

Skip the trash, go for the real flash — the Falls

Hamilton Spectator

I grew up just a few kilometres from the Falls and took the place for granted simply because of its close proximity. What did appeal to me, however, was the beguiling kitsch of Clifton Hill, with its models of the world's tallest man (Robert Wadlow at 8 feet, 11.1 inches) outside the Guinness World Records Museum and funambulist Charles Blondin, jauntily perched on a wire high above the street.

The tawdry side of town seemed more enchanting than the natural purity of the waterfalls, but my parents resisted the pitch. Some 12-year-old part of myself still resents the fact that I never did get to see the shrunken human heads at Ripley's Believe It or Not.

It's fashionable for grownups to dismiss Niagara Falls as a tourist trap and make fun of it as a cultural wasteland with cheap motels featuring heart-shaped Jacuzzis, high rise casinos with has-been entertainers, and gimmicks galore, including cheesy wax museums, rip-off arcades and a flying saucer restaurant.

It's easy to forget there's pure gold under all that razzle-dazzle. Our family goes in search of it on a recent summer weekend, making the 50-minute trek east and bypassing Clifton Hill entirely in our quest to focus on the precious nugget of Niagara — the majesty of the falling waters that cascade like liquid glass — and not be distracted by trashy amusements.

As a result, we'll get drenched during an evening cruise on the new Hornblower ferry, pelted as we take the Journey Behind the Falls and stand just metres from the thundering showers of the Horseshoe Falls, and sprayed by the class six rapids along the Niagara River during our White Water Walk.

During an evening stroll we stare down into the roiling misty canyon of the falls and a delicate mist, as if from a lady's atomizer, lands on our faces like a blessing. We will get wet and stay damp most of the weekend, an organic baptism that leaves us feeling far too purified to risk tainting ourselves with the carnival atmosphere of the casinos and Clifton Hill.

On our first night we embark on a fireworks cruise aboard the new, ungainly named Hornblower ferry, operated by a San Francisco company which replaced the Maid of the Mist this season after the city put the boat tour contract out to tender.

I feel nostalgic for the former, more romantic, name but I'm impressed with the new service the 700-passenger catamarans offer; 360-degree tiered seating and retractable glass doors for dry viewing, as well as a bunch of new cruises, including a sunrise and sunset cruise and the fireworks cruise with a spectacular 10-minute display at the half way point between the American Falls and Horseshoe Falls.

There's an air of festivity during this cruise. People line up for cocktails at the bar, nosh on free veggies and dip at the snack tables and a sound system pounds out pop tunes like Katy Perry's Firework as the boat sets off.

There's no avoiding getting wet (unless you stay in the glassed in area down below) and the crowd, dressed in ultrathin red raincoats with pointed hats, looks like an assembly at a gnome convention. Most folks make their way to the top of the boat for the best views despite the pelting water. Since I wear glasses, I can't see much except the wet spots in front of my eyes.

What I can make out, unfortunately, are the blazing neon signs of casinos and



Anne Bokma on the Hornblower.



Falls skyline at night complete with fireworks.



Niagara Falls by day.



The Hornblower moving just past the falls.



hotel chains along the edge of the Falls. As the fireworks show begins, my younger daughter, who at 14, has naturally shrugged off any gestures of affection from me of late, tips back her head and leans against me as she marvels over the magnificent bursts in the sky.

I hold her tight and this moment alone makes the boat ride worth it. The next day we do the cruise again in the heat of midday. There are no fireworks, no screaming signage, just the pounding of the falls and our echoing heartbeats as we edge into the basin beneath the roaring rapids. As if cued by a director on a movie set, a rainbow appears and everything seems right with the world.



The Old Stone Inn, billed as the city's only historical boutique hotel. Built in 1904 as a flour mill, the 111-room inn, currently undergoing extensive renovations, is within walking distance to the attractions, and offers an elegant old world feel as soon as you enter its doors.

That night, instead of booking into one of the massive hotel towers or iconic roadside motels, we opt for something different and check into the Old Stone Inn, billed as the city's only historic boutique hotel. Built in 1904 as a flour mill, the 111-room inn, currently undergoing extensive renovations, is within walking distance to the attractions, and offers an elegant old world feel as soon as you enter its doors.

The next morning we head across the street to the IMAX theatre featuring the 45-minute film, Niagara: Miracles, Myths and Magic that recounts the tales of some of the 16 adventurers who have gone over the Falls in various contraptions; many of which are on display in the accompanying Daredevil Exhibit. I'm surprised to learn that the very first person to plunge over the Falls in a barrel was 63-year-old school teacher Annie Edson Taylor.

That same year, Maude Willard tucked herself and her dog into a barrel to ride the whirlpool rapids along the Niagara River and died of suffocation (although her dog survived by putting its nose to the only hole in the barrel, effectively cutting off Willard's air supply).

We pick up \$50 (per person) Adventure Passes for admission to four attractions and we manage three of them that afternoon: the Hornblower cruise; the Journey Behind the Falls, where we stand on an observation area where the Horseshoe Falls tumbles from 12 storeys above; and White Water Walk, a boardwalk that follows the tumultuous stretch of whitewater rapids along the Niagara River where waves slam against rock and then leap in the air like giddy dancers.

Despite the tumult, it's the most peaceful part of the day and we settle against large rocks along the water's edge for a half-hour reprieve. The Adventure Pass also includes two days of free transportation on the new WeGo bus system, making it easy to get around.

Tired, and still damp, we head for dinner to Edgewater's Restaurant where I indulge in a Marilyn Monroe martini (pink, of course) and order a slew of yummy appetizers for our table.

We've got a perfect perch on the patio from which to admire the Falls one last time before heading home. On the drive back, the SkyWheel on Clifton Hill beckons with its flashing lights and promise of the most spectacular view of the Falls from its 53-metre-high vantage point in climate-controlled gondolas.

For a moment I feel wistful for the experience, much as I did standing outside Ripley's as a kid. I let the moment pass. There's always next time.

Anne Bokma is a travel writer based in Hamilton.