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# Along the Inland Waterways

One of the most unique dining and lodging experiences in Vermont isn't on land—it's on Lake Champlain.

Story by Molly Farrell Tucker  
Photographs by Natalie Stultz



The Moonlight Lady arrived in Burlington in 2007 and now sails on Lake Champlain. Below left: Captain Stan Walker in the pilothouse.



IT'S BEEN MORE than 75 years since the *Vermont III* steamboat carried passengers on overnight cruises on Lake Champlain. Mike Shea has revived that tradition by offering overnight voyages on *The Moonlight Lady*, a luxurious 1920s-style inland waterways yacht. The 2009 schedule, which runs from May to October, should appeal to history buffs, artists, nature lovers, foodies and wine enthusiasts.

*The Moonlight Lady* was built in 2001 and originally carried day passengers up and down the Dismal Swamp Canal, from Virginia to North Carolina, under the name *The Bonny Blue*. Shea bought the boat in 2007 and brought her to Burlington. Shea is the owner and president of Green Mountain Boat Lines, which has operated commercial day cruisers on Lake Champlain since 1984—including the newest 500-passenger *Spirit of Ethan Allen III*.

Once she arrived in Burlington, *The Moonlight Lady* was extensively renovated to accommodate 16 overnight passengers. The middle deck of the three-level, 72-foot-long boat was outfitted with eight double cabins, each with a private bathroom and large windows. An open-air kitchen





Jeff Egan wraps grilled beef in escarole for the wine-tasting last summer.



Guests tasted a different wine with each of four dishes that Egan prepared.

was installed on the top deck so guests could interact with the chef. A dining area was also added to the top deck, and the pilothouse was replaced with one three times larger, so passengers could sit and talk with the captain. The entertainment center on the lower deck was outfitted with comfortable armchairs where guests can watch movies and read. The lower deck also contains the crews' quarters and the original kitchen, which is now used as the prep kitchen. Heat and air-conditioning was installed to make the boat comfortable for travel in spring, summer and fall.

**L**AST JULY, my husband David and I embarked on the *Lady* for a wine-tasting cruise. We met the other passengers and crew in front of the Community Boathouse in Burlington, near where the boat was docked. Our fellow passengers had learned about the wine cruise in different ways. Joan and John Wolfe, who summer in Williston, had seen a feature about *The Moonlight Lady* on WCAX-TV. "Considering the price of gas, the cruise cost the same as a trip to the Adirondacks," said Joan. Vernon Studer, who runs a foxhunting business with his wife Sandy in Hartland, read a magazine article about *The Moonlight Lady* while getting new tires put on his car. Jody Peck sells vacation timeshares at a Vermont ski resort and heard about *The Moonlight Lady* from a friend. She decided to celebrate her birthday on the wine cruise. "I love Lake Champlain and it sounded like an elegant evening," she said.

We boarded the boat in early

afternoon and headed south, passing sailboats and powerboats, as well as hundreds of cormorants bobbing on the water. Captain Stan Walker tooted the boat's horn to try to get them to fly, but the birds didn't budge. Along the way, the passing shoreline looked like an 18th-century painting, with beautiful farmhouses and camps.

The plan was to enter the Otter Creek in Ferrisburg, cruise down the seven-mile creek and dock for the night at Vergennes Falls. Captain Walker said he would change course and dock overnight in Westport, New York if there was debris in the water. "The creek is fairly narrow and it's difficult for *The Moonlight Lady* to get around tree limbs," he explained. Luck was on our side. Although the creek was muddy from recent rains, most of the debris was along the edges of the creek.

We soon sat down for the wine tasting lead by Dellie Rex, a senior wine instructor at New England Culinary Institute and co-author of the book *About Wine*. Each of the place

settings had four wine glasses for the two red and two white wines she had selected. Rex started out by explaining the basic guidelines for pairing wines with food and, to make sure that we were listening, peppered her talk with a few salty jokes that started with "so, a guy walks into a bar..." (I'll leave the rest to your imagination.)

The wines were paired with four dishes prepared by chef Jeff Egan: lamb lollipops with a salty olive tapenade, chicken with a sour lemon sauce, grilled beef wrapped in bitter escarole, and sweet honeyed figs. We tasted each wine by itself and then with each dish and rated the results. Some wines paired better than others with the food (which was the point of the exercise), but it was all delicious.

The skies got progressively darker as we traveled down the creek. If it had been sunny, we might have seen people fishing for largemouth bass, turtles sunning themselves on rocks and otters swimming in the creek. *The Moonlight Lady* is a big attraction on sunny days.

"A ton of people on the shore yell to us and say it's the biggest boat they've ever seen on the creek," says Captain Walker.

After the wine tasting, we docked in Vergennes, in full view of the spectacular Vergennes Falls. We were not the only boat there. It was a Canadian holiday and several sailboats were sporting maple-leaf flags.

