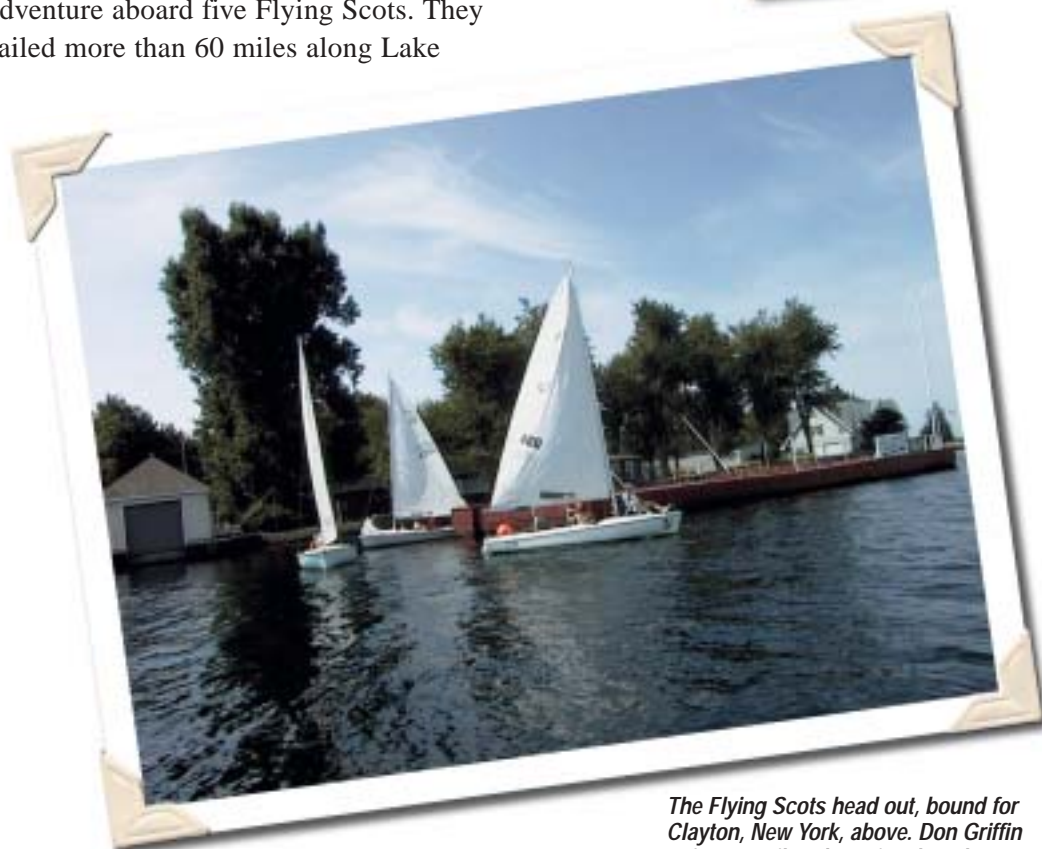


5 Scots 1,000 Islands

How adventurous sailors in 19-foot one-designs navigate the Thousand Islands on Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River

Story and photography
by Susan Keen Flynn

The 24-mile voyage from Westcott Beach State Park to Cape Vincent, N.Y., was a delight, much to the surprise of the 15 sailors who braved the waters of Lake Ontario. Last August the intrepid group embarked on a four-day adventure aboard five Flying Scots. They sailed more than 60 miles along Lake



The Flying Scots head out, bound for Clayton, New York, above. Don Griffin enjoys a sail under spinnaker alone, top.

Ontario and the St. Lawrence River, navigating the scenic Thousand Islands region.

More than 1,800 islands make up the area, dotted with granite cliffs, sandy bays and tall pine trees. The islands serve as stepping stones between New York state and the Canadian Ontario Province. But on the day the sailors set off in their 19-foot Flying Scots, they were more concerned about the lack of a breeze than the breathtaking scenery.

“It was almost dead calm at the southeast end of Lake Ontario,” said Don Griffin, who sailed with his wife Barbara. “We wondered how we were going to do this.” Without sufficient wind, Griffin feared the group wouldn’t make it to Cape Vincent before dark. This would be problematic for the group, who Griffin called “typical inland lake sailors” with no lights on their boats.

