Spending a few Hours in Ithaca, N.Y.

by Melanie D.G. Kaplan

After summer vacation in Canada, I briefly mourned the loss of colored bills in my billfold. But the gloom was short-lived. On my drive home, I took a detour to Ithaca, NY, which I’d heard has its own currency. By day’s end, my wallet swelled again with delightfully colorful money. In place of notes adorned with images of overcrowded streets and playbill with pictures of salamanders and steamboats.

It’s only fitting that this town — as dense with brainpower as it is with composting bins — would have a quirky alternative currency system. I set out, over a few days, to use the money for as many of my purchases as possible. What I didn’t expect was the adventure I faced just trying to find places to spend the salamanders.

Ithaca, home of Cornell University and Ithaca College, is smack in the middle of New York. But it’s far enough from any highway to maintain its middle-of-nowhere feel. I spent four years snowed under at Syracuse University, an hour to the north, but never enjoyed summer in the Finger Lakes region. Late summer in Ithaca blew me away. The leaves were ablaze and its outskirts, filled with gorges and waterfalls, are surprisingly lush.

Plus, you’ve got to love a town whose 25-year-old mayor gives up his car and turns his parking space into a miniature park. And whose townsfolk are equally intense about saving the planet, killing the chain store and consuming locally produced you-name-it.

My first stop was GreenStar Natural Foods Market, where I was told that I could buy some Ithaca Hours — the currency created two decades ago to help promote the buy-local movement and encourage community building. People might use Hours to pay the local farmer or mechanic, instead of paying with greenbacks. And Wal-Mart and Amazon don’t take Hours, so it keeps the money in town.

The founder has since moved away, and use of the once-popular currency has declined. But I’d heard that a local business was trying to single-handedly revitalize Hours and catapult them into the e-banking era.

At GreenStar, the first person I queried about Hours was, by chance, Steve Burke, a market manager who’s the former president of the board for Ithaca Hours. Steve sold me $50 worth of Hours (one Hour equals $10). I marveled at the currency, including one-eight- and one-quarter-Hour notes. They all said “In Ithaca We Trust” and “Ithaca Hours are backed by real capital: our skills, our time, our tools, forests, fields and rivers.”

“But at the moment, I was thinking more about my growing stomach. I walked over the railroad tracks to Ithaca Bakery, where I pecked off a few colorful bills to pay for a huge sandwich.

Just north of town, I stopped at Stewart Park and took in sparkling Cayuga Lake. Then I drove west to the Ithaca Farmers Market, on Cayuga Inlet. The big social event of the week, the market is so well attended on the weekends that locals say it’s the event of the week, the market is so well attended on the weekends that locals say it’s the event of the week, the market is so well attended on the weekends that locals say it’s the event of the week, the market is so well attended on the weekends that locals say it’s the event of the week, the market is so well attended on the weekends that locals say it’s the event of the week, the market is so well attended on the weekends that locals say it’s the event of the week, the market is so well attended on the weekends that locals say it’s the event of the week, the market is so well attended on the weekends that locals say it’s the event of the week, the market is so well attended on the weekends that locals say it’s the event of the week, the market is so well attended on the weekends that locals say it’s the event of the week.

Just past the towers of Cornell and Ithaca College bell tower for afternoon practice. Across the water, I explored Cass Park, where there was plenty of activity — soccer games, a bustling marina, runners, cyclists and a dog park so fancy that I at first mistook it for a miniature golf course.

Back in town, Iate tacos on the patio of Viva Taqueria, then strolled through the Commons, an open-air plaza that serves as the cultural and retail center of downtown. At Home Green Home, which sells stainless-steel drinking straws (four for $10), I bought a book and paid with plastic. They didn’t accept Hours, but they did have free copies of The Frack Almanac.

The next morning, I met Scott Wiggins, owner of La Tourelle Resort, where I was staying (Hours-friendly). Wiggins was born and raised in Ithaca, and his favorite part of the day is tending to the grounds. He described the town as brassy, with a surplus of PhDs who are overqualified for their jobs. “A lot of us,” he added, “never grew out of the ’60s.”

I went for a hike at Buttermilk Falls State Park, around the corner from the resort, then tackled the short, steep hike along the Cascadilla Creek Gorge trail, which connects downtown to Cornell. Halfway up is a small commercial area called Collegetown. I stopped by Collegetown Bagels — CTB, as the locals call it — which is part of the Ithaca Bakery family. Its outdoor picnic tables overflow with students, while the Starbucks across the street was eerily quiet. (As Steve from GreenStar had confided, “A tried-and-true Ithacan wouldn’t be caught walking out of Starbucks.”)

At the CTB counter, the cashier didn’t bat an eye when I asked about paying in Hours, but she did need the assistance of a manager (wearing a ‘No Fracking but- ton’ to process the sale. It was then that I realized what Ithacans have surely understood for years — that consuming is way more fun when your currency looks like Monopoly money.

That didn’t, however, stop me from making purchases at non-Hours-friendly establishments. I bought shoes at Fontana; a fadora at a shop called Evaluation; lunch at Moosewood Restaurant (of vegetarian cookbook fame); and tomatoes at the mini-weekday farmers market. Shopkeepers who didn’t accept Hours had either not heard of the currency or had once accepted it but then found themselves with a stockpile of bills and nowhere to spend them. Businesses such as Ithaca Bakery use them to pay people like their landscapers and snowplowers, who can spend them at places such as the bakery or the farmers market.

Before leaving town, I met the Ben Bernanke of Ithaca Hours, Paul Streb. He’s the Hours’ new board president, and I’d expected to find a hemp-wearing, tofu-eating native. Instead, I sat down for coffee with a clean-cut Long Islander who teaches at Cornell. He has a financial adviser and tax preparation business in town and accepts Hours for his tax work. Paul said that when the recession began in 2008, “Even Obama said, focus on your community. So I did.” He stepped up his Hours advocacy and is working on an electronic version of the currency, which may roll out this fall. He believes that paper currency is terribly inconvenient, and that more businesses and consumers will use Hours when they become virtual bills on a smartphone. He’s optimistic that even Cornell may accept Hours as payment one day.

I said goodbye to Paul, but leftover Hours were burning hole in my pocket. I spent the rest at GreenStar, stocking up on groceries for home. Then I hit the road, my back seat filled with colorful locally grown vegetables, the contents of my wallet once again monochromatic.