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You are here: [Winnipeg Free Press](#) > [Travel](#) > [Lady of the lake](#)

TRAVEL

Lady of the lake

Grace Anne II provides top-notch luxury on Lake of the Woods

By: **Julian Rachey**

23/06/2009 1:00 AM | Comments: 0

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FERRIS BAY, Ont. -- The sun has just cleared the trees on the eastern shore of this secluded bay 40 to 50 kilometres south of Kenora on Lake of the Woods.

There's no wind, not a breath. But the air is filled with the sounds of birds frantic to get this near-perfect August morning started.



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"Your coffee, Mr. Rachey," steward Cameron Sprange offers in hushed tones, trying not to disturb the tranquility. "I have to wake the others who are going fishing this morning. Fresh muffins, will be ready in about 10 minutes."

The brief exchange with Cameron fails to spoil the moment, but it brings me back to the reality of my three-day experience on board the Grace Anne II, an 85-foot wooden vessel whose highly polished mahogany gleams in the morning sun. Built in the early 1930s, it also reflects the fine craftsmanship of a bygone era.

Crew and staff of the Grace Anne II prepare to meet guests at the dock in

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In this idyllic setting well beyond the Barrier Islands of Lake of the Woods and the congestion of weekend cottagers, it's easy to forget, at least for the moment, that this is all part of a luxury wilderness-lake experience.

"More coffee? Or will you be joining the others in the dining room?" Cameron asks a few minutes later. As much as I'd love another half-hour on the fly deck soaking up the pristine surroundings, the allure of fishing for muskie is too much. I join the two others going fishing this morning in the elegant dining room; it's as well-appointed as the Hotel Fort Garry's long-defunct Factor's Table. Chef Nicky Dartiaih's muffins don't disappoint and I'm thinking I should squirrel some away for later.

A close friend who had sailed on the Grace Anne earlier in the year had told me about the quality of the food onboard the Grace Anne. I'd also heard that a Winnipeg restaurateur and Toronto chef had sung Nicky's praises as well. It seems a top priority is to ensure guests are well-fed, which suits me fine.

The five-course gourmet dinner Nicky prepared for the Captain's Dinner last night had exceeded my expectations. *Free Press* eatery expert Marion Warhaft would find the menu and the service worthy of the five stars she stingily hands out.

The fishing boats can be heard in the distance, luring the three of us on deck to the boarding ramp. I quickly duck down to my cabin on the lower deck to shed the jacket I won't need in the warming morning sun. My cabin is one of four singles while there are two double cabins, one of them on the main deck off the dining room and sitting area.

My slight delay turns into luck as I will spend my time this morning alone in the second boat with Grace Anne captain/general manager Brad Doerksen. Brad has been involved with the beautifully crafted mahogany vessel for over 20 years. He started as a guide for fishing forays


[Enlarge image](#)

Chef Nicy Dartiaih


[Enlarge image](#)

when the yacht was owned by 3M out of Minneapolis. In 1994 when 3M put the boat up for sale, Brad and a partner bought the vessel. Their ownership ended in the early part of this decade when Winnipeg entrepreneur Morris Chia, a player in the Canadian travel industry, made them an offer to their liking. Brad stayed on as general manager.

Great. Not only will I learn more about the Grace Anne and Lake of the Woods, one of Canada's natural wonders, but maybe I'll finally figure out how to land a muskie, 'the fish of a thousand casts.'

As we head out of the bay, Brad talks about the underwater structure that muskie prefer, given their territorial predatory nature. He tells me how they will snatch small birds off the top of the water, and attack anything with fins or feathers that might serve as a meal. And he reminds me that, while there are no fishing guarantees, it's unlikely we'll be shut out. I'm trying to recall the Coles notes of yesterday's Muskie Fishing 101 lesson.

In a few minutes, we throttle down at the end of an island. Brad points out the rock structures surfacing in jagged peaks and suggests I direct my 12-inch lure in that direction.

"Remember to work the lure in the figure-eight pattern when you get it to the side of the boat," Brad reminds me. "Muskie are known to follow the lure all the way to the boat and then strike."

A few casts later, as I awkwardly and dutifully struggle with my distorted figure-eights, there is a flash in the water beside the boat. A muskie has followed the lure, but didn't bite -- I'm not sure if the bait or my technique is at fault -- swimming off in disinterest.

"Here. Quick," Brad says, handing me his rod I know I'm about to land my first muskie. Within seconds, I hear: "It's only a northern (pike). He's not running like a muskie."

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Now our talk turns to the Grace Anne I herself. It was built by the Ditchburn Boat Building Company in Orillia, Ont., for John Forlong as a birthday gift to his wife Grace Anne. Launched in Lake of the Woods after an overland trip in 1931, it replaced the Grace Anne, which was eventually sold in the late 1930s to the local Coast Guard unit and was used to place navigation buoys on the Lake.

