

Tale of Two Waterfront Towns

STORY BY BARBARA EDIE

It's a misty, late September morning when I awake to look out over a lonely beach and the low, surprisingly calm horizon of the North Sea.

As I take in this quintessential English seaside moment, I congratulate myself on my decision to choose a bed and breakfast called Ocean House.

I'm in Aldeburgh, a postcard-perfect resort town on the east coast of Suffolk. There are few signs of life on the beach today, abandoned boats are parked on the shore and the fishing shacks along the waterfront are not doing much business yet.

It's a much quieter waterfront than a month or two earlier, according to the owners of the B&B, when tourists, locals and holiday-goers from all over the United Kingdom gathered in this popular coastal town known as much for its arts scene as its long stretch of shingle beach.

Walking along this shingle beach, comprised of smooth pebbles and small- to medium-sized stones, it has the crunch and feel of loose gravel (without the sharpness), completely different from soft white sands of Manitoba beaches.

As I stroll along the esplanade, Crag Path,

it reminds me of another pretty waterfront town known for its fish and resort-like atmosphere, located on a massive lake rather than the sea – Gimli, Manitoba.

While Aldeburgh's population (about 3,000) is smaller than Gimli's (about 5,800), the English town's Victorian-style buildings and waterfront cottages built of brick rather than timber give it a little more stately and bigger feel than its Canadian counterpart.

However, whether it's seaside in Aldeburgh or lakeside in Gimli, both share a history as small fishing villages that grew into summer resorts, and their connection to the water is

still central to their economy, and lifestyle.

Venturing from the seafront to Aldeburgh's High Street, I pop in and out of small boutiques, art galleries, bookstores and shops selling all things nautical. Further down the street, toward the small marina, I come upon a string of quaint cottages painted in pale hues of yellow, pink and blue, available as holiday rentals.

As lunchtime approaches, I'm tempted by the catch-of-the-day on the menus of local restaurants such as The Pelican or The Regatta, and wonder how the fresh fish of the North Sea compares with that of Lake Winnipeg.

In other similarities, both coastal towns have maintained a low-key atmosphere while cultivating a lively arts and cultural scene.

Thousands are drawn to England's east coast every June for the famous Aldeburgh Music Festival, which has been going on for more than 60 years. Concerts, documentary film festivals, literary events and art exhibitions are held throughout the summer.

Across the pond, people head to Gimli in July to watch movies on the beach and take



The North Sea views draw visitors to Aldeburgh, which has a shingle beach made up of smooth pebbles (below). PHOTOS BY WWW.TOURNORFOLK.CO.UK

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part in its International Film Festival, and in August gather for its annual Icelandic Festival. Outdoor concerts, with local and national musicians, and tours of artists' studios and galleries are all part of Gimli's summer events calendar.

Both of these thriving beach communities attract artists of all kinds – writers, painters, potters, sculptors and more. Many of these creative types, as well as people looking for a slower pace of life or a place to retire, are choosing to spend more time by the water, whether as full-time residents or seasonal inhabitants.

Cottage owners longing to live year-round in their seaside or lakefront locations, both here and abroad, are investing in renovations or additions to their homes.

That's certainly the trend in Aldeburgh, says Piers Feetham. He and his wife, Caroline, have redecorated and renovated their summer residence substantially and plan to do more.

"We come here a lot ... about four months of the year, including winter," Feetham says. "It's more than a weekend."

"Caroline spends June through August here, and has a studio here. She's a painter and coastal themes are a big part of her work," he notes.

"I'm here all of August ... and at different times throughout the year."

Feetham runs an art gallery in London and has mounted art expositions in Aldeburgh, including in their garden.

The couple purchased the home from Caroline's parents in 1995, and inherited a lot of dull brown furniture, muted tones and dark floors, Feetham says.

"It really had the look and feel of a retired couple's house."

But not for long.

Caroline brought the sun and sea indoors, painting the kitchen yellow with bold blue cupboards, and sponge painting the living room a pale turquoise. Her artistic talents are also evident on the walls, doorways, table and chairs, enhanced with hand-painted marine motifs of boats, fish, sea birds and starfish.

"It's very much a summer feel ... influenced by the fact that Caroline is an artist, and we both have a strong visual sense," he says.

That artistic flair is reflected by original paintings, ceramics and sculpture carefully placed throughout the house and garden.



Aldeburgh cottage owner Caroline Feetham loves the view from her new deck and sunroom.
PHOTO BY JAMES BALSTON/ARCAIDIMAGES.COM

However, as much as the cheery interior design reflects coastal living, a newly added sunroom and outside deck truly bring the sun and sea into the home. The couple chose large, floor-to-ceiling windows for the room, unlike the small Victorian panes common to the area's homes, to maximize the natural light and sight lines, Feetham says.

A beaming success, the room overlooks their beautifully landscaped two-tiered terrace garden and offers spectacular vistas of red rooftops against the backdrop of the North Sea.

With art a central part of their life, the couple is drawn to Aldeburgh's natural beauty accentuated by its booming cultural scene and community of artists.

"It's a holiday place for people in the arts and culture industry, and a good place for me to network," he says.


In addition to its appeal to artists, the area provides many happy pursuits for golfers, sailors and nature lovers. While the beach, boating and sea-faring activities are obvious attractions, nearby marshes and wetlands offer good opportunities for bird watching

and wildlife spotting. A 22-kilometre estuary offers the perfect place for smooth sailing, Feetham adds.

The Feethams also have a long personal history with their favourite seaside town. Caroline's family has holidayed here since the 1950s, and she and Piers bought their own vacation home here in '79 before purchasing their current one.

And, as in Canada, vacation properties can be pricey. A two-bedroom seafront cottage in Aldeburgh goes for about £450,000 (about C\$750,000), while a seaside villa will set you back about a million pounds. Summer homes within the town range from about £500,000 to £750,000 depending on their size and proximity to the water.

Renting a holiday cottage, on average, costs £350 per week (about \$560) in the low season and £750 a week in the summer.

In England and Canada, coastal living draws those with a passion for art, nature and water. For those lucky enough to reside by the sea or lake, many are altering their homes – and lifestyles – to extend their stay to four seasons ... and often a lifetime. 



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