

My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 9 of the **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

Lake Ontario

It's May 2015 and aside from visiting my grandparents' grave in Ottawa for the first time ever (and the usual quest for books and photos), there's not much of a mission to this seven-day trip except to drive around Lake Ontario, the smallest of the Great Lakes, and then head back home on the American side. The distances are short so it will be slow travelling.

First stop is Hawkesbury, just across the border into Ontario. Before sitting down for a coffee, I take the first photo of the trip: a shot of the car sitting in front of the Ottawa River. Then it's the grave in Ottawa where I get a good shot of the portrait of my grandmother on the tombstone. I don't think I ever saw her face before I discovered a photo of the gravestone on the Web. The grave is 87 years old and the oval-shaped porcelain photo on the gravestone is chipped on one side. She's a serious-looking woman who was run over by a bus on New Year's Eve 1928. I like her face very much - she looks intelligent and self-aware.

I discover Teilhard de Chardin in the Book Bazaar on Bank Street and have lunch before finding my hotel which is close to the Rideau Canal. I take a long walk down the path beside the canal all the way to the centre of town. The city sparkles on this crisp and sunny spring day. There are hardly any people about and downtown Sparks Street is deserted. There are more police and RCMP officers on Parliament Hill than there are visitors. I walk halfway across the bridge to Gatineau to see the Hill from the river before heading back to my hotel for dinner in a vegetarian restaurant across the street.

I'm up early on Day 2 to take the slow road to Kingston, stopping along the way at Perth for a coffee and scone. Perth is extremely photogenic, like all of Larkin County it seems. And Canadian flags everywhere – you just don't see the red maple leaf much in Quebec. It's fun to move slowly down the road, almost like travelling by carriage. A retired war correspondent is talking about his life on the car radio. He says it doesn't matter where you go, all that matters is what you bring back. One way of looking at travel.





Lanark County



Perth

Kingston is where I finally meet Lake Ontario. There's so much history in Kingston, but it's Canadian history so it's pretty dull and the city looks very nice but not very interesting visually. I park the car near the infamous penitentiary but up close it's just blank walls. An amazing coincidence occurs in *Novel Idea*, a bookstore with a very small used section where I find the only remaining book on my wish list: a book of photographs with accompanying quotations called *Summertime*. One quotation is from Carl Jung: "Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes". Yet another way of looking at travel. I eat bits of a horrible dinner in a Chinese restaurant but the fortune cookie makes up for it: "You find beauty in ordinary things."

The morning of Day 3 is bright, cool and clear with not a cloud in the sky, and I find myself practically alone in Sandbanks National Park. At one point I look both ways along the endless beaches curving outward into the lake and see only two people, about a quarter of a mile away. It's extremely windy and the rhythmic sound of the waves in front of me is like a gigantic heartbeat; the sound of the leaves rustling in the trees behind me is seamless and hypnotic.

The water is a bright crystalline aquamarine and trees are growing out of the sand everywhere. There are dunes and drifts of all shapes and sizes and now and then a lonely picnic table weather-beaten to the same color as the sand. Standing still like one of the trees, I experience my first moment of the exquisite combination of connection/disconnection that sometimes happens on the road.





I've booked a room in Oshawa, having made a decision to bypass Toronto in the morning. This will be a scenic trip and there's not much to see in Toronto. Oshawa's waterfront park is very nice but there's a strong sense that here begins the longest stretch of dreary urban landscape in the country: Oshawa through Toronto all the way to Hamilton.

I spend the next morning driving to Niagara Falls, delayed as usual navigating the ugly 401 through Canada's most bloated city. I've booked a room at the Stardust Inn in Niagara Falls, mainly because I liked the name, but also because it was described as an unassuming and traditionally furnished motel fifteen minutes on foot from the Falls. I'm not disappointed when I get there. The motel is very retro and the room even has a real key!

