

## A lucky strike

Don't tell the mainlanders. With Centreville closed and tourists stuck on the shore, life on the Toronto Islands has never been better. Peter Cheney sneaks across the lake to uncover the best-kept secret of the municipal labour dispute

Peter Cheney

Toronto — From Saturday's Globe and Mail  
Last updated on Saturday, Jul. 04, 2009  
08:59PM EDT

In your fantasies, paradise is, well, a paradise. The air is filled with the scent of herbs and the trill of songbirds as you sit in your garden, contemplating a far-off world of traffic jams and daily struggle. In other words, you are in Elizabeth Amer's yard on Ward's Island, a small green cosmos where the city of Toronto is in full view, yet somehow distant.



And this week, thanks to the city strike that has shut down the ferries, it really has been a paradise.

Normally, a million tourists a year flock to the Toronto Islands, drawn by attractions such as the southern beaches and the rides at Centreville. Untold thousands spill over into Ms. Amer's neighbourhood, walking or riding the car-free, tree-lined pathways, curious to see a way of life drawn straight from *The Wind in the Willows*.

But since the strike began, the islands are a world transformed, stripped of their tourist hordes by the forces of politics.

"People are enjoying the quiet," says Ms. Amer. "We don't have anything against the tourists, but there's been a lot less hubbub."

The residents of the Toronto Islands have not been left untouched by the civic strike – just like the mainlanders, their garbage is piling up into rat-infested mountains, and their transportation issues are worse than ever.

Although two boats have been contracted to ferry islanders back and forth, bicycles aren't allowed on the vessels – a critical problem for a car-free community where two-wheelers are a way of life.

To cope, some islanders have started leaving a bicycle locked up on the mainland side, but thieves have twigged to the plan, and made off with several already.

"It's frustrating," said one resident.



*Peter Power/*

*The Globe and Mail* Elizabeth Amer, 70, is a former Toronto city councillor who has lived on Ward's Island her entire life.

But the strike's upside has been a spectacular quiet. On Centre Island, normally a Disney-style throng of tourists and clanking rides, you could fire a cannon through the park without hurting anyone. Stand still, and the only sounds are the cry of gulls and wind rustling through the trees. The restaurants are shuttered, the rental bikes are locked up in a compound, and the paddle boats are in dry-dock. Ward's beach, normally wall-to-wall on a sunny day, is near-empty.

“It's been pretty peaceful,” says Bob Buck, a retired actuary whose grandmother built a cottage on Ward's Island in 1934. Mr. Buck has spent summers on the islands since 1959. This week, he worked at repainting his house, and contemplated the change produced by the ferry shutdown. “It's nice to have some quiet,” he said. “But we never had a problem with the tourists. This is a beautiful place, and people want to see it. Nothing wrong with that.”

The islanders' relationship with their mainland brethren is a complex one, fraught with politics and real-estate envy. The city spent decades trying to eliminate the community and turn the islands into a park, only to be confronted with determined resistance from residents, who waged a lengthy political battle to save their homes. The fight ended in 1993, when the Ontario government passed legislation that granted long-term leases to homeowners on the islands.

Living on the islands involves a unique set of compromises. You get to inhabit a piece of real-estate that makes Rosedale look like a wasteland by comparison – you live beneath soaring trees, and the towers of downtown Toronto glitter across the water. On the downside, everything you buy (including appliances and the materials to build a house) must be loaded onto a ferry and schlepped from the dock. And if you were hoping to get rich by selling your house, forget it: Properties are priced at replacement value, and returned to a land trust.



*Peter Power/*

*The Globe and Mail* While residents in Toronto endure a strike by city workers that have shut down some daycares, city pools, ferries, and garbage collection, residents of Toronto's Ward's Island find it strangely quiet without the throngs of tourists on Centre Island.

Then there's the annual tourist invasion, which begins in late spring and runs until Labour Day or so. Some islanders feel like animals in a zoo, subject to the scrutiny of a seemingly-endless parade of visitors. Most take it in stride: "There are people who come here three or four times a year," says Barry Lipton, a retired construction worker who has lived on the islands since the late 1980s. "They love it, and they pay taxes to support the park. They're entitled to be here."

Even so, the civic strike has provided a welcome respite.

"It's lovely," said Ms. Amer, revelling in the quiet as she hung clothes on a line and recalled the particular hell of last summer, when tens of thousands flocked to the islands for the Virgin Festival, an outdoor concert featuring more than 40 rock bands.

"It was way out of scale," she says. "Let's just put it that way."

Like other islanders, Ms. Amer has mixed feelings about the civic strike.

She'd like it if the garbage got collected, and it would be nice to be able to take a bike on the ferry again. But the peace the strike has produced is a bit addictive: "I know it won't be like this forever," she says. "But it's great for the moment."