Graham Hall, who organized the excursion, recalled the mood of the group.



“Everybody was so pessimistic: ‘There’s no breeze!’ ‘We’ve got more than 20 miles to go!’” said Hall. “I was in prayer all morning.”

Hall’s prayers were answered: The wind picked up. Hall’s boat was the last to leave Westcott Beach State Park. Sailing with his daughter Whitney, one-year-old grandson Morgan and family friend Moppie, Hall could see the other Flying Scots drifting in the water ahead of him. When the breeze came up, the boats started cruising at around 5 knots.

“We ended up surfing at 10 knots into Cape Vincent, ahead of schedule on the most glorious day you could sail,” said Hall. “That was a top 10 sailing day of my entire life. Downwind with my daughter and grandson on board. You can’t imagine it getting better than that.”

That’s high praise from Hall, who has sailed Olympic classes and high-performance sailboats most of his life. In 1982, he began sailing Flying Scots because he had two young daughters. “I had to back off and get in a boat where we could sail together,” said Hall. “The Flying Scot was obvious. Once I got into the class, I realized it was the ‘everything’ boat for me, whether racing or cruising.”

The Flying Scot, a 19-foot one-design, is ideal for daysailing. Hall began cruising with his family in the Flying Scot, which has enough room for kids yet maintains the exciting feel of a small boat. In 1983, the Halls sailed down the Erie Canal, dropping the mast 26 times to go under low bridges.

Hall enjoyed his voyages so much that in 1986 he organized a Thousand Islands cruise

for several Flying Scot sailors. “We don’t go around in a circle,” he said. “We go in a straight line and explore new things everyday.

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It’s an adventure, saying goodbye to the car and everything that grounds you to the world.”

Many years since then Hall has coordinated a trip, sometimes on New York’s Lake

Champlain, other times whale watching on the St. Lawrence. But that first joint cruise in the Thousand Islands region captivated Hall.

“Everything about the region is perfect for cruising,” he said, noting four reasons the area is ideal. First, there’s an almost guaranteed breeze. Second, you’re on big water, but sheltered among islands. Third, it lets you explore the United States’ northern neighbor, Canada. Finally, the water is gorgeous.

When Hall selected the Thousand Islands for his 2004 cruise, he posted a message on the Flying Scot Sailing Association’s Web site asking for others to join him. He scheduled the trip for August 15 to 20, the week between the Saratoga Lake Invitational Regatta and the Flying Scot Canadian Championships. Hall sparked the interest of a diverse group, ranging from Whitney and

her one-year-old to Don Griffin, a young 75-year-old. Others to join the adventure included Charles and Sarah Buffington, Tom and Laura Threlkeld, and Frank and Diane



The Albani family arrives after a good day’s sail, top. Graham lounges on the foredeck, above.



Albani, new Flying Scot owners, with their two teenage children and nephew.

“We aren’t ‘rut’ people who take the same vacation every year. We crave adventure,” wrote Frank Albani in an account of the trip. “When I read about a cruise in the Thousand Islands by Graham Hall, I knew this was it.”

Baby Morgan seemed to agree. The center-board trunk on the Flying Scot is chest high to Morgan, and he’d hang on while sailing. “He pulled bungee cords and pretended he was part of the action,” said Hall. When he got tired, Morgan would fall asleep to the rocking of the boat on pillows up forward.

The other sailors worked a bit harder: The second day, after listening to Hall’s daily chart review, they traveled down current more than 15 miles from Cape Vincent, into the St. Lawrence River, to Clayton, New York. The five boats stayed fairly close together. The adventuresome Griffins sailed under spinnaker alone, storing the mainsail and boom under the seat and using the jib only to maneuver in and out of the harbors.

“Everyone thought we were crazy,” said Don. “But it was great. There’s no boom in the way, so you can sit back and watch an unobstructed view of the countryside.”

