

Days and Nights in Niagara-on-the-Lake



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Photographed by Mike Davis

Mike and I were invited to spend a couple of days in Niagara-on-the-Lake recently, and experience some bed-and-breakfast homes. The Niagara-on-the-Lake Bed and Breakfast Association is a group of around 130 homeowners. The range of accommodations is wide, from small residences to huge historic manors to houses or cottages that can be entirely rented.

Claimed by some to be "the prettiest town in Canada," Niagara-on-the-Lake is full of charm. Historic Queen St. is a busy, popular street year round for shopping, dining, strolling and sampling wine during festivals. ▶

There is much to do around Niagara-on-the-Lake (NOTL), a historically significant town on Lake Ontario at the mouth of the Niagara River. One of the earliest settlements in Ontario, it is home to wonderful old houses in the heritage district near the lake and has experienced action during the War of 1812. Two days and nights is not enough time to do everything on offer in the area, but it's a start.

Carbonnel

We arrived on a Sunday afternoon to check into Carbonnel B&B. Owned by Janet Jones and Guy Hatif, this home is just a few blocks from both the lake and the Welland Canal.

There are two bedrooms with king-sized beds and ensuite baths upstairs, and what they say is the only fully accessible, ground-floor suite in a NOTL B&B. Named the Alexandra Room, this suite has a king-sized bed, a private sitting room with a double-sized pull-out sofa bed and even a small dining area with table and chairs. In the garden is an outdoor spa/hot tub for guests to use.

Queenston

After checking in, we went for a drive to Queenston Heights Park, site of the 1812 battle and commemorative tower to Sir Isaac Brock, and the southern end of the Bruce Trail, which is marked by a stone cairn and plaque. Many

hands have touched this during trail end-to-end excursions.

We then drove through the old part of the historic village of Queenston, admiring the many old houses, including the famous Laura Secord homestead. Carrying on, we came upon a sign for the Willowbank Stone Festival.

This was the first year for this festival, which drew stone carvers and drystone wall builders (wallers) from the U.K. and U.S. to join Canadian experts in celebrating stone. The drystone wallers began creating what will become an enclosed building and the carvers created sculpture that



▲ Carbonnel B&B is one of more than 130 130 delightful residences to stay at in Niagara-on-the-Lake.



would be auctioned off. We joined in at the closing festival reception. Taking advantage of festivals and special events like this, discovered by accident, is one of the memorable pleasures of travelling, and Niagara Region has many of them through the year.

For supper, we tried Bistro Six-One on Queen St. in the heritage district of NOTL. We enjoyed wood-oven-baked pizza and a bottle of Peller Estate Baco Noir, served at ideal temperature to let the smooth richness of the wine fill the senses.

The next morning we had a delicious hot breakfast of Eggs Benedict and a good talk with the other guests at Carbonnel. From the Finger Lakes district

◀ Owned by Faith and David Bell, AquaBella B&B was named in honour of all the water that helps to make Niagara-on-the-Lake beautiful and interesting: Lake Ontario, Niagara River, Welland Canal.

of New York, they were staying a week to see several plays at the Shaw Festival and do some shopping. Meeting other people at breakfast is a distinct advantage of a B&B over a hotel.

Baroque House

We were off to tour a couple more B&Bs, Baroque House in nearby Virgil being the first. Manager Judy Hulley showed us around this new, yet Old-World house filled with hand-crafted elements, original art and antiques. The entire house is available for rent, with three private bedrooms upstairs, all with ensuite full bathrooms, TV and fireplaces. The first floor is a beautiful party space with open kitchen, dining and living areas, and large fireplace. Outside are gardens, a fire pit, hot tub and barbecue.

Brockamour Manor

Closer to the retail heart of Queen St. is the impressive old estate of Brockamour Manor. Built in 1809, it would have been new when it was the site of a romance that has come down through history. Sir Isaac Brock became engaged to Lady Sophia Shaw who lived here, just before the fateful battle at Queenston Heights that ended his life in 1812.

History buffs, lovers of old architecture, even fans of ghost stories will enjoy exploring this Georgian mansion and the many renovations that have been done over the years. Owner Colleen Cone knows well the history of her house and gives a fascinating tour.

There are six guest rooms with fireplaces and ensuite bathrooms, and large, elegant common rooms. The nearly one-acre surrounding property provides privacy and quiet.

AquaBella

A surprise awaited me when we checked into our next B&B, AquaBella. Owner David Bell greeted me with the words "You went to Trinity. So did I."



▲ One of the three bedrooms in luxurious, art- and antique-filled Baroque House in Virgil.

A king-sized sleigh bed is the heart of the Sir Isaac Brock Room in historic Brockamour Manor, built in 1809. ▼





▲ The beautiful blues of the River Room speaks to the theme of AquaBella B&B.

He had been one year ahead of me at the college which is part of University of Toronto. Soon after graduating, he married Faith, and a few years ago they created AquaBella B&B. Both having grown up in St. Catharines, they are knowledgeable about the whole Niagara Region.

Wining & Dining

That afternoon, Mike test drove an electric bike while I went for a walk and came upon the remains of a “Negro” churchyard and gravestones. Then we dropped in on Reimer Winery to get a free sample of their organic wine and discuss this year’s harvest. Wine sampling and purchasing directly from the vineyards is offered by every Niagara winery. With time available before supper we went for a brief walk along the Niagara

A closing reception for the first Willowbank Stone Festival celebrated stone carving and the construction of a dry stone wall building. Many special events are held throughout the year in Niagara Region. ▼



Sue Reimer of Reimer Winery pours a sample of their award-winning signature organic wine, 2010 Peace & Harmony. The numerous wineries in Niagara Region welcome tastings, tours and purchases. ▼





▲ The Bruce Trail's southern end point is at Queenston Heights, marked by this stone cairn and plaque.



◀ While testing this Emmo bike from eSkoot, Mike stopped along the beautiful Niagara Parkway and caught a speedboat zipping downriver. The commemorative block reads "Browns Point/ Here Gen. Sir Isaac Brock/ called out on his way to/ Queenston Heights/ 13th Oct. 1812/ Push on/ York Volunteers"

River, where Mike took some photos.

We had rich Italian food for supper at Old Winery Restaurant on Niagara Stone Road. At the table near us were U.K. stone wallers and organizers of Willow-bank Stone Festival, proving again what a small world it is.

Next morning's breakfast with the other guests, also from parts of the U.S., was a treat of yogurt, granola and fresh berries, followed by David's light waffles with toppings of bacon, berries, maple syrup, whipped cream and a delectable hot peach sauce. Beyond serving as hosts, the Bells will give only as much help as you want in planning your stay.

"Our focus is to be as good an ambassador as possible," says Faith. They can provide wine-tasting coupons and arrange package experiences. They know what's worth seeing at the Shaw Festival, and the other events going on. They know that some guests don't want an agenda. "Just to walk is wonderful," Faith adds. "It's lovely to come in winter when it's not busy. Some have no intention of visiting a winery. Some like to go south to Port Colborne, the mouth of the Welland Canal. It's about the whole peninsula." **NEV**

◀ The distinguished Shaw Festival draws thousands of theatre-goers to Niagara-on-the-Lake annually. Plays by George Bernard Shaw, his contemporaries and about his era, are produced each year.



Niagara-on-the-Lake Bed & Breakfast Association
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