WHATEVER FLOATS YOUR BOAT
The schooner True Love
on Seneca Lake
THREE PERFECT DAYS:
FINGER LAKES

For 10,000 years, this narrow swath of upstate New York has been home to people drawn to its fertile soil and abundant forests. Today, the region’s natural splendor, farm-fresh food and rich culture are attracting a new wave of devotees.

BY ROHAN KAMICHERIL • PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN ROSENZWEIG
SEEN FROM ABOVE, the Finger Lakes look like claw marks on the landscape. The 11 glacial trenches occupy a relatively narrow corridor of central upstate New York, yet they have a far wider significance. The Iroquois believed they were of divine provenance. Farmers and loggers flocked to the area for the fertile land around their shores. The lakes are central to the region’s identity and its economy. Everything here leads back to water.

The forces that shaped the Finger Lakes also endowed the region with a fierce natural beauty. The surrounding hills are split into innumerable gorges, with hidden waterfalls, secret swimming holes and enough scenic outcrops to keep a landscape painter occupied for a lifetime. The lakes themselves, some of the deepest in the U.S., are enchanting—made more so, perhaps, by the lush vineyards that surround them.

And there are plenty of rewards away from the water’s edge, too. In addition to top-notch wineries, orchards dot the countryside, whose meadows burst with cattails, goldenrod and chicory. In summertime farmers markets abound, reflecting a resurgent interest in the bounty of the region. You can’t throw a peach pit without hitting a local cheese maker, bread maker or small-batch seed-oil producer.

The region is also home to Cornell University, Ithaca College and Hobart and William Smith Colleges, a fact that lends its towns a youthful energy and ensures that the area’s cultural attractions are as varied and impressive as its landscapes. It is this variety that makes the Finger Lakes such a wonderful place to be. There’s always a sense that you’re discovering something new, even if that something has been two million years in the making.
DAY ONE | You wake up late, despite the sun pouring through your balcony doors at La Tourelle Resort, a restored farmhouse property surrounded by sprawling lawns and orchards on a hill overlooking Ithaca. From the cumulous depths of your bed, you have a clear view of the high, wooded walls of Buttermilk Falls State Park, where you’ll be spending your morning. First, you head downstairs to The Bistro for a breakfast of oatmeal-crusted French toast and two devilishly decadent Danishes—fortification for the hike you have planned.

The deep gorge trails of Buttermilk Falls are a few minutes’ walk away, along paths winding past cataracts and slender, idling pools. Fractured shale walls beetle overhead, thick with gangly opportunistic weeds. You reach a deep, clear pool at the base of Buttermilk Falls and take the plunge. Reclining in the bracingly chilly water, you squint at the fierce sun overhead, the water thundering in your ears.

After drying off in the sun, you walk over to Moosewood, the Ithaca restaurant famous for its local, vegetarian fare. In the airy blonde-wood dining room, you savor Asian rice salad and sun-gold squash soup and watch the boho regulars and Cornell academics Chow down on their veggie burgers and ‘70s-style composed salads.

As a reward for your virtuous lunch, you order a brownie with a scoop of vanilla from the nearby Dennis’ Homemade Ice Cream. Feeling a little hiked out, you take a short drive to Newman Overlook in the middle of the Cornell Plantations, the university’s

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FINGER LAKES BY THE NUMBERS

WINERIES IN THE FINGER LAKES REGION
100+

GRAPE PIES PRODUCED DURING FALL HARVEST (APPROXIMATE)
30,000

YEAR THE FIRST WOMEN’S RIGHTS CONVENTION WAS HELD IN SENeca FALLS
1848

YEAR THE ICE CREAM SUNDAE WAS INVENTED IN ITHACA
1891

LENGTH OF THE FINGER LAKES HIKING TRAIL, IN MILES
549

MAXIMUM DEPTH, IN FEET, OF SENeca LAKE, THE DEEPEST OF THE FINGER LAKES
618
FINGER LAKES || THREE PERFECT DAYS

vast natural preserve, which houses an arboretum and a botanical garden. You enjoy the park from above, gazing out over the tufted treetop canopy while digging into your dessert.

Feeling jauntier now, you head back into town to visit the Johnson Museum of Art, home to one of the best university art collections in the U.S. You enter the hulking I.M. Pei building and head to the top floor, which has fine views of shimmering Cayuga Lake. From here, you work your way down through the sunny galleries, pausing before Giacometti’s bronze “Walking Man II.” “Look,” says an old man to his wife, gesturing at the stooped, attenuated figure, “it’s us earlier today!”

As the afternoon wears on, you head over to the Ithaca Beer Company, a popular brewery across the road from Buttermilk Falls State Park. You order a cold and bracingly bitter Excelsior! White Gold in the bustling tap room, then head outside to sit in a lawn chair and enjoy a more tranquil drinking experience. On surrounding lawns, fires burn in clay pits. Children run about, scrambling after the blinking fireflies. In a nearby field, head-high corn stalks rustle in the breeze.

It’s hard to drag yourself away from all this, but dinner awaits at Hazelnut Kitchen in nearby Trumansburg. With its handsome vintage detail, the restaurant feels like a gleaming hand-tooled diorama. You sit at a bar near the galley kitchen and get down to the business of ordering. Your peach and arugula salad is ripe and peppery. The house-made pan-fried gnocchi, with fresh corn and a trembling poached egg, are tender, crisp and sweet. You take a spoon to your crème brûlée and it cracks like a hammer on plate glass. You can’t possibly eat more than two bites, you think, then polish it off handily.

