

Living in BROCKVILLE

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Ian Coristine

His View of the 1000 Islands

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BROCKVILLE'S HOMETOWN MAGAZINE

Cover Feature

Ian Cristine

By Laura Wright



"What people don't realize is that I'm up before dawn in the hopes of catching the early morning light. And all too often I come back with bugs in my teeth from hanging out the side of the plane to catch a good shot," he says with a laugh. "Not to mention the frostbite from flying around at dawn with the doors off the plane,"

Ian Cristine

It isn't often that you get to sit down with a man of passion, if you'll pardon the description, but that is just what I had the opportunity to do a while back when I spent the afternoon with local photographer Ian Cristine. On a sunny spring day that felt more like summer I had a chance to get to know the man who has adopted the Thousand Islands as his home and has become one of its most vocal champions.

I originally thought spending time with Cristine would be rather glamorous. I envisioned us flying around the countryside, perhaps swooping down out of the skies to stop for lunch somewhere. Cristine dashed my dream when he told me that he doesn't fly until the water is a little warmer. Apparently flying a floatplane in April, when hypothermia will set in rather quickly should you end up in the water, is something to be avoided. Then he explained that his life is nowhere near as exciting as people might think. The incredible aerial images of the area for which Cristine is known come with a certain degree of sacrifice. "What people don't realize is that I'm up before dawn in the hopes of catching the early morning light. And all too often I come back with bugs in my teeth from hanging out the side of the plane to catch a good shot," he says with a laugh. "Not to mention the frostbite from flying around at dawn with the doors off the plane," he adds.

Cristine's three books of images of the Thousand Islands have sold a combined total of almost 55,000 copies. Cristine is the first to admit that he had no idea what he was getting into when he decided to publish the first book in 2002, but it was a best-seller within weeks of being published. Much of his success is directly attributable to his perseverance. "I sold the book door to door like the Fuller Brush man," Cristine says with a grin. He even made sales calls to stores up and down the river with his new puppy tucked in his jacket. "She was too young to leave on the island by herself," he explains. "And she was so cute that she helped me get into more than a few places."

For all intents and purposes, Ian Cristine has led a charmed life. After a comfortable upbringing in an affluent Montreal neighbourhood, he drove racing cars, flew across the U.S. a number of times in his Challenger ultralight, and now spends his days taking aerial photographs of his favorite place in the whole world. He has a wife he loves, children he adores, a dog who epitomizes the term "man's best friend" and he lives from "ice-out to ice-in," as he puts it, on the island he purchased in 1995 after falling in love with the area.

But don't be fooled into thinking that Cristine has had things handed to him on a silver platter. Cristine is a man who believes in putting 100% into everything he does, and that philosophy has paid off in the things he has achieved in his life, not the least of which are his



books. "I don't understand why you would only put seventy percent into something you do," says Cristine, "because then you can only hope for a seventy-percent result. What a waste of time."

From the time he was a little boy Cristine had two goals – to drive racing cars and to fly planes. In 1967, at the age of 18, he started racing cars in Montreal, although funds were limited so his first years were spent driving a clapped-out Mini, which was all he could afford to buy. He showed promise, although without a better car his prospects were limited. Even though racing was not the career Cristine's mother had dreamed of for her son, she understood how important it was to him and gave him the money that was to have gone towards a university education. With \$5,000 in hand, Cristine purchased a Formula Ford. "I wasn't prepared for how much faster that car was," laughs Cristine. "It took some getting used to."

“A couple of months ago, someone from Vancouver who is writing a book on Canadian racing contacted me for photos and I dug out some ancient albums and scanned some pictures which really ring my memory bells. This is my 1972 March 722 in which I competed in the Player’s Challenge Series and won one race”.



But Coristine’s talent soon outstripped his ability to fund his racing. He won three championships, but at the time car racing didn’t enjoy the popularity it does today so sponsorship dollars were difficult to find, even for a talented young racer. He found sufficient support to help him graduate to still faster Formula B cars in the Player’s Challenge Series National Championship, but funds to run the car were very limited. Coristine remembers leaving Montreal for a race in Edmonton with his racing car on the trailer hitched to the old truck he was driving. In his pocket was a whopping \$75 – all the money he had – to cover all his and his mechanic’s personal and racing expenses. “One sponsor gave us an Esso card rather than giving us cash. At the time you could use your Esso card for gas only but they were giving away coupons for A&W Teen Burgers, so my mechanic and I lived on nothing else because that’s all we could afford,” Coristine shares with the cheeky grin of a man who can now look back on his youthful antics with a laugh.

But he wasn’t laughing when he retired from racing in 1973, at the age of 24. He was mentally and physically exhausted, \$51,000 in debt, and demoralized by the death of a fellow racer on the circuit. Coristine was replaced on the team by a talented young driver named Gilles Villeneuve, who to this day Coristine speaks of with fondness. “It is not often that you meet someone who is a genius at what he does, but Gilles was.”

Fast forward to 1992, when Coristine first discovered the Thousand Islands. His business was distributing Challenger ultralights across Canada. While on a spur-of-the-moment flying trip with a couple of friends he stumbled upon the Thousand Islands while following the path of the St. Lawrence River. For Coristine, it was love at first sight. “When I saw the islands, I couldn’t begin to understand how I had lived two hours away all my life but never knew they existed.” A few years later he bought a small island just west of Brockville, the circumference of which could probably be walked in fifteen minutes if it weren’t for the fact that you feel compelled to stop and gaze around in wonderment at the view every hundred feet or so.

Coristine’s love of the area brought him into contact with Paul Malo, an architect, historian and author who died in 2008 at the age of 78 having devoted much of his life to the preservation of the architecture

and history of the Thousand Islands. “Paul was the dean of architecture at Syracuse University and I didn’t even have a university education, but we both felt a deep connection to this place and wanted to build a greater appreciation for it,” explains Coristine about his relationship with the man he considered to be both friend and mentor. According to Coristine, Malo was one of the area’s greatest advocates and one whose passion and knowledge can’t be replaced. As his illness advanced, he poured all his energy into an online magazine, ThousandIslandsLife.com, which continues to this day as a resource for those who want to know more about the history and the culture of the Thousand Islands. “He still had volumes of information to share about the area, and that is a real loss for all of us.” But Malo was perhaps a better historian and architect than a business man, as Coristine can attest. “He advised me not to publish my first book because he was sure I’d lose my shirt. Instead, he suggested I buy Nortel,” Coristine shares with a hearty chuckle.

Coristine’s passion for the Thousand Islands led him to strike up a friendship with Simon Fuller, who he believes has the vision and the means to change the history and prosperity of Brockville for the better. According to Coristine, Malo also recognized Fuller’s ability to return the area to its former glory. “Paul knew that Simon could be the facilitator of great things. What Simon is offering is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” says Coristine. “If it goes away, what replaces it will be a shadow of what could have been. He’s trying to make a contribution to Canada the way his family has always done it, by building something of importance that will last,” says Coristine about Fuller, whose family legacy includes the Fuller Building in downtown Brockville and the Canadian parliament buildings.

The legacy that Coristine hopes to leave is one of building a greater appreciation for these Thousand Islands that we call home. “Most people are unaware that one of the world’s great places lies in our midst,” laments Coristine. “It’s a place that when you truly understand what’s here, has the power to change your life,” says Coristine. And that’s exactly what it did.