



Island TREASURES

One Thousand Islands... One Thousand Stories

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TIMES

LOVE at First Flight

RALEIGH ISLAND



Photo courtesy of Ian Coristine
1000IslandsPhotoArt.com

I an Coristine was flying his ultralight Challenger plane through sunny skies on a summer day 16 years ago when he saw the Thousand Islands for the first time. It was a moment that changed the pilot's life forever.

The birds-eye view was breathtaking. Ships threading through narrow channels, lighthouses, cottages and fairy-tale castles dotting the St. Lawrence River on a string of green jewels. And so began a love affair that continues to this day.

"I think I've tripped over heaven here," said Coristine, whose three books of photography on the Thousand Islands continue to be top sellers.

Now the Montreal native is penning a book called *One In A Thousand*, detailing how a serendipitous flight 16 years ago took him on a journey to become a photographer, author, and owner of one of the Thousand Islands.

"My thigh is still sore from pinching myself," he said.





Photo courtesy of Ian Coristine
1000IslandsPhotoArt.com

Raleigh Island, just west of Brockville, is home to Coristine during the spring and summer months. As soon as the ice thaws, he retreats to his cottage with a panoramic view of the river including the fabled Singer Castle on Dark Island, to take aerial photographs from his plane. This summer he is busy at work on his fourth book, his first written publication which will also incorporate his images of the Thousand Islands.

In the winter months, home is Hudson, Quebec, where the 59-year-old resides with his wife Mary. They have two children, Scotty, 21, and Hayley, 26.

Coristine bought Raleigh Island, also known as Spong Island, in 1995. He had been looking for an island here for three years when he discovered the property. The island features a unique natural harbour that provides ideal shelter for his floatplane. It was the first time in a century the island had been up for sale.

Inside the living room of the modest two-bedroom cottage hangs a wooden fish with the words: "The River Chooses Some."

But Coristine's tour begins outside with his Irish Setter, Molly, at his side.

"This is the dining room," he says, gesturing towards several Adirondack chairs and a table pointing west. "This is the spare dining room for when the wind makes the first one unusable," he says as he leads the way through a canopy of pine, oak and maple trees to another group of deck chairs pointing south on the two-acre island.

"And this," he says, taking a seat with Molly on a rocky shelf covered in pine needles with a view to the east of the river, "is the couch."

This island near Jones Creek, featured on the Fine Living TV channel, is a great source

of Coristine's inspiration. By his own estimation, he has taken over 40,000 images of the Thousand Islands.

The veteran pilot spent two decades marketing Challenger planes across Canada and that included taking air to air photographs from the pilot's seat for articles in flying magazines. Over time he developed an ability to take photographs and fly at the same time by using rudder pedals with his feet while controlling the plane's "stick" with his knees to leave his hands free to capture the images. Unknowingly, he had learned the perfect skills to compliment an entirely unexpected project.

When he found himself living in "the assignment" and waking up to the river's magical moments, Coristine realized he had an opportunity or perhaps even an obligation as these unlikely ingredients weren't likely to come together again. He began shooting the Thousand Islands low from above at dawn and dusk, capturing the ideal light to reveal the place in a way that most people never see.

"It's like being Peter Pan or flying a magic carpet," he said. "It is the privileged view. As beautiful as it may be from water level, the next shoreline obscures the view beyond, but from above an intricate and incredibly beautiful labyrinth emerges."

He came to photography by accident. When he discovered the Thousand Islands, he wanted to share the beauty of the region with friends. That eventually led him to self-publish his first book of photography, *The 1000 Islands*, in 2002.

The book sold over 32,000 copies, a remarkable feat, given 5,000 copies sold is considered a best-seller in Canada. Coristine

has since sold a total of over 52,000 of all of his three books, including his second book, *Water, Wind and Sky: Ian Coristine's Thousand Islands* and his third, *The Thousand Islands*.

"People ask me what I know about photography," he says. "I say 'Not much'. But I do know about tenacity and obsessiveness."

His images are taken from the water, air and land. One day, Coristine watched with amusement as five mink clamoured up from the river onto Raleigh Island. He patiently staked out one of them who had hidden in a crevice and took a photograph of it when it eventually peeked out from the rocks.

But most of his photographs focus on the region's unique landscape featuring shipwrecks, historical landmarks, and islands draped in mist and the magical light of dawn and dusk. Coristine sees the Thousand Islands through an ethereal lens. He believes it is just as exotic and foreign a place as Tahiti and as majestic as the Rockies but even more unique.

"It really is the cottage version of Venice," he says. "That's why people are so blown away."

Today, his photographs of the region appear in publications around the globe.

Coristine had two childhood dreams: to become a race car driver and a pilot. He achieved both, racing at 18 until the age of 24 in Quebec and across North America in the Molson Series and Players Challenge Series Formula B national championships before retiring in 1973.

A young Quebec racer named Gilles Villeneuve took his place on the team when he left the circuit. Villeneuve would go on to become a multiple Grand Prix winner for Ferrari. The father of Formula One World

Coristine on his
"couch" with Molly



Champion Jacques Villeneuve, he died in a crash in 1982 while qualifying for the Belgian Grand Prix.

With professional racing behind him, Coristine turned his attention to his flying. He took up gliding at the age of 30. Intrigued by ultralight planes, he soon started flying Challengers and became a flight instructor at St. Lazare, Quebec. He began marketing the planes in 1983 for the Illinois-based manufacturer, taking air to air photographs of airplanes for trade magazines.

But it wasn't until July 1992 that he flew over the Thousand Islands for the first time during a trip with two other Challenger pilots. They had no plans to tour the Thousand Islands that day but randomly ended up flying up the St. Lawrence River.

Captivated, Coristine began a quest to find a place here. Three years later he found Raleigh Island and that eventually led to publishing his first book in 2002.

"He fell in love with the area and wanted to share it with the rest of the world," said Lyne Roberge-Henderson, co-owner and vice-president of sales and marketing at Henderson Printing who printed Coristine's two most recent books. "He is such a great ambassador," she said. "Whatever Ian embraces, he embraces 300 per cent.

"He just realized there's a real gem here," said Jake Belanger, who co-owns Brockville's Leeds County Books with wife, Pat. "We've sold thousands of his books. It was a product waiting to be discovered. It just keeps selling

over and over again. There's not a day that goes by that we don't sell a copy."

The books have sold equally well across the border to tourists and locals alike. "In my opinion, books 1, 2 and 3 are the best done in this area in a long, long time," said Alan Hutchinson, business manager at the Antique Boat Museum in Clayton and owner of Corbin's River Heritage Store. "He has an eye for capturing an image."

Now, Coristine is writing the story of his unlikely adventure and trying to capture the same mystique of the Thousand Islands in words as he has portrayed in his photographs.

"I am so in love with this place," he says, overlooking the vista from Raleigh Island that spreads out over the river and into the horizon like a canvas waiting to be explored. "It just comes from the heart."

Raleigh Island is also known as
Spong Island

