

The Best of the Niagara Region

You hear it before you see it, a low constant rumble that poets have called the “mighty voice of thunder.” Then you see the ever-present mist, often shot through with rainbows when the sun hits. Only when you reach the edge of the gorge can you see and be awed by the immensity that is Niagara Falls.

This is one of the iconic geographical wonders of the world, a unique creation of nature, carved into the landscape by wind, ice, and water over 12,000 years along the 11km (7 miles) of the Niagara River Gorge. It’s an unforgettable experience to watch 2,832 cubic meters (100,000 cubic ft.) of water per second rush over the edge of the Falls, as waters from the Upper Great Lakes Basin empty over the 52m-high (170-ft.) precipice. To stand at Table Rock, where the first visitors to North America must have once stared in wonder, is a potent reminder of the power of nature.

Still, no matter how many times you may visit, the power of these falls never fails to silence conversation. There is a kind of rhythm that synchronizes between the rushing water and the human pulse. It’s electrifying.

Yet Niagara has much more to offer. Move back from the Falls and you’ll find yourself in the center of a bustling entertainment zone that ranges from upscale hotels and cafes to casinos and nightclubs. A few miles from the Falls, the rhythm changes again and you’ll find yourself immersed in some of the finest parklands, gardens, and pathways in the country. A drive down the Niagara Parkway brings you to wine country, with vineyards, wine chateaus, and, in the milder months, roadside stands that sell fresh local fruits and vegetables for a spontaneous picnic on the banks of the Niagara River.

In historic Niagara-on-the-Lake, often called “the prettiest town in Canada,” tree-lined streets invite you to take a leisurely stroll past elegant Victorian and Edwardian homes. The village is also a thriving arts community, with several galleries and artists’ studios, not to mention the annual Shaw Theatre Festival, presented by the only theater in the world specializing exclusively in plays by George Bernard Shaw and his contemporaries.

And the region is steeped in history, from the pageantry of old Fort George, to the architecture of St. Marks Church, which dates from 1791 and was used during the War of 1812 as a hospital by the British and then as a barracks by the Americans.

The Escarpment, which cradles the Niagara Peninsula, has blessed the area with a temperate micro-climate that produces the excellent grapes and tender fruit which have made the Peninsula famous. It also provides some of the best biking and hiking trails in the province. There are several small, well-preserved, archetypal southern Ontario towns, like Jordan, Beamsville, Vineland, and Grimsby, each with its own character, each well worth a visit.

In addition, there are some intriguing day tours to Welland, Port Dover, St. Catharines, and Hamilton that can expand your visit to Niagara.

1 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE NIAGARA REGION EXPERIENCES

- Visiting the Falls:** It's the jewel in the crown and the unmistakable center of attention for visitors. You haven't done the Falls justice if you've only seen them once. To see them in bright sunshine, with a "sunbow" in the mist, is one kind of thrill, but seeing the Falls illuminated at night is a different kind of beauty. My favorite views are the winter ones, when nearby trees turn into ice sculptures from the spray, and, in particularly cold winters, an ice bridge forms. You can walk behind the Falls, gaze at them from below on the *Maid of the Mist*, or fly over them by helicopter. See chapter 7.
- Dining in Wine Country:** With more than 80 different wineries, Niagara has an embarrassment of great wines. The area also offers some of the best dining in the country. A casual lunch on a patio terrace, with views of the vineyards and the lake—perhaps accompanied by a chilled glass of the Riesling that Niagara does so well—is an ideal way to spend a summer afternoon. See chapter 8.
- Walking Through the Spring Blossoms:** Blossom Sunday is traditionally celebrated on the Sunday before Mother's Day, when the orchards are alive with color—ivory, white, and pink from apple, cherry, pear, apricot, and peach blossoms. Formal gardens, like Queen Victoria Park near the Falls, are ablaze with tulips, daffodils, foxglove, and muscari in the spring, and continue with vibrant colors right through to first frost. See chapter 7.
- Immersing Yourself in History:** Fort Niagara, Fort George, Old Fort Erie, and Fort Mississauga are testaments to the War of 1812. A visit to one of these forts will take you back in time. Lundy's Lane Historical Museum, like the Niagara Falls Museum, contains artifacts from that period, as well as a significant collection of items from the early days of the Falls. See chapter 7.
- Immersing Yourself in Culture:** In addition to the celebrated Shaw Theatre Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, a variety of niche museums abound, ranging from a dollhouse collection to a printing museum, as well as artists' galleries, like the Angie Strauss Gallery in Niagara-on-the-Lake. See chapter 7.
- Niagara Wine Festival and the Harvest Experience:** There are more than 100 events including tastings, tours, concerts, artisan shows, and family entertainment as the area celebrates the grape harvest in late September. Many of the wineries are eager to welcome the real aficionado to participate in the harvest—especially some of the smaller wineries where much of the work of harvesting and sorting the grapes is done by hand. See chapter 7.

