

How to Drive to Ottawa

To Torontonians, getting to Ottawa or Carleton Place may pose a challenge. Torontonians expect any city worth visiting to be on the 401, or at least on a highway that originates in Toronto like the 401, 400, 403 or QEW. If a city is not located on these highways, well, it raises some red flags. Can you drive there? Are the roads paved? Do you need chains on your tires in the winter? Which side of the road does one drive on? Are there gas stations, and do you need to carry a 10 gallon jerry can of gasoline? This note should help put Torontonian's minds at ease about the trip east.

I will note here that there are Ontarians than don't live in the GTA. There is another culture that believes that highway 17, not the 401, is the backbone of the province of Ontario, and if your city is not on this highway, then your status as an Ontarian is questioned. Indeed, when you head west from Montreal, you are faced with an existential choice: shall I take Autoroute 20 which leads to the 401 and eventually to Detroit, Michigan (of all places), or Autoroute 40 which leads to the 417, which is really Hwy 17, the Trans-Canada Highway. So, I'll leave you as the judge: which deserves the moniker of Ontario's main artery: the 401 which leads to Detroit, or the Trans-Canada Highway, which leads to Vancouver, via every province in-between?

I once had a visitor from England (where they do drive on the other side of the road), who asked me where highway 417 went. I responded with something line Arnprior or Renfrew, which caused him some confusion. "No, really, where does it go if you take it all the way?" Oh, I said, the Pacific Ocean if you go west, and the Atlantic Ocean if you go east. This is what he wanted to hear, and he was very impressed. This Trans-Canada Highway, Hwy 17, can take you from coast to coast. The 401 can't do THAT for you!

By the way, only foreigners say "Highway 401" (and if it is enunciated as "highway four-hundred-and-one", your first language could not possibly be Canadian). Ontarians say "the 401", as if "the" is a short form for "The Kings Highway". Mind you, this may be a big city phenomenon, as no-one would say "the 17" or "the 7". Americans eliminate the "highway" and "the" entirely; you refer to "I95" without any prefix. I conclude that the word "the" before a highway number is shorthand for "a wide limited access highway in Ontario".

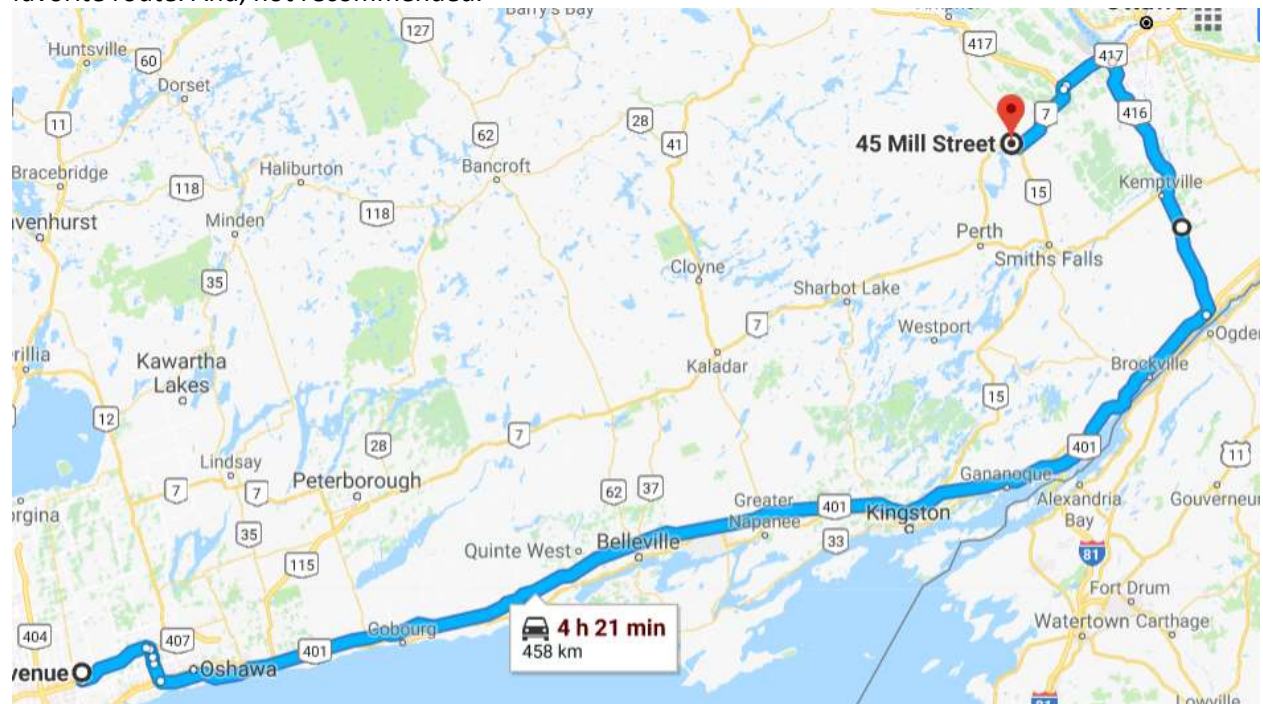
In any case, Ottawa, which is an Eastern Ontario city, not a Southern Ontario city, probably aligns itself with the Hwy 17 gang. Carleton Place is on Hwy 7, which is connected efficiently to Ottawa, joining Hwy 417 (which is a close brother to Hwy 17, of course) in the western fringes of Ottawa., So in spite of it being an artery through the GTA, Hwy 7 probably has mixed alliances and a bit of an identity crisis.

