

thebigtrip

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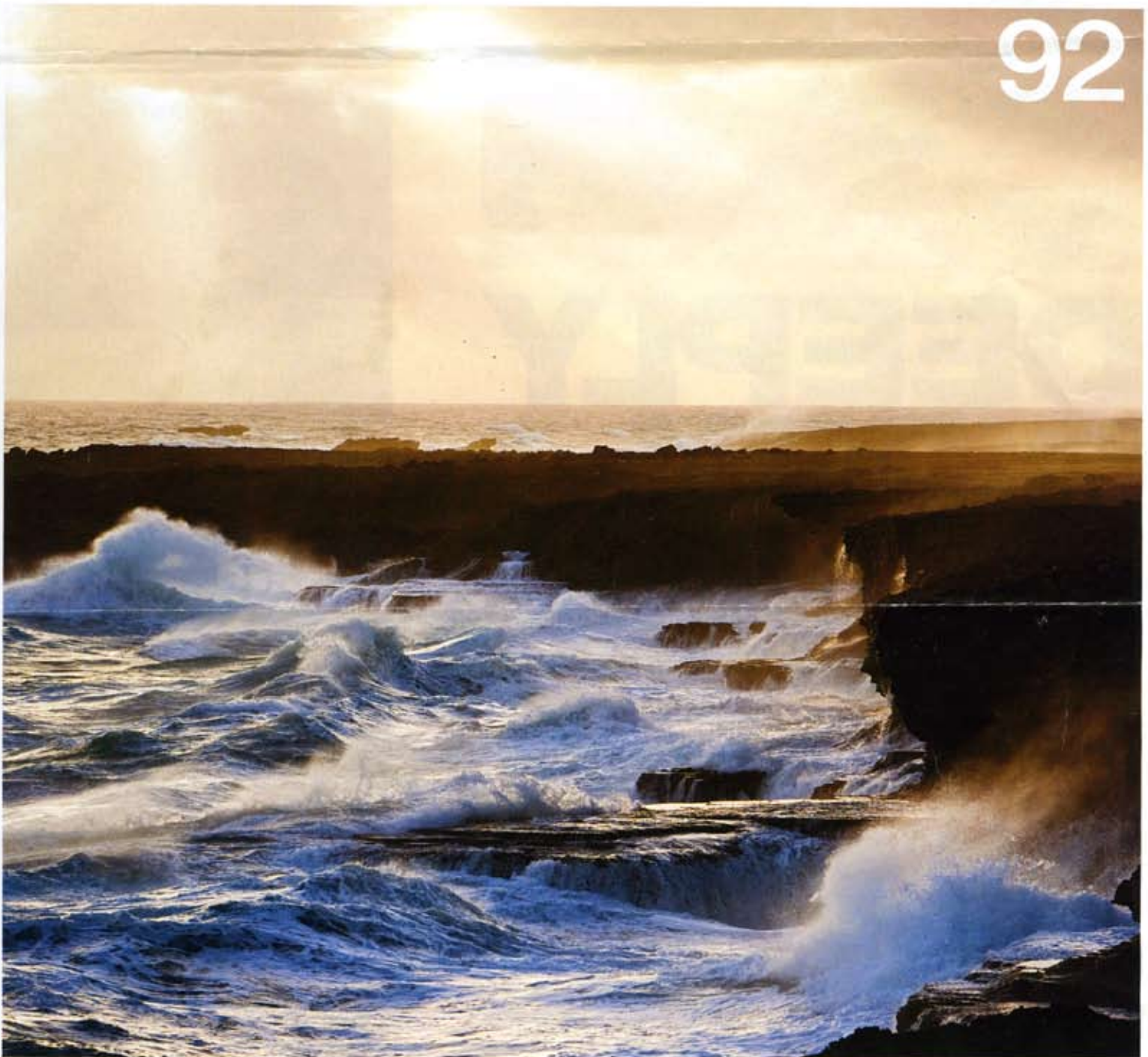
Get a little inspiration – right here

PAGE 86 DEEPLY DIPPY Beaches, blue water and Coronas on ice... Lake Huron is Canada's own secret California

PAGE 92 BEAUTY AND THE FEAST Barbados has the looks *and* the cooks – so long as you bypass the buffet

PAGE 102 WIGHT MISCHIEF A VW campervan makes a trip to the Isle of Wight a vintage vacation

