

Gorgeous George
Sample New York's ever-beautiful
Lake George
aboard an 8-meter Comitti Wooden
Boat

By Dennis Caprio

Poised with palette in hand, ready to paint the leaves in shades of gold, brown and red, autumn hovered over the ridges of New York's Adirondack Mountains. In the valley, the Queen of American Lakes shimmered under the hazy sun of the last few days of August, as though clinging for dear life to the moist warmth of summer. At this latitude (about an hour's drive southeast of Lake Placid) frost could touch the higher elevations in a week or two. I stood atop a knoll in the shade of maple, oak, birch and pine trees, peering over the roof of a boathouse and northeast into the lake. Defying the acidic soil and dense shade, a sparse crew cut of fine-blade grass struggled through the layer of pine needles under foot. Tree roots projected above the thin layer of soil like arthritic fingers, seeking to anchor themselves among cracks in the rock beneath. Each step I'd taken to reach my vantage point had fallen on this cushion of needles and inspired fantasies out of *The Last of the Mohicans*. Traffic on the lake was light, this being a Thursday afternoon. Mike Turner, head of Turner Marine Group, and I had arranged to meet at the boathouse below. Turner imports mahogany runabouts built in Como, Italy, by Comitti Wooden Boats s.r.l. and he planned to exhibit the 8-meter Portofino and her sister, the 6.5-meter Sanremo, at a show of classic wooden boats scheduled for August in Lake George Village. Meanwhile, though, he had time to play—to show off his boat and acquaint me with the style of boating that remains popular on Lake George well into the age of fiberglass. Recreational boating thrived early

on many of the lakes of the Adirondacks, thanks in part to the articles of George Washington Sears, or "Nessmuk," as his readers knew him—wood drake in the Narragansett language. A frail and tiny man, he traveled the lakes aboard a decked 20-pound lapstrake canoe built by J. Henry Rushton of Canton, New York. Nessmuk's articles appeared in *Forest and Stream* magazine in the 1880s and sent other adventurers flocking to the lakes for the wilderness experience. As the internal-combustion engine excised the romance from self-propulsion, motorboats replaced canoes on the larger lakes. And then Lake George captured the spotlight as the place for speedboating. Lake George is one of the jewels of the Adirondack Park, a preserve of six million acres in northeastern New York. The park borders Lake Champlain on the east, reaches north to within a stone's throw of the Canadian border, west to within about 30 miles of Watertown and south to Saratoga Springs. The region's many lakes (about two dozen), its close proximity to the state capital, Albany, and reasonably easy access by train from New York City helped assure the park's popularity as a summer getaway. Size probably contributed as much as its location to Lake George's popularity as a venue for speedboating. It is 32 miles long, a maximum of three miles wide and has 109 miles of tortuous shoreline. Huge underground springs feed these 44 square miles of boating heaven, and about 300 islands create wonderfully intimate coves and possibilities for picnics or exploration ashore. Plate tectonics, glaciers of the ice age and erosion from flowing water built the Adirondack Mountains and lakes. Lake George ranges to 195 feet in depth, and a lot of the shoreline is nearly vertical, allowing boats to maneuver within inches of it. True to the tradition of boating on Lake George, Turner and the

Portofino emerged from behind the point going like the clappers. What a great-looking boat, I thought. Turner throttled back, the Portofino pulled in her skirts and settled to displacement speed. Her soft edges; raked, arced and tumblehome stern; wrap-around windscreen and bright finish reminded me of the speedboats built by Riva in the 1950s. And no wonder, both builders hailing from the same area. Mario Comitti opened his shop on in 1956. Like any self-respecting Italian male, he liked speed, so he designed and built his boats to be fast. Comitti's son, Elia, raced the boats, won consistently, and established his father's reputation as an exceptionally talented builder. Unlike Riva, which no longer builds in wood, Comitti remains dedicated to the material—if not to the old techniques. The company employs the wood epoxy saturation technique (WEST) made famous by the Gougeon Brothers. Craftsmen plank the topsides with full-length matched mahogany boards over two courses of mahogany veneer set at 45 degrees to one another. The entire laminate is set in epoxy and vacuum-bagged. Below the waterline, craftsmen plank the bottom with RINA-certified marine plywood, mechanically fastened and epoxied to mahogany or oak stringers and frames. The structure is stiff, and the wood quiets the boat's interaction with the water in a way that you have to experience to believe. I hurried to the boathouse to catch lines, but Turner had idled into an empty space as though he were parking a car. Sheltered from the wind, blowing 8 to 10 knots out of the south, the Portofino glided to the softest of landings, Turner's right hand on a piling to save the varnished topsides. Not to worry, the Stoppani varnish is nearly as durable as gelcoat (although scratches in this finish do look worse). We planned to take a spin for the sake of experiencing the Portofino's speed and handling, then to collect