It was not always thus. If you go back 70 years, Hwy 7 did not reach Carleton Place or Ottawa. It stopped at Perth. Hwy 15 took a circuitous route from Kingston to Smiths Falls, then Perth, Carleton Place, and Ottawa. It was only in the 1950's that Hwy 7 took something closer to its current route.

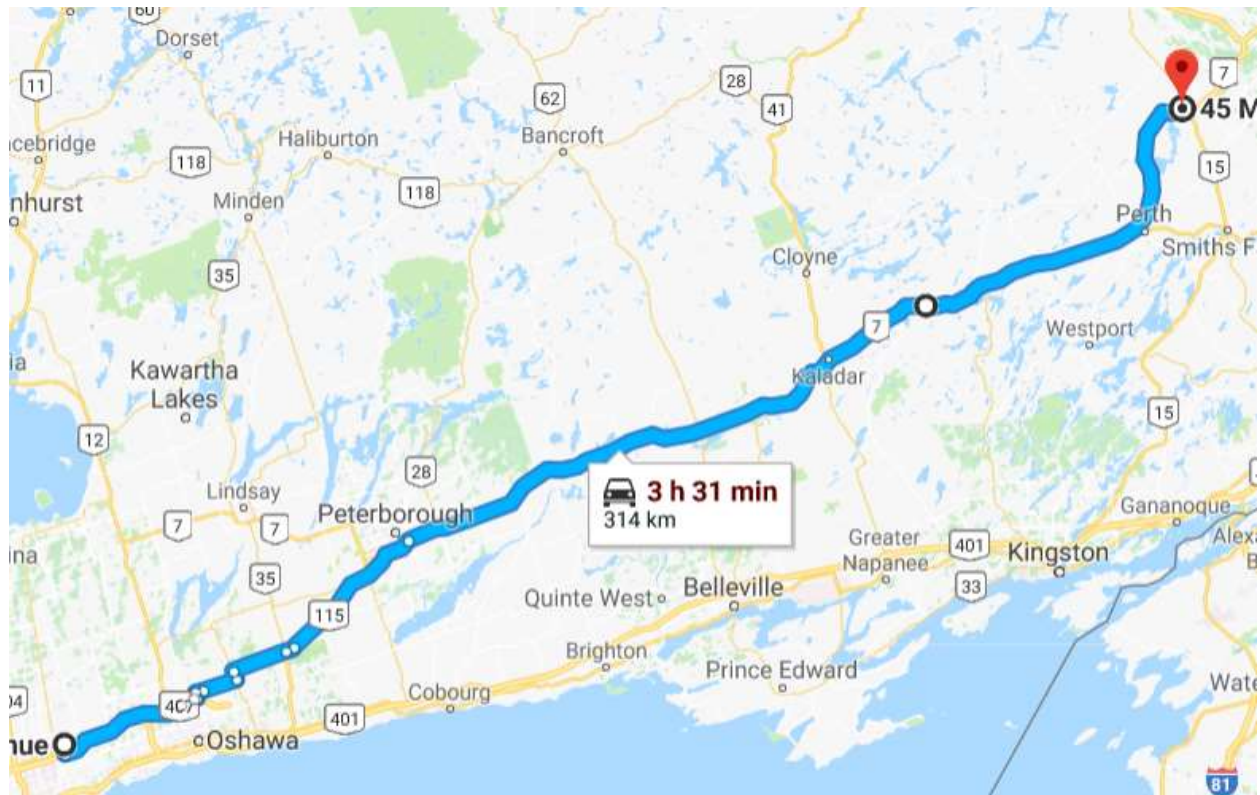
So, how best to drive from Toronto to Carleton Place? There are many routes to choose from, you're your choice will depend on your driving preferences, your urgency, the weather, and the season.

