

Sometimes the Best Travel Is Closest to Home

An Upstate New Yorker discovers unimaginable delights in the Finger Lakes, her childhood "backyard"

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The Middle Falls At Letchworth State Park

I'm not a member of the "100-countries" club, aka the [Century Club](#), but I have been around. I've been to every continent (except Antarctica), 55 countries and, closer to home, all but seven U.S. states. I've been known to fly halfway around the world on a few days' notice for a week-long trip. If I have my way, someday I *will* join the Century Club's elite travel community.

Despite all the traveling I've done as an adult, I led a rather parochial life growing up. Our family didn't venture far, mostly just to visit relatives further north in New York. I think I crossed state lines exactly once — to Hershey, PA. — an obligatory vacation for families in that part of the country. We took that other de rigueur trip, to Niagara Falls, though I can't recall whether we dipped a toe into Canada. Even if we did, we would've stayed in a cheap American motel and eaten at familiar chain restaurants.

I officially caught the travel bug right after college, when my beau invited me to accompany him to Germany, where he'd spent his junior year and now had a three-month job. I jumped at the chance. When time was up, we got teaching jobs, extended our stay by a year, visited 10 countries and dubbed our VW beetle "Wanderlust."

Once back in the States, I was chomping at the bit to get out again and returned to Europe at least once a year for some time. Once I got into scuba diving, my horizons widened (or should I say deepened?), and I traded megalithic

cathedrals and cobblestone pedestrian zones for warm water and great reefs. During really busy travel periods, I kept a suitcase half-packed and my passport ready to grab on a moment's notice.

I wasn't uninterested in places closer to home; I was just young and impressionable and always in search of the next Big Wow.

A New York State of Mind

This past summer, my sister and I were planning to attend a multi-class reunion in our hometown upstate. Since we both had some vacation time, we decided to turn a fun weekend into a sensational week.

We set some logistical parameters and I immediately suggested the furthest realistic-yet-most-exotic place — Canada! — all the more compelling because my sister had never seen Toronto. ("It's like driving to Europe," I told her.)

Then we had a brainstorm. Growing up, we *knew* about the Finger Lakes, all of 60 miles away. I'd always heard people gush over their beauty, but aside from a couple of trips to [Watkins Glen](#), I'd never quite made it there.

Planning the trip was a whole other animal. For starters, there are 11 lakes in the group (with exotic Indian names like Owasco, Otisco, Honeoye and Seneca) and 650 miles of shoreline. The 9,000-square-mile [region](#) sprawls from Lake Ontario to the Pennsylvania border. But I knew exactly how to plan the perfect trip: I'd let my sister do it.

We realized that four days wasn't nearly enough to squeeze in everything we wanted to do: hiking, eating, doing water activities (there are 1,063 waterfalls in the region!), horseback riding and antiquing. In addition to drinking in the natural beauty, there was going to be a lot of actual drinking. The Finger Lakes, that blue handprint smack in the middle of western New York, are home to more than 100 winemakers.

Getting a Handle on the Finger Lakes

We reached the area at noon and kicked off the trip with a wine-tasting lunch at one of the premier tasting rooms, [Fox Run](#). The former dairy dates to 1865, but for the past 23 years, it's been cranking out a very different kind of drink.

The lunch counter's offerings were as vast and tempting as the tasting area's. It was impossible to select just one thing, so we shared a board of New York State cheeses and fruit and tapas. The highlight: garlic-pesto sautéed mushrooms.

I'd had some Finger Lakes wines before and was under the impression they were supersweet native grapes (as opposed to more sophisticated old-world ones). I could not have been more wrong. While Riesling put the region on the map, today it successfully produces award-winning, world-class white and red wines, many that came from European vines.

At Fox Run my misconceptions were corrected. We did the full tasting (15 varietals): one sparkling wine, eight whites and six reds. They ranged from quite decent to good enough to bring home. Among our samplings was the now-famous [Tierce](#), a collaborative blend made with two other local winemakers that was served at the 2013 Presidential Inaugural Luncheon. It has the distinction of being the only one the decision-makers were in 100 percent agreement about.

This kind of team spirit defines the local wine industry. Vintners are more into cooperation than competition, helping each other pick grapes, bottle wines and promote one another. It's not a marketing gimmick, it's a reflection of the local character — and it's evident in everything from the way they speak about other producers to how much they

genuinely care about their guests.

Next stop was [Glenora](#), a justifiably favorite destination of tourists and locals alike. All the rooms face Seneca Lake — I could have sat on our terrace all day and night. The full moon over the lake was a (huge) bonus. But there was more wine to taste — a lot of it. Glenora produces 30 to 40 different varietals in its half-million-dollar super-high-tech bottling system from Italy.

In the spirit of Finger Lakes cooperation, Glenora does bottling and labeling for some of its “competitors.” But there’s one place they’ve got the others beat: their wine-and-chocolate tasting, offered every day on demand. After our dual tastings, we enjoyed a spectacular meal outdoors and continued to watch the moon rise and reflect spookily in the lake.

My sister might have missed out on a European-flavored city, but she did get to sleep in a castle. The history of the [Belhurst Castle](#) property is a lively one, involving the Iroquois Nation, multiple white owners, poisoning, deaths, insanity, gambling, a Prohibition speakeasy and embezzlement. Eventually the wife of an industrialist came up with the plan to build the castle. It took 50 men working four years to finally get the job done.

Today it’s on the National Register of Historic Properties and is regularly selected as one of the most romantic destinations in the state. It’s a popular venue for weddings from spring until late fall, they average two weddings per weekend. The server at our (amazing) dinner told us the brides are so beautiful, she’s always in tears.

The inside of the old castle is worth a tour in and of itself. Every room is furnished differently, and exquisitely. In the days before indoor plumbing, a dumbwaiter transported water to a spigot. Today that beverage has been replaced by wine — guests can help themselves to vino on demand.

We were all set to splurge on the divine [Mirbeau Inn and Spa](#), but they were fully booked. So we had to settle for the kind of massage that puts the “ah” in spa and a dinner on the terrace overlooking the Monet-inspired gardens. My sister got her second taste of Europe, and we tried to will the sun not to set so our magical view wouldn’t disappear, but we weren’t successful.

Hate to See Us Go

Our final stop was Skaneateles, at the northern tip of the lake of the same name (and host of a Dickens Fest every December, when the town morphs into 1840s London). A jewel of a community, it boasts a very progressive, abolitionist, utopian past and stunning mansions lining its main street. We stayed just outside of town, at a delightful Colonial Revival B+B called [Hobbit Hollow](#). While our rooms were cozy and impressively appointed, the highlight was breakfast outdoors, fastidiously prepared and served by a professionally trained chef.

The property is run by the same folks who manage the popular downtown Sherwood Inn (a former stagecoach stop), and we were treated to a tour of that big-wow property, across from the lake, plus a few of their others. We were instructed not to skip the extraordinary [Patisserie](#) around back, so we indulged in their famous sourdough bread, and my sister had a cookie that she’s still talking about.

On the drive down to our reunion, we relived highlights of the trip — too numerous to recount — and agreed that we were happy we’d waited until our 50s to finally have discovered this marvelous gem so close to home. We noted that the towns (and the wines) have grown up as much as we have. We hated leaving, but we consoled ourselves with the knowledge the most amazing time to visit is actually fall, when the foliage rivals any landscape anywhere. We know we’ll be back — season after season.