The sailing was more challenging for the Buffingtons, particularly around Whiskey Island. “It was a large body of water with a long fetch,” said Charles. “We were rocking and rolling and had to find the opening to the channel. We worked hard with the compass and field glasses to ensure our direction.”

The group docked at Clayton in midafternoon and headed to the Antique Boat Museum, which displays everything from birch bark canoes made by Native Americans

to modern-day powerboats. Then the sailors dined at the Thousand Islands Inn, where the salad dressing of the same name originated.

The third morning the group left Clayton for a 9.4-mile sail to Gananoque, Ontario, a resort town in southeastern Ontario. “We sailed out of the harbor at Clayton, and there were a bunch of freighters coming through,” said Charles Buffington. “You realize just how small you are in the Flying Scot!” The Scots, sailing with a southwest breeze and heading north, crossed an open patch of water, then wound through the closely packed Admiralty Islands with gorgeous, old homes clinging to the rocky shores.

The Griffins had a global positioning system, so the Buffingtons stuck close by. Still, all the sailors kept a close eye out for white rocks dotting the water. “We started out on a close reach to clear Grindstone Island, then headed off on a broad reach under a freshening breeze of 8 to 12 knots to maneuver down through the smaller Admiralty Islands,” said Griffin. This was tricky, said Hall: “We had to jibe in good air several times in tight quarters among the islands.”

Passing the small islands, the boats made a left turn at Hay Island, then straight into the Gananoque Inn’s protected dockage. The sail only took about an hour and a half, with the five Flying Scots arriving in the late morning and early afternoon. “We came screaming into the little harbor town at the upscale Gananoque Inn under full sail,” Griffin said. The owner of a classic wooden sailboat docked at the inn nervously eyed the speedy Scots. “He did not really relax until we were tied up with ample bumpers out.”

A storm passed through Gananoque the night before the final day of sailing. The group awoke to gusty winds and whitecaps on the water in front of the inn. The sailors had planned to meet at the docks at 10 a.m. to begin the voyage to Alexandria Bay, New York, approximately 14 miles away. The weather forecast predicted the winds would drop by noon, but the fearless sailors departed in the morning as planned.



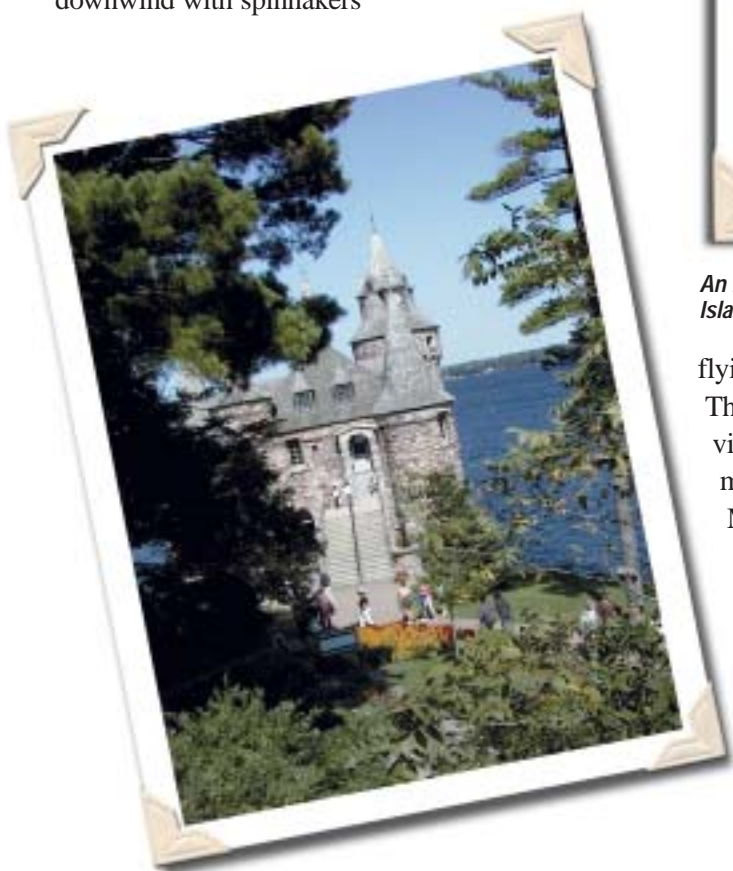
Graham and the crew head through the Narrows, top. Barbara takes a turn at the helm, above.

