

The Impulsive Traveler

In Buffalo, N.Y., an elevated feeling

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

A South Beach-inspired gathering place. Bike lanes and kayak tours. Free outdoor yoga classes. Alfresco dancing and dining.

Ready for this one? It's all in Buffalo.

Last month, I shuffled up to the city that brought us hydraulic power, the grain elevator and spicy wings. I had some reservations, which lingered largely from my college days in Upstate New York. I was so scarred by the long, cruel winters that after graduation, I moved 1,000 miles south. But I'd been hearing some buzz about a revitalized Buffalo, and that — combined with the absence of snow — drew me north.

Once there, I was determined to get to the bottom of the buzz. And I pledged to spend all my waking hours outdoors. Of course, that meant missing such indoor gems as Frank Lloyd Wright's Darwin Martin House; Ani DiFranco's Babeville, the restored church-turned-arts center; and all the bars, which are open until 4 a.m. (The permanent exhibit of the late journalist Tim Russert's re-created office will open this fall in the Buffalo History Museum, too.) But it also meant getting acquainted with waterways, architecture and smells that are distinctly Buffalonian.

Over four days in this Great Lakes city, only once did I hear someone mention the body part that chickens use for flapping, that beloved spicy bar food the city loves to claim. And thankfully, the only reminders of the city's winters were potholes that trivialized Washington's.

The evening I arrived, I headed to Elmwood Village to catch Campus WheelWorks' popular Tuesday night bike ride. Compared with the West Side, the grittier artist and immigrant neighborhood nearby, this is the neighborhood that locals describe as "more yuppie," with blocks of boutiques and restaurants, including a storefront tattoo parlor next to a high-end home goods shop. And if you must have Buffalo wings, stop at Watson's for the chocolate variety.

The weekly bike ride comes in four speeds: The fastest is for those who want to conquer their internal demons (35 miles), and the slowest is for those who simply want to see a bit of the city on two wheels (12 miles). I opted for the latter, and we biked past Forest Lawn Cemetery (President Millard Fillmore and Rick James are buried there) and Hoyt Lake, around Delaware Park (designed by Frederick Law Olmsted) and up to North Buffalo for ice cream.

We also passed the Richardson Olmsted Complex. It includes the beautifully restored Olmsted-designed grounds and the striking 19th-century H.H. Richardson-designed Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane, scheduled to reopen as a boutique hotel in 2016. After the ride, with a storm threatening, dozens of cyclists gathered behind the bike shop to find a spread of snacks and a mini-fridge packed with PBR.

Signs of a new Buffalo became obvious in no time: cranes all around town and local enthusiasm beyond typical civic pride. From its industrial heyday in the early 1900s, Buffalo sank to downtrodden at best. Its population is about half what it was in the 1950s. But today, residents are excited about the makeover underway, and everyone seems to know college graduates moving back to the city, or people coming here for jobs.



JAMES SCHWABEL/ALAMY

Huge, largely abandoned grain elevators loom dramatically above kayakers and paddleboarders on the Buffalo River.

"The psychology of this region has turned," said Howard Zemsky, a local developer who's behind the Larkin Square project, a new outdoor public space with a 1930s gas station-turned-restaurant at the site of the former Larkin Soap Co.

Zemsky is also a co-chair of the Western New York Regional Economic Development Council, which is charged with coming up with a plan for the "Buffalo Billion," the \$1 billion that Gov. Andrew Cuomo pledged to the city for economic revitalization.

The area now known as Larkinville, in the old Hydraulics neighborhood, was largely abandoned and falling apart just a few years ago. (I can imagine the bleakness, because I drove through several other parts of town that could still use some developer love.) First Niagara Bank financed the replacement of "every inch of public infrastructure," Zemsky said.

Zemsky was drawn to the colors and whimsy of South Beach, Fla., hotels, and he has re-created that experience here, with inviting hula hoops on manicured lawns and technicolor Adirondack chairs. Several nights a week, happy-hour events attract crowds in the thousands — grown-ups circling a free-standing bar like the kind you'd see when walking off the beach, kids playing pickleball and couples dancing to music.

Historically and today, the best of Buffalo comes out by the water. The city was the western terminus of the Erie Canal; Lake Erie flows into the Niagara River; and the much smaller Buffalo River twists through the city's southern side. Canada sits less than a mile away, across the Peace Bridge.