If you simply must use "the" highways, you will take the 401 east to the 416 at Prescott, then north until it ends at the 417 (or "the Queensway", not to be confused with "the Queensway" in the GTA or even more confusingly, "the Queen Elizabeth Way", which runs parallel to "the Queensway" in the GTA. I wonder how many tourists were confused by that?) in Ottawa, then west to Hwy 7, and to Carleton Place. Two lanes in each direction, entirely a "limited access" highway, paved the whole way. Boring.

And, long, 458km from 64 Cornell Park Ave, or 496km from PCR. Well over 100km longer than our favorite route. And, not recommended.



On the other extreme, you can entirely avoid the 401. From Markham, take the 407 to Hwy 115, which you take north, then east, to Peterborough, then Hwy 7 the rest of the way. This is how Kelley and I do it. There is a good quick greasy spoon restaurant, Jack's, in Norwood at the railroad bridge (not to be confused with Jakes, east of Norwood. And avoid "The Ranch" between Havelock and Marmora; although the lot is always busy, it is a deceptive trap). Hwy 7 is picturesque, going thru Canadian Shield and wilderness. Paved all the way, drive on the right side of the road. You'll slow down at Norwood, Havelock, Marmora, and Perth. You'll see signs for Silver Lake, Sharbot Lake, Kaladar, Madoc, and Peterborough. There are passing lanes, but never when you need them the most. Pleasant drive, even in the winter. The only caveat is that this route is busy with Toronto traffic (up to Madoc, where Hwy 62 turns up to Bancroft) on long weekends in the summer. (This is not an issue for those living in Ottawa, as we are going the other way, but is a factor for Torontonians to consider. Hwy 37 might be better in this case) 315km from 64 Cornell Park Avenue to 45 Mill St. From Port Credit, we take the 427 to the 407, but you could also take the 401 to highway 35/115 to Peterborough, 372km from PCR.



In-between, there are other ways to get from Carleton Place to Toronto:

- Hwy 15 goes south from Carleton Place to the 401 (at Kingston) via Smiths Falls. If you really like the 400 series highways, this may be the one for you, but also consider county road 10 (below). Smith's Falls can be a bit messy if you miss the poorly marked bypass around downtown. 364km to Cornell Park Ave, 401km to PCR.
- You can take Hwy 15 south to Franktown, then right on county road 10. This road will take you thru Perth, Westport (and Rideau Lake cottage country), Perth Road, and becomes Division St. in Kingston. Uncle Don's cottage was on this route. A very pleasant but twisty road, lovely in fall, not a good choice in the winter. Bring your GPS, because county road 10 makes some turns that are very easy to miss. 357km to Cornell park Ave. 394km to PCR. A slower but shorter road than Hwy 15 thru Smiths Falls, but I prefer it, and yes, indeed it is paved.
- If you take Hwy 7 west out of Carleton Place, there are several routes that will take you back down to the 401. The most popular is probably Hwy 37 that goes thru Tweed. This is the preferred route for the Greyhound busses, and was our preferred route for many years. 344km to Cornell Park Ave, 381km to PCR. Note that the Holyrood restaurant is now closed.
- You can also take Hwy 7 west to county road 41 south (originally Hwy 41) to Napanee. 362km to Cornell Park Ave, 399km to PCR. This road is very remote, goes thru the middle of nowhere, and I haven't taken it in years!
- There are others like Hwy 62 or Hwy 38, but they're longer and I have never tried them. Or, go thru Bancroft if you really want a beautiful but very long drive!