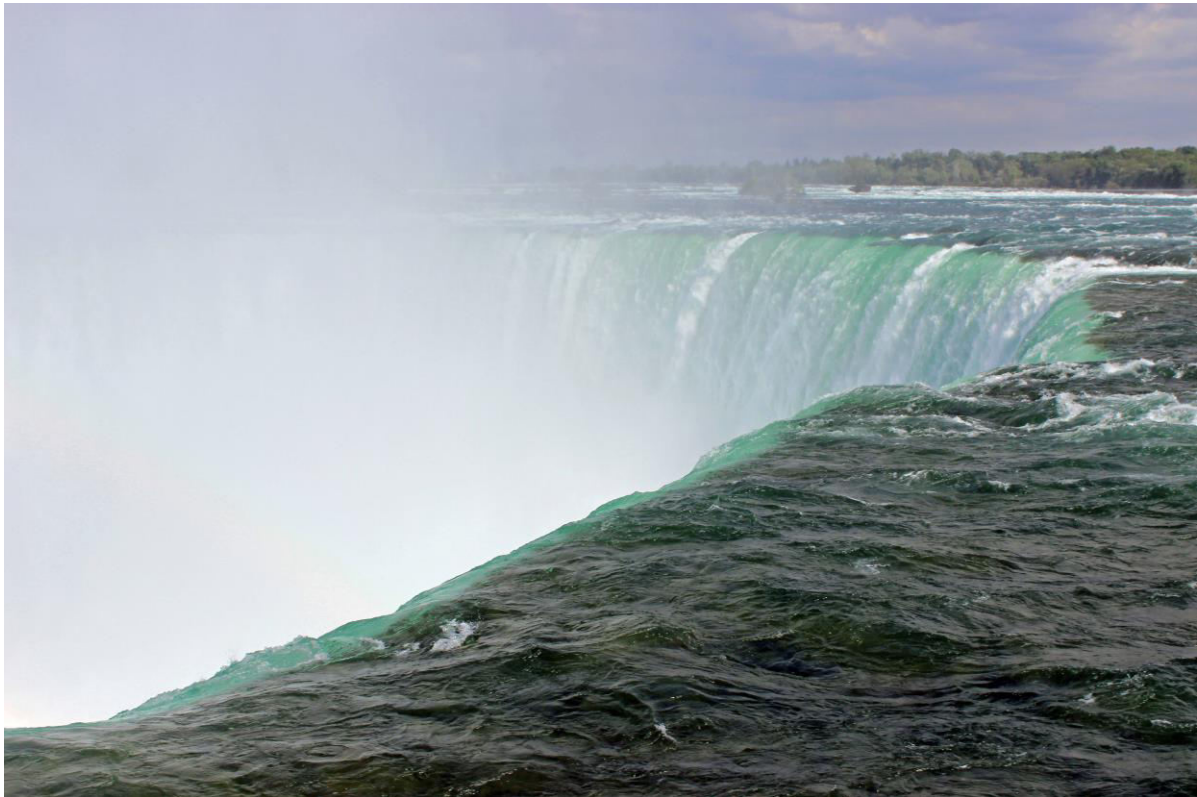
It's noon when I leave the motel and walk through a deserted and sketchy neighborhood to Clifton Hill which leads down to the Falls. Clifton Hill is fantastic and even kitschier than I remember from the last time I was here twenty-five years ago with my kids. It smells like cotton candy and it's got rides, freakish museums and funhouses. Loudspeakers on the House of Frankenstein and Dracula's Haunted Castle beckon: *Foolish mortals beware! Behind these walls.... Remember, in the House of Frankenstein, there... is... no... turning... back!*

Then the Falls begin to appear like a dreamscape at the foot of the hill and I remember where I am. A true wonder of the world! I walk along the railing gawking like everyone else and eventually get to the spot just a few feet away from the edge of Horseshoe Falls where the water seems to hang suspended in space for a moment before it plunges into the abyss.