Turner's wife, M.J., and two of their friends, Chris and Sherry, at their place a bit north of Silver Bay. Our tour of the shoreline would end with dinner at The Algonquin Restaurant in Bolton Landing, the traditional feeding and watering hole of the western shore. Before we cast off, Turner rummaged through the boathouse, looking for bottled water to take with us. Failing to find any, he simply filled a couple of empties from the lake. The springs beneath Lake George continuously feed pure water to it from the mouth of the lake at the southern end. As long as the residents and businesses along the shore carefully monitor runoff and septic systems, the lake should remain clean for centuries. Like adolescents let loose alone in the family's speedboat for the first time, Turner and I headed into the lake and opened the throttle to the stops. A 300 hp MerCruiser V-8 spinning a Bravo Three sterndrive provided the thrust. The contra-rotating props took a solid bite of water and hurled the boat forward. We planed off in a heartbeat and soon reached the Portofino's top speed of 47.7 knots, by my GPS. She sped across the top of the lake's one-foot chop, responding to steering inputs like a BMW M3 on the Pacific Coast Highway. What fun. The clock crowded 5 p.m. when we stopped in Hague to pick up M.J., Chris and Sherry. A great clamoring of arms, legs, tote bags, liquid-filled canisters, sweaters, windbreakers and five separate conversations followed the ritual introductions. Although the Portofino has a reasonable amount of stowage under the dashboard, she's a bit tight on space for stuff. Two of us in front, three in back and gear in the nooks and crannies around our feet, we headed south, chauffeured by Turner, the evening's dedicated driver. Sherry opened her bottle of margaritas. "Would anyone like one?" We made quite a contrast from the early days of navigation on the lake.

During the last decades of the 19th century and well into the 20th century, stern-wheel steamboats served as the region's public transportation system. A few of these relics remain to take passengers for tours of the lake: majestic and unhurried, great ornate conveyances panting like teams of oxen as their giant paddlewheels beat the surface of the lake. Summer residents, though, preferred to drive themselves. Wooden runabouts darted to and fro on the lake, carried families to parties, picnics, the store, restaurants, the post office—nearly everywhere but the mountaintops. Families simply went for drives as they would in their automobiles and as we were doing in the Portofino. Lake George is a culture on the water, and of boathouses to go along with boats. Weather is the main reason boathouses punctuate the entire developed shoreline of Lake George, but doesn't explain why they're so cozy. For that you need to see families, as I did, making use of them: swimming, entertaining, hanging out and messing about with their boats. Summer residents built many of the boathouses prior to World War II, when the availability of relatively lightweight gasoline-fueled engines lit a fire under the recreational boating market. In those days, every boathouse on the lake sheltered at least one mahogany runabout or launch, built by Hacker-Craft, Gar Wood, Chris-Craft, Ditchburn, Fay & Bowen, Shepherd, Dodge and others. They provide an intimate setting, out of the sun and weather. Although a rustic version of Victorian architecture characterizes the early boathouses, "contrived rustic" might better describe many of the newer ones, including the one that now houses the Portofino. We circumnavigated Green Island, the site of The Sagamore, an exclusive resort that opened in 1883 and was restored a hundred years later. On the eastern shore, we stole among a handful of islands, two of which were connected by arched

footbridges. On another island, a young couple lay draped over a huge, smooth rock taking the sun. Where was their boat, we wondered? We didn't see any other wooden boats until we checked in at The Algonquin for dinner. One of the handful of mahogany runabouts docked at the restaurant was a late 1930s double-cockpit Chris-Craft that belonged to Jenny, a friend of my companions. As she was headed north, too, we decided to run together after our meal. We rendezvoused about 100 yards from the docks and set off north through the darkness, our Comitti off the starboard quarter of the Chris. Relying on Jenny's superior local knowledge as our guide, we sped over the water, picking up unlighted red markers in the moonlight as though we were on an interstate highway. Finally, Jenny and her crew peeled off amid whoops of farewell, her Chris's exhaust snapping epithets at our civilized Comitti. What a fine end to a wonderful day on Lake George. Contact: Turner Marine Group, (802) 863-9853; www.comittigroup.com/NA. Lake George Association, www.lakegeorgeassociation.org.