2 THE BEST SPLURGE HOTELS

- Harbour House Hotel** (85 Melville St., Niagara-on-the-Lake; ☎ 905/468-4683; www.ontariosfinestinn.com): With its large, light-filled rooms in soft colors, Harbour House provides a homey respite for the visitor. Breakfast is served in the conservatory, with the hotel's famous homemade granola, and a complimentary tasting of local wines is served at 4pm in the library lobby.

Harbour House is in easy walking distance to the theater, restaurants, or shopping, and is a stone's throw from the lake and the sailing boats. See p. 68.

- **Sheraton Fallsview Hotel & Conference Center** (6755 Fallsview Blvd., Niagara Falls, ON; ☎ 905/374-1077): For the ultimate sleepover that includes the Falls, check into a falls-view loft suite at the Sheraton Fallsview. Two-story-high windows capture the entire dramatic view. See p. 61.
- **Prince of Wales** (6 Picton St., Niagara-on-the-Lake; ☎ 905/468-3245; www.vintage-hotels.com): Once a bit too fussy for most tastes, the Prince of Wales Hotel has been carefully recalibrated and the result is an opulent hotel with rooms that are rich with natural light and uniquely designed bedrooms. There's a fresh rose on your pillow each night. The hotel's Churchill Bar is the watering hole of choice for actors and theater people. See p. 70.
- **The Sterling Inn & Spa** (5195 Magdalen St., Niagara Falls, ON; ☎ 289/292-0000; www.sterlingniagara.com): This boutique inn spoils its visitors with large rooms, dark wood floors, and oversized showers with rain shower heads and body jets, as well as two-person Jacuzzis. **One** is the in-house spa, and the dining room, **AG**, serves some of the best food in the area. All the attractions of the Falls are a short walk away. See p. 64.
- **The Oban Inn Spa Restaurant** (160 Front St., Niagara-on-the-Lake; ☎ 905/468-2165; www.obaninn.ca): The inn began life as a private home in 1824, and was extensively renovated in 2006. Rooms are decorated in an English Country style with contemporary accents. There are views of the lake and of the oldest golf course in Ontario. The **OSpa** is a soothing space that includes a lap pool and an outdoor hot spring and steam room. See p. 68.

3 BEST MODERATELY PRICED HOTELS

- **Doubletree Fallsview Resort & Spa** (6039 Fallsview Blvd., Niagara Falls, ON; ☎ 905/358-3817; www.niagarafallsdoubletree.com): The public spaces of this hotel recall the designs of the Frank Lloyd Wright era, with the feel of a National Park Lodge. Ask for a king-bed room with Jacuzzi and a view of the American Falls. See p. 62.
- **Black Walnut Manor** (4255 Victoria Ave., Vineland Station; ☎ 905/562-8675; www.blackwalnutmanor.com): There is nothing that compares with the Black Walnut in the entire Niagara region. An old farmstead property in the country, it is equipped with the upscale urban amenities of a downtown boutique hotel. See p. 75.
- **Keefer Mansion Inn** (14 St. Davids St. W., Thorold; ☎ 905/680-9581; www.keefermansion.com): A perfect inn for booklovers. It's located near the largest book remaindering depot in North America, and the inn even has a Booklover's package that includes a gift certificate to the Book Depot. This carefully restored historic home has spacious rooms, each unique, and an excellent dining room and a new spa. See p. 79.
- **Old Bank House Historic Inn** (10 Front St., Niagara-on-the-Lake; ☎ 905/468-7136): With such an abundance of intriguing and charming historical properties in Niagara-on-the-Lake, choosing one to highlight seems grossly unfair. However, the Old Bank is a fine example

of the type of accommodations you can expect to find in the town. It has a prime location close to the theater, shops, and restaurants, yet it's on a quiet street steps away from Simcoe Park and Lake Ontario. Rooms are furnished in period decor, and a spacious veranda runs along the front of the house. The property's historical secret is that it was the site of the first branch of the Bank of Canada—the original vault (now restored) is still in the house. See p. 72.

- **American Loyalist Peter Secord Inn** (215 Creek Rd., St. Davids; ☎ 905/262-1030): For an affordable yet historic stay, book one of the two bedrooms in this authentic stone house that dates back to 1782, the oldest

home in Ontario. The sparkling-clean inn comes with coverlets on the four-poster beds so white they almost hurt your eyes, not to mention the polished original wide-planked floors. The inn is a short drive from both Niagara-on-the-Lake and Niagara Falls. See p. 78.