92

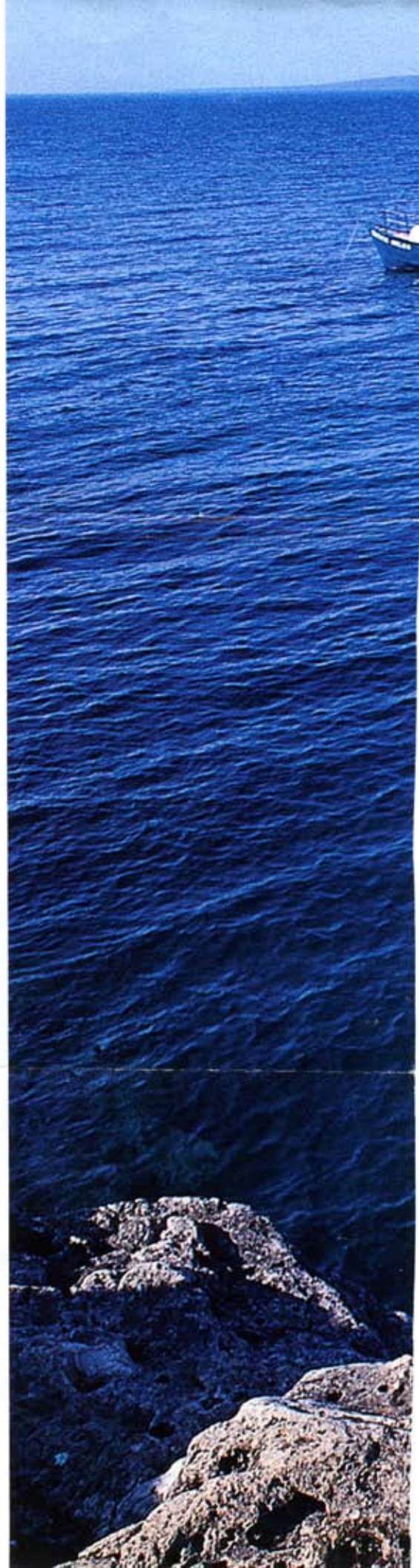


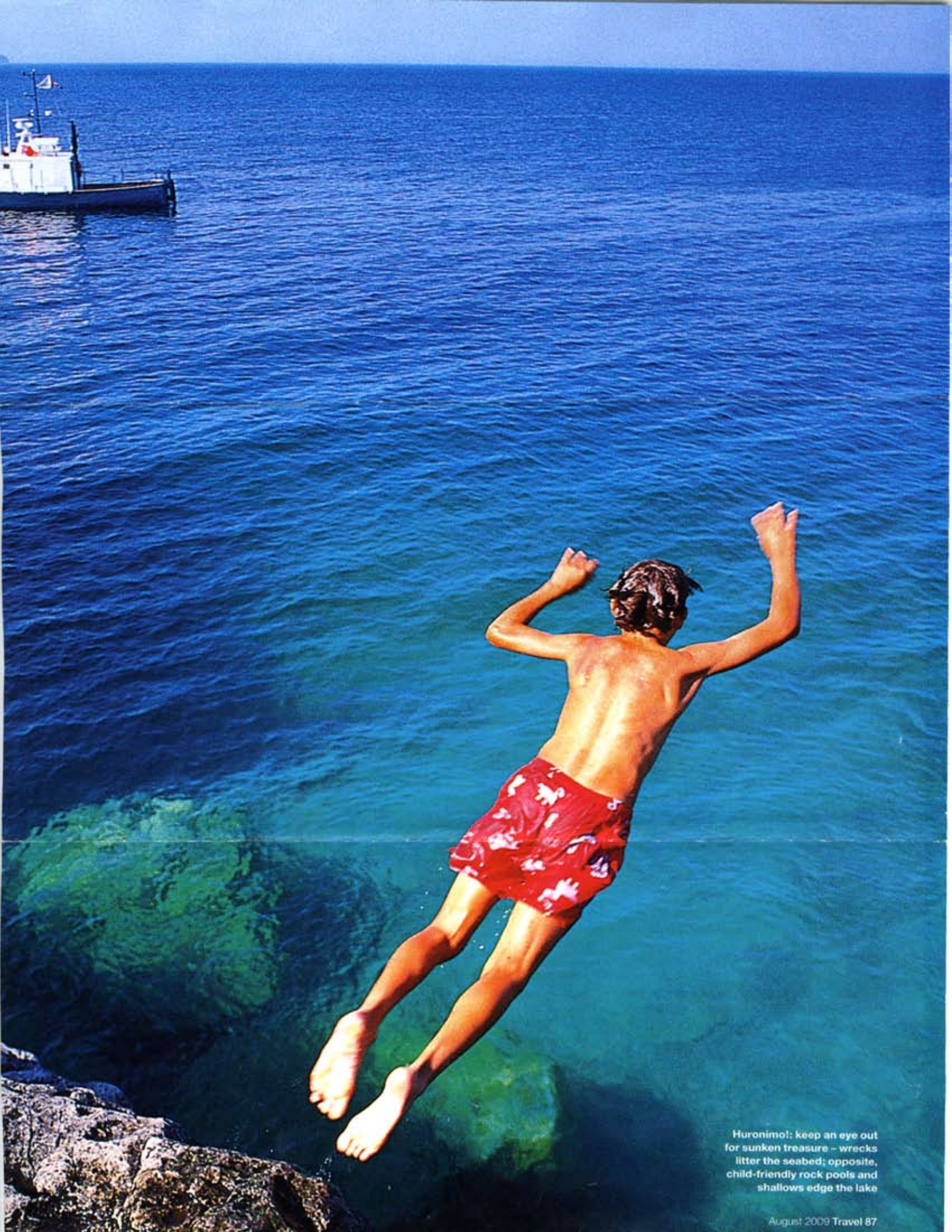
PHOTOGRAPHY: JEN JUDGE



DEEPLY DIPPY

The beers are Mexican, the vibe is Californian, the weather's Mediterranean. And the scenery? 100 per cent Canadian. **Ellen Himelfarb** goes crazy for the beach vibe at Ontario's lovely, laid-back Lake Huron





Huronimo!; keep an eye out for sunken treasure – wrecks litter the seabed; opposite, child-friendly rock pools and shallows edge the lake



can't recall the last time I was served beer from a cold aluminium bucket. But here at this plastic table on the boardwalk, with '70s rock piped in from a monster speaker and the periodic whiff of wacky baccy teasing our nostrils, it feels just about right. This is a ladies' night of sorts. The men are playing golf on a cliff overlooking the water, so we've gone in search of 'a bit of rough' on our genteel holiday. We've found it in Grand Bend, among the terraced taverns, alfresco clubs, surf shops and ice-cream trolleys on this precious piece of shoreline. The average age is 'uni', and the only reminder that we are beyond that bracket is the gang of bare-bottomed toddlers tottering on the beach before us: no shirt, no shoes, no nappies, no problem.

If this scene were sold in postcard form, it might be mistaken for Cape Cod, Virginia Beach, even southern California – but certainly not southwestern Ontario, on the

