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In late June, the Kingston area was comfortably quiet, but signs of a tourism rebound were quickly appearing

There have been months of talk about pent-up demand from travellers, and now tourists are walking the walk

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Midweek, things are quiet in Kingston. Only a few cars sit in the parking lot at the Frontenac Club hotel. Downtown, the patio is subdued at Stone City Ales, though I'm not complaining. It means I, not typically a big beer drinker, get to chat with the owner and discover a brew that has me wanting seconds: Yacht Rock, the brewery's German-style sour.

Even though the province has started to reopen, travellers are taking their time venturing out. The next day, north of the city in Frontenac Provincial Park, my friend and I along with guide Walt Sepic are the only ones on the hiking trail. It seems we have the park to ourselves - aside from the many gypsy moth caterpillars - and I can't quite believe it. The southeastern Ontario park is less than an hour's drive north of Kingston, or two hours south from Ottawa. Sitting on the southern edge of the Canadian Shield, it's the result of a dance between glaciers and mountains higher than the Rockies. It's home to campsites, canoe routes and fishing spots. And on this sunny late June afternoon, it's ours to enjoy.

As we walk, we talk. Sepic owns and runs Firefly Adventures, an outdoors ex-

perience company focused on canoe trips and outdoor education. Last summer was meant to be busy; every booking Sepic had ended up being cancelled. And though it's quiet now, I'm doubtful the low traffic will last much longer. Sure enough, later in the afternoon we see a few kayakers coming in from a day's paddle, and a couple others heading out to their campsite.

The next day we head to nearby Gananoque, where things look to be picking up faster. There are short line-ups to get into clothing boutiques and other small shops, we snag the last table for a late afternoon drink on the patio of Gan Brewing Co., and the dinner scene at Riva is buzzing with diners happy to be out and social.

We spend the morning kayaking the St. Lawrence River in Thousand Islands National Park. It is a peaceful introduction to the area, with two guides from 1000 Islands Kayaking taking us around islands and explaining the ecological characteristics of the region. Our group is small, just five of us bobbing on the water as we acclimate to our paddles and vessels. And we are lucky. One of the guides mentions that last year's

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bookings were through the roof - busier than the previous summer - and he expects the same this season.

Later in the day we see the islands from a different vantage point - the sky - on a flight with 1000 Islands Helicopter Tours. The shift in perspective not only offers a greater understanding of the park we were navigating through in the morning, but a look at the land border with the United States. The pilot explains that many Americans have cottages in the area, and that the crossing is typically flowing with cars. It's quiet today, but no doubt will be busy once the border opens again.

We return to Kingston that evening, and pull into the hotel parking lot only to find it packed. The province has entered a new stage of reopening, and Frontenac Club has filled up for the weekend. I've got to hunt for a place to leave my car - a sure sign pre-pandemic life is returning.

There have been months of talk about pent-up demand from travellers, and now tourists are walking the walk. I'm grateful that I had a few days in the region while it was still quiet, because it's not going to stay that way much longer.

Your turn

Stay

The Frontenac Club, once a branch of the Bank of Montreal, reopened mid-pandemic after months of renovations. It's filled with history, and there's a historian on site for guided tours of the property. Rooms are spacious and luxe. Be sure to book a meal on the patio.

Souvenirs

Trousdale's General Store in Sydenham,

Ont., not far from Frontenac Provincial Park, is a community landmark, and the country's oldest general store (first opened in 1836). It's stocked with books, personal care goods, art pieces and snacks, all from local makers and artists.

Off the beaten path

About 30 minutes north of Gananoque, Ont., is off-the-grid Berry Homestead Farm. It is home to a family of donkeys, which not only help the owners maintain their land, but are keen to interact with visitors. A guided tour of the farm and its production systems includes quality time petting and brushing the donkeys. By appointment only.

The writer was a guest of RTO9, the regional tourism organization. It did not review or approve this article prior to publication.

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