

BUCKET LIST ROAD TRIP

by Marilyn Litvak

Towering clouds of mist accompanied by a thunderous roar greeted us as we waited patiently in our car, windows rolled down, to cross the Niagara River from the United States into Canada over the Rainbow Bridge. The time was 3 p.m. on a lovely, clear and pleasantly warm, Sunday afternoon in July.

Visiting Niagara Falls had been on my bucket list for years. And now, thanks to this summer road trip with my brother, his wife and my daughter, it has been accomplished.

We left the Boston area 9 hours earlier, at 6 a.m., with my brother at the wheel. Our scenic trip westward involved using the Mass Turnpike to connect with the New York Thruway.

Driving through the verdant Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts, we viewed the distant Adirondack Mountains of New York; and stopped to appreciate the locks of the still-flowing Erie Canal running parallel to the Thruway.

Not once did we have to drive through a city or town; they were only viewed as names on exit signs.

And now our destination was in full view—Niagara Falls Canada—waiting to be explored and enjoyed.

The backup of cars at the Rainbow Bridge customs point required $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour of patience to navigate. Lots of people were headed to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls to enjoy a free evening concert at Queen Victoria Park, which borders the Niagara River, to be followed by fireworks over the nearby falls.

The Niagara River acts as a divisor between the United States and Canada with the border between the two countries located in the center of the river.

Flowing some 30 plus miles north from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario, the river cascades approximately 175 feet down over a bluff top half way on its trip between the two lakes. The resulting contiguous waterfalls are some of the most famous in the world with Horseshoe Falls on the Canadian side of the River; and the less dramatic, but equally beautiful American Falls and Bridal Veil Falls on the American side.

Since it was now only 4 p.m. we had plenty of time to check-in to our hotel and have dinner before the evening's festivities began.

The fireworks were brief but spectacular enhanced by spotlights illuminating all three falls with rainbow colors as the crackers went off.

What a great way to end the first day of our road trip adventure!

Needless to say, we slept well that night allowing us to rise early the next morning to begin our up close and personal exploration of the falls.

A short walk down nearby Clifton Hill Road brought us back to the river. And a quick elevator ride took us down to the boarding area for a thrilling boat ride out on the Niagara River to the falls.

As we boarded, we were provided with what would turn out to be much needed red plastic ponchos; the first of three we would wear that day. The boat was jam packed as we departed the wharf, but we had a great viewing spot towards the front on the top deck—what better place to get soaked.

Within minutes we were not more than 20 feet from the American and Bridal Veil Falls. But it was the thunderous, crashing, misty Horseshoe Falls that really brought out passengers' screams of appreciation and picture taking--an incredible experience!

40 minutes later we were back at the dock, wet but totally thrilled with the voyage.

The elevator whisked us back up to the scenic walk along the river. And we headed south through blossoming gardens to Table Rock Centre—about a mile away. Our next adventure would involve participating in a Journey Behind the Falls as we explored majestic Horseshoe Falls from another perspective.

Once again we would take an elevator down to river level and be issued plastic ponchos; this time yellow in color.

Dug back in the early part of the 20th century, the tunnels behind Horseshoe Falls feature two large portals for you to experience the sound of the falls cascading down from the river above coupled with the enveloping gray mist that is created. Historical facts and pictures, including one of Princess Diana visiting with her children, abound on the walls of the tunnels. Why there's even an uncompleted tunnel for you to get a better sense of the construction effort.

For the most part we stayed dry, except when we ventured out on to the vista platforms at the end of the tunnel exploration. The ponchos were definitely needed again.

For lunch, we opted to enjoy the outside café at the Table Rock Center with its gorgeous views of all three falls and the river rapids above Horseshoe Falls. Nor did it hurt that grilled frankfurters and strawberry shakes were on the menu.

We closed out the afternoon with our final poncho-wearing event—a blue one this time. And were we ever glad we had them on as we viewed Niagara’s Fury, an 8-minute animated film depicting Niagara’s creation, which was shown as you rotated 360 degrees on a turntable through snow, rain, and water.

It was a full day! But we all agreed we wouldn’t have missed one minute of it.



And we still had one more day to enjoy exploring this beautiful area.

The next morning we headed north some 15 miles along the Niagara Parkway—described by Winston Churchill as one of the most scenic Sunday drives in the world. Our ultimate destination was the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake.

The Parkway took us past a blooming Botanical Garden, multiple golf courses, and beckoning wineries. A well-maintained bike path paralleled the road. Beautiful views beckoned with every twist and turn we took. But we didn't stop until we reached Fort George at the southern edge of the town.

The reconstructed fort looking out over the Niagara River dates back to the 18th century and played a role in the 1812 United States War with Britain—changing hands several times. Easily visible on the American side of the river, and within cannon range, is Fort Niagara.

You can tour the Fort George barracks staffed with knowledgeable guides, watch period food preparation in an authentic kitchen, witness a presentation of arms by costumed soldiers, have your picture taken in the fort's jail, and inspect those trusty antique cannons.

We then proceeded into the busy downtown of Niagara-on-the-Lake located on Lake Ontario where the Niagara River empties after its long run from Lake Erie. The town is as charming and authentic as one could hope for.

Back in the 18th and 19th century, it was the capitol of the Province of Ontario. And many of the old brick and mortar buildings from that period, as well as handsome white clapboard ones, line its shady green streets. All are in wonderful condition.

A long, busy main street features all kinds of shops and restaurants making for a fun day of walking, shopping, and dining.

And in the spring thru fall period, the city hosts a Shaw Festival which offers a variety of Bernard Shaw's plays, as well as other playwrights of that period, at multiple historical venues around the city.

On any return visit to the area, I would definitely plan to spend more time in this charming environment.

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