- **Three Forty Gate Bed and Breakfast** (340 Gate St., Niagara-on-the-Lake; ☎ 905/468-4319; www.threefortygate.com): You certainly don't feel like you're sleeping in Aunt Martha's back bedroom when you stay here. Three Forty Gate is sleek and attractive, and within walking distance of the heart of town. As a bonus, there's a personal greeting from Trigger, the resident yellow Labrador retriever. See p. 73.

4 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE DINING EXPERIENCES

- **De Luca's Wine Country Restaurant** (Niagara Stone Rd., Niagara-on-the-Lake; ☎ 905/468-7900; www.tonydeluca.ca): This cozy little bistro, with its long windows looking out to the vineyards, serves regional cuisine full of honest flavors. And each course is enhanced with a suggested Niagara wine pairing. See p. 91.
- **AG** (5195 Magdalen St., Niagara Falls, ON; ☎ 289/292-0000; www.sterlingniagara.com): Tucked inside the only boutique hotel in Niagara Falls is arguably the city's best restaurant. Chef Cory Linkson creates traditional French cuisine by harnessing the myriad flavors of local ingredients. An all-VQA wine list carries some exceptional offerings from regional vineyards. See p. 84.
- **Treadwell Farm to Table Cuisine** (61 Lakeport Rd., Port Dalhousie; ☎ 905/934-9797; www.treadwellcuisine.com): Voted one of the 10 best new restaurants in Canada the year it opened,

Stephen Treadwell's Farm to Table Cuisine is an homage to locality. His elegant cooking style is married beautifully to his commitment to using the freshest local ingredients. See p. 94.

- **Elements on the Falls** (6650 Niagara Pkwy., Niagara Falls, ON; ☎ 905/354-3631; www.niagaraparks.com): Chef Paul Pennock prepares inventive cuisine in a comfortable and relaxing dining room. But it's the view here that counts, as you won't find a better place to dine in style this close to the edge of the Falls. Even if you don't have dinner, sit at the bar for a martini and tapas at sunset and watch the colors change on the water. See p. 84.
- **Terroir La Cachette** (1339 Lakeshore Rd., Niagara-on-the-Lake; ☎ 905/468-1222): Although Terroir La Cachette's cuisine focuses on regional wines and ingredients, the French Provençal style that Quebecois chef Alain Levesque has perfected remains at the heart of the

restaurant's dishes. It's a perfect partnership—French sensibilities and the best local ingredients. The dining room overlooks the vineyards. See p. 102.

- **Vineland Estates Winery Restaurant** (3620 Moyer Rd., Vineland; ☎ 888/846-3526): This was at one time the flagship winery dining room, the one

that set the pace and style for many of the other wineries to follow. It is still one of the prettiest places to dine in the Peninsula, especially outside on the patio on a fine day. The menu is seasonal and local, and the views of the vineyards, especially at sunset, are enchanting. See p. 102.

5 THE MOST ROMANTIC NIAGARA MOMENTS

- **Awakening to a Perfect View of the Falls from Your Bed:** The high-rise hotels on Fallsview Avenue in Niagara Falls, Ontario, have spectacular views of the Falls from many of their rooms. Try the Konica-Minolta Tower Centre, which has an angled floor-to-ceiling wall of windows and king-size beds, or the Sheraton Fallsview Hotel & Conference Centre, which has stunning loft suites with a two-story wall of windows. Order breakfast in bed, throw open the curtains, and luxuriate in the spectacular views. See p. 65 and p. 61.
- **A Horse-Drawn Carriage Ride in Niagara-on-the-Lake:** The historical streets are a picture-perfect setting for a romantic carriage ride in summer, when the gardens and hanging baskets are filled to overflowing with colorful blooms, or on a crisp, sunny winter day, bundled up under a blanket. The guides are knowledgeable and entertaining. See p. 54.
- **A Leisurely Meal on a Winery Patio, Overlooking the Vineyards:** There is

no better way to dine than outdoors in the fresh air. A summer breeze, a glass of fine wine at your fingertips, and your amore—they all add up to a memorable experience. Try Peller Estates on a summer evening, where there are rosebushes at the end of each row of vines and the terrace twinkles with candlelight, or Vineland Estates on a warm June afternoon, with the rolling vineyards spread out before you. Some of the hotels and restaurants in wine country will provide you with a picnic lunch that you can enjoy in one of the many parks. See “Dine Among the Vines” in chapter 6.

- **A Concert Under the Stars in the Vineyards at Jackson-Triggs:** Each year the lineup of performers gets better. Sit in the amphitheater, sip a glass of wine, dine al fresco at the casual market grill, or just nibble some tapas and enjoy the music of Canada's best—Chantal Kreviazuk, Rufus Wainright, Bruce Cockburn, the Canadian Tenors, Colin James, and Jesse Cook to name a few who have performed here. See p. 208.

