

SLICE OF AMERICANA



New York's Letchworth State Park

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

It's arguably the most American of vacations: That ritual where mom and dad pack the kids (along with the doggie, if there is one) into the family car and head out on the open road. The destination? A state park. The soundtrack? A chorus of "Are we there yet?" Even if you haven't experienced such a trip, you've seen one dramatized on TV.

This year, with our nation's collective focus on going green and getting back to basics, a trip to a state park makes a lot of sense. (What's more, it can cost cents on the dollar compared to other vacation options.) And with nearly 400 state parks to choose from across the country, odds are we won't all end up crowding the same one on the same weekend.

Of course, there are state parks worth exploring close to home. But New York's Letchworth State Park boasts several compelling reasons why it's worth going the extra distance.

SCENERY

Billed as "The Grand Canyon of the East," the 17-mile long Letchworth State Park boasts spectacular views. Within its 14,350 acres, the winding Genesee River tumbles over three major waterfalls—one of which is 107 feet high. On each side of the river are vertical cliff walls that reach up to 600 feet, their layers of sedimentary stone mimicking the rippling waters below. Lush forests provide a dramatic backdrop for the dazzling sight.

Open year-round, the view within the park is stylish in any season. Summer greens turn to bright orange and gold each fall, and winter snows give way to spring blooms. Remember to bring your digital camera and plenty of extra memory cards.

HISTORY

Letchworth State Park is rich with legends and stories—some tragic, some heroic—about its past inhabitants, which include Native Americans, colonists, soldiers, engineers and workers. Among the former residents is Mary Jemison, who was born at sea to Irish immigrants and adopted by the Seneca tribe at 15, and William Pryor

Letchworth, a saddlery businessman, social reformer and benefactor.

Historic sites include the pre-Revolutionary War Seneca Council House, used for the Iroquois' last council meeting on the Genesee in 1872; the Portage High Bridge, once the world's highest wooden bridge; a Civil War camp; two pioneer "ghost towns"; stone works completed in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps; and more. The William Pryor Letchworth Museum houses thousands of artifacts that provide additional insight into the Genesee Valley's past.

ACCOMODATIONS

On-site lodging options range from rustic to luxurious. At the plush Glen Iris Inn, I enjoyed the best sleep of my life, lulled by the sound of the Middle Falls just a stone's throw beyond my window. Glen Iris Inn, the former home of William Pryor Letchworth, dates from 1830 and has been an inn since 1914. All guest rooms (11 standard and four suites) are furnished with period pieces, yet equipped with modern conveniences like air-conditioning and private baths.

Other rental options include a lodge with seven efficiency rooms, a three-bedroom cottage, a four-bedroom stone house, a three-bedroom chalet, 82 rustic cabins that can accommodate from two to six people with varied amenities such as wood or electric heat, and 270 campsites.

ACTIVITIES

There's little risk of growing bored. The park boasts 66 miles of hiking trails. Additional trails exist for horseback riding, biking, snowmobiling and cross-country skiing. There are nature, history and performing arts programs; fairs and festivals; guided tours; summer lectures; whitewater rafting, kayaking, hot air ballooning and a huge swimming pool. In winter, enjoy ice skating, snow tubing, snowmobiling and horse-drawn sleigh rides. Deer and spring turkey hunting is permitted in season.

The only problem at New York's Letchworth State Park is that when it's time to leave, your travel companions will whine, "Do we have to?" **SP**

MORE INFORMATION**LETCHWORTH STATE PARK**

1-585-493-3600

www.nysparks.state.ny.us**GLEN IRIS INN**

1-585-493-2622

www.glenirisinn.com

Overnight rates start at \$90.

GETTING THERE

Letchworth State Park is about a 15-hour drive from Atlanta. If you're concerned that time translates into 54,000 repetitions of "Are we there yet?," fly direct from Atlanta to Buffalo, New York on Delta or AirTran, rent a car at the airport, and the park is about an hour away.

WHEN TO GO

Letchworth State Park is open year-round from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.; entrance fee is \$6 per car. Cabins may be rented throughout the year (starting from \$38/night). The camping area is open from mid-May to mid-October. Glen Iris Inn is open now through Nov. 1. The William Pryor Letchworth Museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. from May through October; a donation of \$1/adult and 50¢/child is suggested. Fall is typically the park's busiest season.

MORE FUN

Niagara Falls is only about two hours from Letchworth State Park, so an ideal itinerary includes visits to both. For details, visit www.niagara-usa.com and www.tourismniagara.com.

Scenes around
Letchworth State
Park