shores of Lake Huron, a Great Lake. The sand is Florida-fine, the weather, too, at least until October. The pace is slow, the hair long. People surf here, for goodness sake.

I'm from Ontario, but I left years ago to live in London, thinking even Britain's weather would beat eternal winters of slush seeping into your boots. But this summer, as I knock back a Corona and watch the tan lines slowly fade from my bare feet, I think, 'Oh, Canada!'

Summer for most Ontarians has a specific aroma. It emanates from a dank cabin in coniferous woods, surrounded by the ubiquitous grey rock known as Canadian shield. And the lake water? To call it refreshing would be polite. So it seems incongruous to be admiring the bare torso of a lithe, sunburnt student as he struts out to shore with his wakeboard, the late-afternoon sun ricocheting off his mirrored Ray-Bans. But who's complaining?

Lake Huron is one of Canada's underrated treasures. There is hardly a

beach on its 6,000km of shoreline that isn't perfectly suited for holidaymakers, whether you're sipping Corona or vintage champagne.

The Torontonians who throng here, escaping the city's smog and humidity on summer weekends, are only beginning to switch allegiance from the wildernesses further north in regions like Muskoka and Algonquin Provincial Park. But you're just as likely to encounter an American from one of Detroit's suburbs. The Victorian village of Bayfield, where we've pitched up for two weeks, is less than three hours from both metropolises.