6 THE BEST THINGS TO DO FOR FREE (OR ALMOST)

- **View the Falls from Both Sides of the Border:** The best views of the Falls are enjoyed in Niagara Falls, Ontario, but you are free to stroll up and down the sidewalks along the Niagara Gorge on

both sides of the Niagara River to view both sets of falls. On Friday, Sunday, and holiday evenings at 10pm from May to September, spectacular fireworks light up the Falls. See p. 206.

- **Watch a Ship Go Through the Locks on the Welland Canal:** Lock 3 and Lock 7 are the best viewing locations. See p. 123.
- **Hike or Bike the Bruce Trail on the Niagara Escarpment:** The Bruce Trail is an 850km (528-mile) meandering path overlooking the Niagara River. The trail passes through countless orchards and wineries, yet feels secluded and wild. Hikers can experience fantastic views, waterfalls, steep inclines, and lush fauna and flora. The southern terminus of the Bruce Trail is located in Queenston Heights Park. Follow the white blazes as the trail winds along the Niagara Escarpment, a prominent ridge that cuts through the Niagara region from east to west. See p. 145.
- **Taste Wine at a Winery Tasting Room:** Some wineries charge a nominal fee for each sample but will wave the fee if you buy a bottle of wine, and a few ask for a donation to charity. Many, however, are free. Several of the small wineries have patios where you can sit outside to enjoy your wine. Some also have walking paths or are adjacent to the Bruce Trail. See p. 165.
- **Stroll Through the Niagara Parks Commission Botanical Gardens:** These gardens are open all year. The displays of flowers, shrubs, and trees are an inspiration to gardeners and a delight to everyone who enters. See p. 136.

7 BEST ACTIVITIES FOR FAMILIES

- ***Maid of the Mist*** (www.maidofthemist.com): One of the oldest tourist attractions in North America, this is still the most popular activity for visitors to the Falls. Aim for one of the first sailings, which start at 9am in high season, to avoid long lines, or wait for a late day sailing after 7pm, when the light is softer. Find a place on the upper deck if you want the best views and if you don't mind getting a bit wet. This is where you will really feel the power of the Falls. The big blue raincoats will keep you relatively dry. The *Maid of the Mist* tours start on both sides of the border. See p. 110.
- **Cave of the Winds:** A wooden boardwalk takes visitors to the base of the American Falls, where they get up close with the Falls. Souvenir non-slip sandals and lightweight recyclable rain ponchos are provided. Tour hours have been extended so visitors can see the fireworks displays from vantage points on the boardwalk. See p. 115.
- **Niagara's Fury:** (Table Rock, 6450 Niagara Pkwy., Niagara Falls, ON; www.niagarasfury.com): Visit Table Rock for this new experience—the re-creation of the birth of Niagara, complete with the sights, sounds, and movements of glacial action, as glaciers calve and water rushes to create the Falls. You'll have a whole new appreciation for the Falls after you experience this 3-D sensory-surround experience. Don't miss the handmade chocolates at Pop & Lolly's. See p. 111.
- **Butterfly Conservatory:** The conservatory, on the Niagara Parkway in Ontario, is a bright and airy rainforest-like environment, with a multilevel pathway (stroller and wheelchair accessible) that winds its way through the lush foliage. Two thousand tropical butterflies, representing 50 different species, live freely in the conservatory. The trick is to walk slowly and pause often, because the most rewarding sights are usually found through quiet observation. Even boisterous kids will

enjoy the soothing atmosphere of this magical jungle. See p. 113.

- **Carousel at Lakeside Park:** One of the largest and best-preserved examples of a Looff menagerie carousel, the carousel at Lakeside Park on Lake Ontario in Old Port Dalhousie is a fantastic sight. Built in 1898, there are 69 carousel animals, arranged in four rings; and it costs only a nickel a ride! See p. 132.
- **Sheep at Featherstone Estate Winery:** If you are visiting wineries in July and early August, don't miss a visit to Featherstone. The vintners found a solution to thinning the grape vines. For 6 weeks, they send in dozens of contented sheep to munch on the lower grape leaves. Come watch and interact with the wooly workers, as well as try the winery's excellent Black Sheep Riesling. See p. 178.
- **Niagara Freefall Indoor Skydiving** (www.niagarafreefall.com): For an extreme adventure, consider flying without a plane. In this wind-tunnel experience, you can experience freefall, do tumbling tricks, and float on a current of air. The staff will train you and supply the helmets and equipment. There's also Lazer Ball and a climbing wall. See p. 134.
- **Take a Ride on the Orchard Express:** Puddicombe Estate Farm invites kids to take a ride on a miniature train that tours the orchards, while the grown-ups try out the winery. There's also a petting zoo. See p. 134.