The rain stopped and my husband and I took a walk into Vergennes to do a little window-shopping. While we were gone, the chef prepared a three-course meal, starting with a salad of baby aru-




Dave Tucker and Jodie Peck enjoy a cocktail as they cruise down the Otter Creek on their 2008 wine-tasting cruise.





The Lake Escape is a two-day, one-night trip from Burlington to Vergennes via Lake Champlain and Otter Creek.


## Just the facts

*The Moonlight Lady* is operated under Vermont Discovery Cruises, a division of Green Mountain Boat Lines. The office is located at 348 Flynn Avenue in Burlington. The 2009 season includes a variety of overnight cruises, including:

 Lake Escape is a two-day, one-night cruise that travels from Burlington to Vergennes via Lake Champlain and the Otter Creek River. *The Moonlight Lady* docks overnight near Vergennes Falls and returns to Burlington the following morning.

 The Champagne Sunset cruise is a three-day, two-night trip and includes overnight stays at Vergennes Falls and the Westport Marina in New York, as well as visits to the Basin Harbor Club in Vergennes and Arnold's Bay, Fort Ticonderoga and Mount Independence in New York.

 Three consecutive Quadricentennial Cruises in July will commemorate the 400th anniversary of Samuel de Champlain's discovery of Lake Champlain. Guests can sign up for any or all of the three cruises. The first leg, The Montrealer, is a four-day, three-night cruise from Burlington to Montreal. The second leg of the trip, The St. Lawrence Express, is a four-day, three-night cruise from Montreal to Quebec City. The third and longest leg, The Champlain Discovery, is a six-day, five-night voyage from Quebec City to Burlington.

 *The Moonlight Lady* can also be chartered for one-day events for up to 48 people. For more information, call (802) 863-3350, e-mail [info@vermontdiscoverycruises.com](mailto:info@vermontdiscoverycruises.com) or go to [www.vermontdiscoverycruises.com](http://www.vermontdiscoverycruises.com).

gula, red onion and Green Mountain blue cheese, dressed with lemon vinaigrette. The two main courses followed next—an oyster ragu with chanterelle mushrooms that the chef had picked himself the day before, and a Vermont pork loin with cider cream sauce and a side of sweet potatoes. Dessert was a homemade blueberry crumble.

After dinner, we lingered with other passengers for a nightcap at the bar and then retired to our stateroom, which had two single beds. I took the upper bed, while my 6' 5" husband took the lower.

We woke at 6:30 the next morning

to the sounds of the engines starting underneath us, and took showers in our private bathroom while the boat began its journey back to Burlington. We then followed our noses to the upper deck, where the chef was making cooked-to-order breakfasts. We sat with the other passengers at the bar, cradling cups of coffee, and watched the chef prepare homemade French toast, bacon and omelets.


After breakfast, armed with another cup of coffee, we joined the captain in the pilot house. As we exited Otter Creek and cruised up Lake Champlain, he gave us another impromptu history

lesson on the landmarks we passed. We entered the Burlington harbor—quite a sight to see from the water!—and docked once again near the Community Boathouse at 10 a.m. On this short journey, we had traveled to another world, filled with great food and wine and wonderful scenery. And we even learned a thing or two.

A MONTH AFTER our cruise, Maria Savoie took over as chef. She learned to cook from her parents, who owned the Ruthcliffe Lodge and Restaurant in Isle La Motte. Savoie prepares two main courses for dinner, and steak and lobster is always served on the first night. She uses Vermont-made chocolates, wines, beers, cheeses, maple syrup, pepperoni, produce and ice cream as much as possible. "I'm a big believer in local ingredients," she says. The food is certainly plentiful. Savoie says one passenger last year kept bursting the buttons on her pants and had to switch to an elastic-waist pair.

In 2008, a third of the passengers on *The Moonlight Lady* were Vermonters. "I was pleased," says Shea. "I figured people who live in Vermont love it and are not afraid to vacation and spend their money here."

Shea made a few changes for the 2009 season. "It was new for us last year to run a boat as both a hotel and a restaurant," he says. "We learned along the way what passengers like and where their interests are. Most have a thirst for knowledge about Lake Champlain and have read about its history." Shea created three new cruises to commemorate Vermont's quadricentennial celebration of French explorer Samuel de Champlain's discovery of Lake Champlain 400 years ago. A bird watching and nature lover's cruise was added, lead by naturalist Chip Darmstadt. The May cruise coincided with the arrival of migratory birds and the blooming of spring plants.

The watercolor painting cruise has returned for a second year, with daily instructional workshops by artist Sean Callahan as the boat travels to scenic spots on the lake. Passengers will also continue to enjoy the seven-mile trip on the Otter Creek. "It is the most beautiful part of those cruises," says Shea. 

**Molly Tucker Farrell is a freelance writer who lives in Burlington.**