There are smart hotels off Bayfield's Main Street, with names like The Little Inn. But they're pricey – especially if you earn Canadian dollars – with superstar chefs and an unspoken disdain for young families. (We had a tussle with the wait staff at one, and left before our mains arrived.) No matter. The prime properties line the lakeshore, and ours is a wobbly Victorian house on a cliff high above



BANKS OF DRIFTWOOD ACT AS MAKESHIFT BENCHES: WE SIP CHAMPAGNE FROM PLASTIC GLASSES

Left, rock of ages: 500-million-year-old fossils can be found on the lake's escarpments; above, cool down with a Corona and lime. Opposite, forests line much of the lake

the beach, a handy five-minute walk from the town pub.

The beach is Lake Huron's big surprise – at least around its southern reaches, from the village of Sauble Beach (dress code: skimpy cozzie, Havaiana flip-flops) to the border town of Port Huron, 240km on. Fine white sand sits between two-storey dunes on one side and water on the other. Go for a swim and your friends will watch you wade out forever, water no higher than your thighs, until you're a sunburnt speck and the sandbar finally drops to a swimmable level.

Most of the private rentals have their own access to the beach, down dozens of wooden stairs, and public access is everywhere. But unless you arrive on a hot, sunny Sunday in August, you should have the beach to yourself. Huron may be the best-kept secret that nobody is keeping, but the news is moving at a leisurely pace. In the early mornings, we pad down the dunes to watch the mist lift, and make small talk with barefoot pensioners toting metal

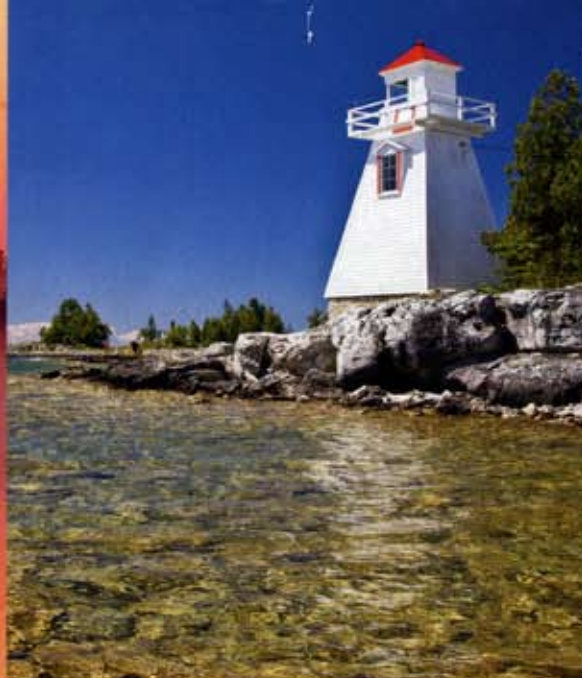
detectors, or collecting recyclable bottles left by teenagers at still-smoking bonfires. After breakfast we haul down our coolers, hoist our beach umbrellas and simply... exist. One of our posse raises her head above magazine level just long enough to say: 'I am officially swearing off Nantucket.'

Yes, Bayfield serves us well with its clapboard cottages and their friendly, salt-of-the-earth tenants, its lake-view parks, its accessible village, its ice cream scooped by students out of a hole in the general-store wall. We become regulars at the Ritz, named for its owner Martha Ritz and not for any resemblance to the Piccadilly institution. The bar is a homely oak with chummy stools and vintage-clad barmaids serving fine Bloody Caesars (the classic Canadian cocktail of vodka with Clamato, Tabasco and Worcestershire Sauce). A squeaky screen door leads to a terrace of plastic patio furniture from which to chomp on pulled-pork sandwiches and watch fellow tourists get their bearings on their first *passeggiata*.

But our time in Bayfield is really all about the beach. At the weekends, we challenge bronzed 20-somethings to rounds of volleyball and badminton, golden retrievers nipping at our heels. Come evening, we climb to our vast garden to watch the sun sink while the kids climb trees and our chef (Dad) grills sausages and steams corn bought in bushels from the roadside.

If you can do without amenities like emergency ice cream and overpriced garden ornaments, you can find a holiday let just about anywhere on Huron, from the wilder Bruce Peninsula in the north, where older-money Canadians have owned lake-front cottages for centuries, to Grand Bend in the south, where students from the local university reunite before Freshers' Week.

