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# TRAVEL

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PHOTO BY JIM BUSH, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Elwood Avenue offers a lively restaurant scene for people watching.

# A cultural gem in the heart of Buffalo

## Elmwood Village boasts a vibrant buzz

ANNE BOKMA

If fiery wings and frigid winters are the first things that come to mind when you think of Buffalo, it may be time to reconsider this “city of good neighbours” in western New York. Buffalo boasts 32 unique neighbourhoods, ranging from Allentown to Wilert Park. Among the most vibrant is Elmwood Village in central Buffalo, named one of the “10 Great Neighbourhoods in America” by the American Planning Association.

On a recent getaway, my husband and I skipped the famous Buffalo wings in favour of a cultural weekend fling in the Village area, complete with musical theatre, trips to art galleries and a tour of local architectural gems. We also wore down our heels during an hours-long shopping stroll along the two-mile Elmwood “strip” that makes up the heart of the Village — more than 300 specialty shops, coffee houses, restaurants and bars give it a vibrant buzz and are a testament to the revitalization of the area over the past decade.

### A city with great bones

We knew we were in for an architectural treat as soon as we walked into the elegant Art Deco lobby of the Lafayette Hotel, built in 1904 by Louise Bethune, the first female architect recognized by the American Institute of Architects. The Lafayette fell into disrepair for decades but a recent \$42-million renovation has restored the grande dame to its prime.

The New York Times has recognized Buffalo as one of the top cities in America for architecture — some 80 sites are included on the National Register of Historic Places. Buffalo once vied with Chicago as America’s “second city” and its industrial wealth drew all of the notable American architects of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, most famously Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright designed his first commercial building for Buffalo’s Larkin Soap Company in 1904 and Darwin Martin, the executive who discovered him, was responsible for several commissions in the area, including his primary residence and summer home, Darwin Martin House and Graycliff Estate, both of which hold regular tours.

We attended the Unitarian Church on Elmwood Avenue on Sunday morn-



PHOTO COURTESY LAFAYETTE HOTEL, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Above: The elegant Art Deco lobby of the Lafayette Hotel is a showpiece, built in 1904 by Louise Bethune, the first female architect recognized by the American Institute of Architects. Right: Lively street art speaks to the vibe that rules in Elmwood Village.



PHOTO BY ANNE BOKMA, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

ing. This English country gothic structure, built in 1906, is a beautiful example of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century arts and crafts aesthetic and was designed by Edward Austin Kent (who is also remembered for being the only Buffalonian to die in the sinking of the Titanic).

Other architectural delights in the area were the many oversized wooden Victorian houses that we came to call “the painted ladies” for their striking exterior cosmetic work of wooden tracery and bright shades of paint. Many of these homes have equally colourful gardens, which were on display in the city’s annual Garden Walk, a free

event that attracts some 60,000 visitors every July.

### Cultural show stoppers

The Albright Knox Art Gallery, which features one of the country’s best collections of modern art, has a current exhibition, Treasures of the Queen City (until Sept. 21) of 70 masterworks from its collection, including paintings by Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Salvador Dali, Frida Kahlo, Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol. Take a free guided tour or pick up an audio wand at the reception desk to enrich the experience. The nearby Burchfield Penney Art Center is dedi-

cated to the works of watercolourist Charles Burchfield, best known for his romantic depictions of nature, and other artists from the western New York region.

If you want to sit back and be entertained, Buffalo is home to 20 professional theatre companies. Big Broadway shows, such as Chicago and Kinky Boots, will be staged this season at Shea’s Performing Arts Centre, an old 1920s movie palace. On a smaller scale, Buffalo United Artists puts on provocative LGBTQ-friendly shows. We caught a hilarious spoof of the disaster film, The Poseidon Adventure, starring popular local actor Jimmy Janowski, known as Buffalo’s “King of Queens.” His drag performance as the Shelley Winters’ character in Poseidon: An Upside Down Musical was both marvellous and memorable.

### Good eats

Of the several dozen restaurants in the Village, Trattoria Aroma and Blue Monk are among the most popular. Cantina Loco in nearby Allentown is a friendly lunch spot for fish tacos and tangy margaritas and it’s worth the short drive to the west end to enjoy the funky atmosphere of the all-day brunch spot, Sweetness 7 Cafe, where the menu includes Birkenstock Madness (fluffy pancakes with seasonal fruit and drizzled honey). Our most memorable dining experience was at Seabar, where the succulent seafood and sushi menu, designed by top chef Mike Andrzejewski, includes a beef on weck sushi roll, a take on the popular beef on kummelweck roll found only in Buffalo.

This is a city that truly celebrates food, and various annual food festivals, including the National Buffalo Wing Festival, held every Labour Day, bear witness to this. The festival honours the Buffalo-style chicken wing that was first prepared in the city 50 years ago at the still-standing Anchor Bar (which opened a location in Hamilton a couple years ago). Buffalo may offer a tantalizing menu of artistic attractions to keep visitors coming back, but it’s also tempting to consider slumming it at the decidedly lowbrow wing festival. One of the highlights of the event is a famous wing eating competition — last year Miki Sudo took first place for eating 178 wings in 12 minutes. High culture it ain’t, but I’d love a front-row seat.

Anne Bokma is a travel writer based in Hamilton.