bridal Veil Falls and River Trail in



▲ The massive flat limestone pavements at Misery Bay Provincial Park are alvars, globally rare geological formations ridged with grooves showing the direction of the retreating glacier debris from the last Ice Age, about 10,000 years ago.



▲ The Escarpment views at the Mississagi Lighthouse on the western edge of Manitoulin Island are dramatic from water and from land; a trail leads to a swimming spot among the ancient rock formations.



▼ The top of the famous Cup and Saucer, the highest point on Manitoulin, is accessible by trails thanks to Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.



▼ Sunset in August at the water's edge of Freer Point on the North Channel, showing alvars and a variety of plants and grasses. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.



► Dr. Roy Jeffery, trail steward for several properties with conservation agreements with the Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy. He believes this gnarled tree at Freer Point is about 600 years old, one in a long line of ancient cedars stretching along the Escarpment from the Bruce Peninsula to Manitoulin Island.





Kagawong, the East Bluff in Gore Bay, Cape Roberts in Sheshegwaning First Nation and the Mississagi Lighthouse in Meldrum Bay, among many others, each with distinctive trails and lookouts open to the public.

The Cup and Saucer Hiking Trail, arguably Manitoulin's most well-known Niagara Escarpment landform, rises to 351 m (1,150 ft) above sea level, site of the Island's highest point of land and of expansive views, one of the very few small islands that stood above the water of glacial Lake Algonquin at the end of the last Ice Age as the Island's landmass became uncovered.

Almost all land on the Island is privately owned, making access to some Niagara Escarpment sites difficult, although some owners facilitate access and may charge a small fee, such as at Rockgarden Terrace Resort. On this property is Mindemoya Cave, bored into Escarpment rock layers by a powerful glacial stream as the ice sheets, which were kilometres thick, melted.

EBC Work

The efforts of the Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC) “to create nature reserves allowing for sustainable, low impact recreation” in the Niagara Escarpment region has also generated an extensive network of trails that enhances the older trails on the Island. Many of the trails on the EBC's “Hiking Trails on Manitoulin Island” map, set within forests, prairie grasses, pavement-like alvars, wetlands and along shorelines, accentuate the sloping nature of the land, away from the drama of the cliffs and bluffs, and are stunning in their own right as micro-environments of rare flora and endangered fauna conservation.

Volunteer caretaker Dr. Roy Jeffery maintains trails as steward of various EBC





◀ Near Ice Lake, Linda and Chuc Willson maintain public trails on their conservation property, RavensWing Trail, 50 acres of peaceful paths on “low Escarpment” lands with a prolific vegetable garden at the trailhead.

▼ Many Niagara Escarpment features can be seen while driving or biking around Manitoulin Island, such as this outcrop of 450-million-year-old rocks on scenic Indian Point Road near Evansville in the western part of Manitoulin.

properties, including at the Cup and Saucer, where he, volunteers and the Town of Northeastern Manitoulin and the Islands swiftly developed a new entrance and bigger parking lot on EBC property last summer after a landowner closed the original entry due to financial difficulties.

At Freer Point on the North Channel just west of Little Current, Dr. Jeffery minds 360 acres of rare Bur Oaks, wetlands and two km of beach. He maintains the trails along the water’s edge and through tall grass, the occasional crotchety-looking Bur Oak solidly interjecting itself, like the tough, fire-resistant rarity it is, especially grouped in grassy savannahs like these.

“This is a good example of a conservation property,” he says. “It’s naturally preserved, outdoors, public, and non-motorized.” Dr. Jeffery pauses by a gnarled Eastern White Cedar that seems to cling to a rocky ledge for dear life. “This tree,” he says, “is probably 600 years old. It’s the continuation of a line of ancient cedars that stretches from Wiarton up to Tobermory and to the Island along the Escarpment.”

RavensWing

Small miracles of survival along the Niagara Escarpment in places protected from human development suddenly manifest on the forest floor, like the glowing white Puffballs and delicate, tiny Turkey Tail mushrooms at RavensWing Trail at Ice Lake, a 50-acre property with a conservation agreement with EBC.

Here, Linda and Chuc Willson have beautiful “low Escarpment” public trails among untouched drumlins, which are hillocks of rocks and boulders left behind by glacier melt. The trails uncover many such delightful findings as Hawberries, Ginseng, Bergamot, Yarrow, wild Leeks and Strawberries. At the trailhead the Willsons cultivate a vegetable garden, harvest apples from the old trees they are rehabilitating, tap Maple trees and are restoring the meadow to encourage Bobolinks and Meadowlarks to join the cranes and ducks.

“In this rich biosphere, food grows naturally. It’s wonderful to forage for food,” says Linda. “There’s a magical feeling of



stillness here, but Mother Nature’s caring for the forest is going on all the time.”

To Chuc Willson, who found this property in 1987

when he was “guided by a Blue Heron spirit,” it’s important that their garden be “in harmony with the land around it, and that we are present here

•Trails on public, private, municipal and First Nations lands are shown on the 'Hiking Trails on Manitoulin Island' map available from EBC at escarpment.ca.

•Permission to access Freer Point's trails may be requested from Bob Barnett at EBC: Tel. 416-960-8121 or toll-free, 888-815-9575.

•RavensWing Trail is open to the public at 144 Meadowlark Road, close to Ice Lake. Contact Chuc and Linda Willson at 705-282-0274 or icelakegarden@gmail.com for a guided tour.

•A guide to the Island's geological history, with two detailed field trips: Manitoulin Rocks! Rocks, Fossils and Landforms of Manitoulin Island, by M. Coniglio, P. Karrow and P. Russell.



with the land, respectfully.”

Isobel Harry is a writer and photographer who lives and works on Manitoulin

*Island where her interests in arts, culture, justice, landscape conservation, people and animals get a thorough workout. **NEV***