I buy a boat ticket and put on the goofy red disposable parka for the view from below, which is even more awesome. With the boat sitting at the foot of the falls, looking up at the water roaring over the edge and smashing down so close to where I'm standing on the deck, I witness the biggest display of power I have ever seen. The water at the top sparkles like diamonds and the emerald color is gorgeous and unique. The jade-green surface of the water below is swirling but surprisingly flat and calm in its own weird way - unexpected serenity so close to violent chaos.







The funhouse atmosphere of Clifton Hill is slightly depressing the next morning and I wish I had my grandkids with me. It's Saturday and there are a lot more people about. Herds of tourists roam everywhere you look and the light is not as good as yesterday so, after going to the top of the Skylon Tower for a bird's eye view, I head off to my next destination.

Port Colborne is a small but interesting town on Lake Erie at the southern end of the Welland Canal that connects to Lake Ontario. I wander around the town and get some nice shots. The water in the canal is a translucent green; the water in Nickel Harbour is a deep, darker blue. The harbour was developed years ago by the mining industry. What defines these post-industrial places now? What's to prevent them all melding into one? In the park at the harbour I ask someone about the turds I see everywhere on the grass, thinking maybe they were left by coyotes or some other small animals, but they are actually Canada Geese turds. The birds are huge and everywhere you look.





Mine is the only car in sight on the bridge to Buffalo early Sunday morning on Day 5. There's a marathon race underway in the city which is otherwise deserted, and I could have stayed for mass in St. Louis Cathedral but I would have had to wait for an hour and there was absolutely nothing in the downtown neighborhood resembling a café or any other sign of life.

I continue on to Rochester where I find the George Eastman House, which the Web says is the world's oldest museum of photography. The house is beautiful but the exhibits are not very interesting. I like what I learn about Eastman, one of those turn-of-the-last-century renaissance men who, along with his buddies Edison and Ford, changed the world. Suffering from many ailments at the age of seventy-seven, the worst being incontinence, he chose an honorable exit. He shot himself in the heart in the upstairs bedroom and left the following note: "To my friends, my work is done – Why wait?"

Downtown Syracuse is a ghost town with mine one of two cars parked in the central square, where a couple of skateboarders have the whole place to themselves. I find my motel a bit further north in Brewerton and treat myself to a full meal in a family restaurant. I have never seen such large portions (enough for three people) and I struggle to eat half of the food I am given. I won't eat again until late afternoon the next day.

On the road home the next morning I see more road-kill than I've ever seen anywhere else, including three small deer! It doesn't feel like much of a road trip at this point, with only 1400 km. of driving in six days. The man on the radio said what matters is what you bring back, so what did I bring back aside from the photos, two fridge magnets, the Teilhard de Chardin book and the thought that what matters is what you bring back?

The Chardin book is probably enough. How is it I never crossed paths with this guy until now? So much of what this French Jesuit priest and philosopher says rings true. Most of what I take from the book is in the first few chapters where some of his basic beliefs are explained.

The man was a wanderer who used to say: "I am a pilgrim of the future on the way back from a journey made entirely in the past." He considers all research, all work, to be a form of adoration and says: "The greater share I take (of the work), the more weight I will bring to bear on the whole surface of the real..."

He captures the essence of religious faith and optimism when he says: “My dearest faith is that something loving is the deepest essence of the growing universe.”

He believes that with everything we do, we are gradually increasing the growing Soul or Spirit of the World. When he says, “I feel that the only important work in the world is the discovery (or rather the creation) of the future,” the feeling is based on acknowledging the following three points:

- 1) The universe is converging (not diverging); it’s moving toward unity. (A sort of reverse Big Bang)
- 2) This unity is spiritual and built by the work of the world. (Everything we do matters)
- 3) This unity is *conscious and personal*. This consciousness or person is God. (God exists)

Two days after I return, the photo of Grandmother is printed and framed and I start to feel a connection between me and this woman who died exactly 25 years before I was born. Another treasure brought back.