The Threlkelds left first, with the Buffingtons, Griffins and Hall's boat close behind. Hall informed the group by radio that the Albanis, docked at another marina, couldn't leave because of strong head winds and its location behind a long line of docked power boats. "The first hour was a wild ride on a broad reach. We flew at 8 knots without spinnaker or planing. We were afraid to look at anything," says Griffin. "If we'd left at noon instead of 10, we would've had a quieter ride."

Fortunately, the wind moderated, and the four Flying Scots made an aft to beam reach, mostly downhill to Wellesley Island. They stopped briefly at the 600-acre Nature Center on the island, where Griffin jokes, "We went to the butterfly pavilion and saw one." From an elevated exhibit house on the island, the group spotted a sailboat crossing the Canadian Middle Channel about two miles away. Through a telescope, they saw it was a Flying Scot and sent a radio message to the Albanis guiding them to turn left and head south. The Albanis headed toward the Narrows, and the rest of the boats left Wellesley Island and did the same.

The winds were ideal for the trip through the Narrows, a passage approximately 100 feet wide with huge rock formations on either side. "You wouldn't think looking at a chart that you'd want to go through this," Hall said. "But once you have some local knowledge, you can handle it." The boats had a gentle run through the Narrows and into the main channel of the St. Lawrence.

The remaining trip was a gentle run dead downwind with spinnakers



An island A-frame cottage is a peculiar sight, top. Baby Morgan goes for a dip, middle. Boldt Castle on Heart Island stands tall over the waters surrounding the Thousand Islands, left.

flying. The group passed under the Thousand Islands Bridge, enjoying the view of the lush countryside and huge mansions along the aptly named Millionaire's Row and dodging the occasional ocean-bound freighter. "They're so high above you," Hall said. "It's like a huge apartment building going by." But the Flying Scots also shared the water with canoes, kayaks, antique runabouts from the 1920s and a variety of other boats.

The group sailed to Heart Island, with Hall docking first and heading off some problems clearing customs. Flying Scots don't have hull numbers, and customs officials chastised the sailors for crossing international waters without them. Hall convinced them to let the small boats through, and the rest of the group had no troubles. "I don't think they took us too seriously," says Griffin said. "The bemused customs officer was very cordial, but barely looked at our passports."

While on the island, everyone toured Boldt Castle. The grandiose six-story castle with

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120 rooms was built by George C. Boldt, owner of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, to replicate a full-size Rhineland Castle. Afterward, the group sailed on to its dockside motel in Alexandria Bay and tied up at the quay in front.

The Buffingtons, Griffins and Hall and Moppie attended the Flying Scot Canadian Championships on Stony Lake, Ontario. Hall and Moppie tied for fourth place with the Buffingtons, and the Griffins came in ninth.

Looking back on the Thousand Islands cruise, companionship topped the group's list of memories. "The camaraderie and fellowship—getting together with sailors from different parts of the country—was the most valuable part of the trip," Hall said. From the first night in Cape Vincent, when the diverse group dragged some tables together at a waterside restaurant, until the last, everyone from the baby to teens to lifelong sailors had fun.

And the sailing was unforgettable, too. "The beauty of the whole area was spectacular," Barbara Griffin said. She remembers in particular sailing around Grenadier Island. "The clarity of the water was unbelievable. You could look down and see the bottom," she said. Yet the charts indicated the water was at least 10 feet deep.

Sarah Buffington said she liked the view from the water, where she occasionally took a break from crewing to play "tube wife." After jumping overboard in her life jacket, she'd "hang onto the safety line, and I'd sail off the wind to get up some speed," Charles said.

Like many in the group, the Griffins use their Flying Scot for racing. From Memorial Day through Labor Day they race in most of the regattas on Deep Creek Lake, Maryland, home of Flying Scot, Inc., the company that builds the boats. "This was the first time we pleasure-sailed," says Barbara. "We didn't know the Flying Scot could do that." □