For as long as locals can remember, the waterways have been contaminated by remnants from the industrial age, but today an effort is underway not only to



LARIS KARKLIS/THE WASHINGTON POST

clean the water, but to also make it more accessible for recreation and entertainment.

I explored the Buffalo River corridor by kayak with Jill Jedlicka, director of Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper, a nonprofit organization that's playing an important role on the water scene. We paddled through what's called Elevator Alley — the world's largest collection of grain elevators, which hold the silos that once

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As we paddled toward the convergence with Lake Erie, Jedlicka pointed out signs of progress on both sides of the river: the return of rowing clubs; a new park, a development that will include a roller derby rink, ice skating rinks and a microbrewery; and Canalside, a new space that hosts 1,000 events a year, including free outdoor Pilates classes and concerts.

That night, I hit a Canalside concert. To escape the crowds, I walked along the water, out to an observation tower at the end of the Erie Basin Marina. I was struck by the vastness of Buffalo's waterfront. Imagining what it would look like in the winter, I quickly sensed why, everywhere I went, Buffalonians seemed to have an acute appreciation for their summers by the water.

The next morning, before I left town, I discovered another section of waterfront — the Outer Harbor, on Lake Erie. I walked out to a lighthouse that sits beside a Coast Guard station and couldn't imagine a spot with a better view of the lake, the rivers and downtown. Then I jogged to Times Beach, a nature preserve, and waded in the water at Wilkeson Pointe. Bird sounds nearly drowned out the din of cars behind me. For a few minutes, I forgot where I was. But then I left the harbor. The heavy, sweet smell of toasted oat cereal wafted through the car windows, and I remembered.

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IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

American Airlines offers nonstop flights from Reagan National to Buffalo. United also offers nonstop flights from Dulles. Southwest flies nonstop from BWI Marshall.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel @ The Lafayette

391 Washington St.
716-853-1505
www.thehotellafayette.com
Built in 1904, recently reopened as a boutique hotel. Rooms start at \$169 weekdays, \$199 weekends, including breakfast.

Hostel Buffalo-Niagara

667 Main St.
716-852-5222
www.hostelbuffalo.com
In the theater district. Could use some updating, but you can't beat the price: Shared rooms start at \$25 a night.

WHERE TO EAT

Larkin Square Food Truck Tuesdays

745 Seneca St.
716-362-2665
www.larkinsquare.com
Every Tuesday through Oct. 28, from 5 to 8 p.m., follow your nose to a gathering of 30 food trucks from Buffalo and Rochester, including Amy's (lentil-berry flatbread wrap, \$6), Lloyd Taco (Tricked Out nachos, \$6.89), Black Market Food Truck (banh mi sandwiches, \$8).

Sweet_ness 7 Cafe

220 Grant St.
716-883-1738
www.sweetness7.com
An eclectic West Side gathering spot that has helped turn the neighborhood around. Brunch all day (French toast \$7, Spanish scramble \$10), vegan options, house-made chocolate milk (\$3).

Gene McCarthy's

73 Hamburg St.
716-855-8948
www.genemccarthys.com
Classic Buffalo, 50-year-old favorite of locals in the Old First Ward neighborhood, with outdoor seating and a new brewery next door. Entrees start at \$11.50.

WHAT TO DO

Campus WheelWorks

Tuesday Night Rides
744 Elmwood Ave.
716-881-3613
www.campuswheelworks.com
Every Tuesday through August, four levels of free rides (ranging from 12 to 35 miles), 6 to 8 p.m. Call ahead for rentals, which are free for first-time riders and start at \$40 otherwise.

Canalside

44 Prime St.
www.canalsidebuffalo.com
Through August: yoga, Zumba and Pilates classes, Tuesday movies, Wednesday dance (ballroom, salsa, swing) and Thursday concerts. All free.

National Buffalo Wing Festival

www.buffalowing.com
Celebrate the 50th anniversary of Buffalo wings Aug. 30 (noon to 9 p.m.) and 31 (noon to 7 p.m.). \$5 per day. Each jumbo wing \$1.

INFORMATION

www.visitbuffalonianiagara.com

— M.D.G.K.