But be he owner, captain or fishing guide, his pride in the Grace Anne II, its crew and its operations is undeniable. In his talk of his vessel, its staff, its service commitment and navigating the lake he loves makes, Brad sounds the proudest of fathers. Nicky, the chef extraordinaire who preps five-star food in a galley no bigger than a small walk-in closet. Captain Patrick Howard, who has trained his stewards to intuitively anticipate each guest's wants and needs. And of course the fishing guides who ensure guests enjoy one of the best fisheries in the country.

And there it is -- a decisive yank on my line during on what must be my thousandth cast. But this one's another pike no bigger than the last and hardly worth our time with the feeble fight put up.

Sensing a possibly frustrated guest, Brad asks if I want to return to Turtle Bay Lodge on Big Narrows Island where the yacht has travelled while we've been fishing. No word needs to be spoken.

The plan was for the five journalists who are guests of the Grace Anne II this weekend to meet at the lodge, which is part of the Grace Anne II operation, and experience some of the non-angling activities offered -- skeet shooting, kayaking, hitting golf balls, exploring the island's trails (hiking or even on an ATV) hot-tubbing and massages. Well, plans are subject to change and Brad doesn't seem all that disappointed when I suggest a few hundred more casts before heading in. I've now got muskies on the brain and the thought of any of those other activities doesn't measure up to just the hope of landing the big one.

So Brad radios the Grace Anne II that we'll be out for another hour, but back in time for brunch Nicky is preparing and our trip back to Winnipeg.

As we fish, Brad continues talking about the Grace Anne II and the variety of people that use it each season. A number of guests, Brad notes, are regulars who book next year's vacation as they disembark at the dock in Kenora and head for their private jet at the airport.

And there's the occasional client that books a three-day getaway more than once in a summer, lured by the luxury of a fully pampered wilderness experience.

Shots from the skeet stations pepper our conversation. While we're still without a muskie, our time is up. Brad throttles up and we head to the lodge.

We board the Grace Anne II for our return to Kenora and then Winnipeg. Nicky's brunch is outstanding and features pancakes with fresh blueberries picked the night before on the island by Brad and some of the fishing guides. After we finish, we retire to the fly deck for more coffee (cocktails if anyone is so inclined as the time is approaching noon).

Bonnie Hudacek, Grace Anne manager of guest relations and our host, talks about the various occasions that the yacht has been used for: family get-togethers, birthdays, anniversaries, business dealings or just a quiet getaway. She talks about the importance of meeting the wishes and needs of every guest and ensuring the highest possible quality in all aspects of the operation.

And although she concedes the high costs associated with living the royal life on the Grace Anne (see box) make it somewhat prohibitive for the average person, she adds there are those special occasions or business dealings that justify it.

As we approach Kenora's harbour, it is obvious regular cottagers on the lake know the Grace Anne well. Boaters wave and sound their horns as we pass. Kids run down from their cottages waving and waiting for a blast from the boat's air horn. As I sit on the fly deck waving back, I get the feeling that somehow this is a special piece of the lake's fabric and that by being on it, I am somehow special.

I also realize Lake of the Woods is a real Canadian treasure and clearly the Grace Anne II is its crown jewel. And surely that means that this muskie-less king is good for another thousand casts.

Chef Nicky Dartiaih

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GRACE ANNE II MENUS

DAY ONE

Soup

Cream of mushroom & portobello Soup

Salad

Crab & seafood salad

Entrees

Seared scallops & shrimp kebobs on lemon rice with parsley butter

New York striploin with roasted onions & garlic mushrooms

Roasted half-duck with a peach & brandy sauce

Spinach & ricotta cheese-stuffed chicken breast with an herb & tomato sauce

Dessert

Lemon chiffon pie

CAPTAIN'S DINNER MENU

(last night onboard)

Appetizer

Coquille St. Jacques or smoked salmon platter

Soup

Roasted red and yellow pepper veloute

Salad

Cranberry and spinach salad with sesame dressing

Entrees

Ostrich steak with Madagascar green peppercorn sauce

Stuffed pork tenderloin with red wine and mushroom sauce

Beef tenderloin, crab and lobster tail

New Zealand rack of lamb with a side of blue cheese sauce

Pastry-wrapped salmon filet with asparagus hollandaise sauce

Dessert

Strawberry cheesecake

GRACE ANNE II PRICES

/ per guest

24 Hour Experience Package...\$1,695

2 Night Stay Charter...\$2,795

3 Night Stay Charter...\$3,495

4 Night Stay Charter...\$4,595

(Includes 1-day fly-in fishing trip on a private Twin Otter charter to our beautiful trout lake)

5 Night Stay Charter...\$5,695

(Includes 1 day of fly in fishing or 1 day of fly-in golf)

Website: www.graceanne.com

Manager guest relations: Bonnie Hudacek, bhudacek@graceanne.com