We do our share of beach-hopping, and choose a favourite: the smart Oakwood Resort, where the sand is meticulously filtered daily, and the shallow descent from the car park is stair-free – a boon for those with babes in arms. There's no fee to use >



A MENNONITE GROCER SELLS FARM-FRESH APPLE PIES. TRY NOT TO CRASH INTO HIS HORSE-DRAWN BUGGY

Top left, misty morning: fog covers one of Lake Huron's 30,000 islands; **above right,** 40 lighthouses dot the shore; **right,** lake waters teem with bass, trout, perch and herring. **Opposite, Mennonites first settled here in the 1850s**



this beach, and we take full advantage, seeing as none of Oakwood's guests seem to be interested in joining us. We succumb to hypnosis from the lapping waves and wonder if we haven't missed a crucial bit of news. Tornado approaching? Shark circling? End of the world nigh? It's remarkable that Grand Bend – where the preferred form of transport is the jet ski and the drink of choice is pink with a parasol – is less than a kilometre upwind.

There are 60,000 permanent residents in Huron County – an area the size of Cornwall – and many of them are still, effectively, living in the 19th century. On the coastal Bluewater Highway outside Bayfield is a Mennonite grocer hawking farm-fresh tomatoes, homemade jams and apple pies. Try not to collide with the horse-drawn carriages as you leave the car park.

There are thousands of Mennonites, and Amish too, between the shoreline and the twin cities of Kitchener-Waterloo, 100km east of here. Track them down to the thrice-

weekly farmers' market in the village of St Jacobs, just north of K-W, where you can also grab a handcrafted Mennonite quilt and join a carriage tour of the community.

At some stage you may want to rejoin the 21st century, though. And just 45 minutes by car from Bayfield, out of the tidy fields of gentlemen's farms, rises the great city of London – capital of southwestern Ontario. We make the trip to satisfy our urge to shop for something other than souvenir honey – and to revisit my alma mater, the University of Western Ontario, on the north side of town. But now, as a citizen of the 'proper' London, I appreciate it as a curiosity in its own right. It has a River Thames, which meanders in a contour not unlike the original. It has streets named for Piccadilly, Pall Mall, Grosvenor, Bond, Cheapside and Regent. Its first bridge was called Blackfriars – and it's still there in all its rickety glory after 135 years. And its central artery is Oxford Street, the fast-food capital of the city.

In London, Ontario, you can walk the Thames from the UWO campus, through the park system into town, stopping for refreshment on Richmond Street, where preppy students try on their beer goggles at infamous bars like the Ceeps and Barney's. There is no shortage of places to get downright silly, but feeling self-consciously over the hill, we soon hit the mall.

Back in Bayfield, things are livelier than usual. It's a bank holiday, the last of the summer, and there's a wedding in Pioneer Park, the village green cantilevered over the beach. Men with ties loosened, and women holding high heels in hands, stumble down the public access to banks of driftwood that act as makeshift benches, sipping champagne from plastic flutes. In town, the Black Dog pub is standing room only as visitors from more remote beaches search for action. It seems we've lost claim to our own private slice of bliss. And then, as if a sign from Mother Nature that summer has overstayed its welcome, it starts to rain. ■



travel brief

GETTING THERE

Air Canada (0871 220 1111, www.aircanada.com) flies from Heathrow to Toronto, from £632 return. **BA** (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow, from £407 return. **Canadian Affair** (020 7616 9185, www.canadianaffair.ca) has direct flights to Toronto on Air Transat from nine UK cities, from £378 return.

WHERE TO STAY

The Little Inn of Bayfield (00 1 519 565 2611, www.littleinn.com) has doubles from £107, B&B. **Oakwood Resort** (00 1 519 238 2377, www.oakwoodinnresort.com) has doubles from £115, B&B. For self-catering, try **Lake Huron Cottage Rentals** (00 1 877 582 5669, www.lakehuroncottagerentals.com) or **Blue Water Cottage Rentals** (00 1 519 238 5700, www.bluewatercottagerentals.com).

com. Prices for a lake-front property start at about £500 a week.

WHERE TO EAT

The Ritz, Bayfield (00 1 519 565 2325, www.martharitz.com; mains from £7). **The Red Pump Inn**, Bayfield (00 1 519 565 2576, www.theredpumpinn.com; mains from £16). **The Black Dog**, Bayfield (00 1 519 565 2326, www.blackdogpubbistro.ca; mains from £7). **Aunt Gussie's**, Grand Bend (00 1 519 238 6786, www.grandbend.com/aunt/gussies.htm; mains from £4).

FURTHER INFORMATION

Visit www.villageofbayfield.com for tips on exploring Bayfield, and www.ontarioswestcoast.ca for Huron County. For more details on St Jacobs' farmers market and Mennonite country, see www.stjacobs.com.