It’s still on the early side when you get back to Ithaca, so you stop by Lot 10, a bar known for its excellent mixed drinks and eclectic roster of musical acts. To start, you order a Negroni (Beefeater gin, Campari, vermouth), which the bartender executes perfectly. As you swallow the last of your drink, Matt Riis, the bar’s garrulous owner, convinces you to try a Pickleback—one part Jameson, one part pickle juice. “Sweet & Sour Dill or Spicy Asian?” he asks, already pouring out shots. You wish your college town had had a place like this.

It’s getting late, and you’re feeling a little, um, pickled, but you decide on one more stop before heading back to the hotel. So it is that, a few minutes later, you find yourself back at the Johnson Museum, standing on a lawn and gazing up at a balcony, upon which you can see Leo Villareal’s “Cosmos” installation, its constellation of lights careening across the ceiling of the Mallin Sculpture Court, splitting and regrouping, a sea of nautiloids and fractals blooming and fading into the night sky.

DAY TWO | You wake up early and head to the open-air Ithaca Farmers Market, where you forage for breakfast among heaps of produce—nectarines like summer moons, garnet-colored beets, tangled mounds of...
A MATTER OF TASTE
Clockwise from top left: A brewer samples his wares at Ithaca Beer Company; rich harvests at the Ithaca Farmers Market; mixing it up at Lot 10; crème brûlée with a fruity twist at Hazelnut Kitchen.
STATE FARE
Clockwise from top:
Finger Lakes Distilling; goat cheese at Lively Run; animal responsible for said cheese
peppers and beans. “Eat one, it won’t kill you!” a farmer yells as you eyeball a bin of cherries. You pop two in your mouth and buy a pound to snack on. Next, you wolf down a num unsom ang, a sweet Cambodian rice cake, then a blueberry scone at the aptly named Fat Boy Bakery. Oh, and a quick hunk of poppy-seed cake from Veronika’s Pastries. You were hungry.

Your next stop, a few miles up the west bank of Cayuga, is the sleek, angular Museum of the Earth, carved into a hillside above the lake. A 300-million-year-old Coelophysis dinosaur guards the entrance, beyond which, hanging from the ceiling, is the skeleton of a right whale. In one gallery you find a display recounting the glacial history of the area’s imponderably deep lakes. In another, you encounter the official fossil of the state of New York: an immense sea scorpion, now thankfully extinct.

You leave the museum in a predatory mood, so you stop by Lively Run, a nearby goat cheese maker. The goats, listlessly chewing their hay in the barn, are too peaceable to pique your appetite, so you head into the tasting room, where you sample a briny Balkan-style feta and a creamy Cayuga blue before you continue on your way, primed for lunch.

After a short drive west, the broad expanse of Seneca Lake comes into view. You stop at the Stonecat in Hector, a clapboard bistro overlooking the water, and claim a table under a shaggy willow tree. You dig into a pub plate of maple-juniper sausage, accompanied by a wild smear of peach-apricot chutney and a buttery wedge of Keeley’s Across the Pond cheese, enjoying the dappled shade and gazing idly at the distant boats.

Your next stop is Watkins Glen, an idyllic hamlet at the lake’s southern end, but first you duck into Finger Lakes Distilling in Burdett for a digestivo. Beyond the glass-walled tasting room you can see the Willy Wonka–style works, the gurgling vats and copper stills producing a clear trickle of high-proof spirits. You toss back a shot of the soon-to-be-released wheated bourbon, which disappears in a luxurious vapor. You buy a bottle and wish you had room for more.

You arrive in Watkins Glen and check into the Harbor Hotel, which sits astride Seneca Lake. The hotel’s handsome fieldstone lobby is lined with Gilded Age photographs of the town. Your balcony has a wide view over the marina, where you spot your ride for the afternoon: the schooner True Love, rocking imperially in her slip. The boat’s gleaming woodwork and clean lines seem unchanged from its star turn with Grace Kelly in High Society.

After a brief rest, you stroll down to the dock to meet Lawrence Hacker, the boat’s captain. Lawrence looks the part—tan and tall and squinting against the sun. The rushing wind swells the sails, and the cobalt water parts in surging waves, sending a fine spray into the air. The boat scuds northward, passing rolling vineyards, stands of forest cover, rows of lakeside cabins. By the time you reach Hector Falls, the sun has begun to descend, and the towering face of the falls is bathed in golden light. Later, as the boat makes its way back to dock, its sails snapping in the wind, you think you could get used to this.

There’s time for a sundowner before dinner, so you head for the Tavern Room at Seneca Lodge, a nearby cluster of A-frames and cabins. The bar’s timber walls are hung with deer heads. You put a coin in the nickelodeon and order a mug of the house pale ale. Jack, one of the owners, regales you with snippets of local lore, at one point producing a finger, which, the story goes, once belonged to a regular. He lost it in a workshop accident, Jack says, so he had it bronzed and gave it to the bar as a gift. After this, he moves on to his favorite topic: birdwatching. “Barn swallows, they’re all barn swallows,” one of the regulars shouts to hear more, but your growling stomach has other ideas.

The bistro at Red Newt Cellars in Hector is serving a number of its older vintages tonight. You start with a heady 2008 Curry Creek Gewürztraminer and a board of pickles and cheeses and meats. Your strip steak is both beautifully charred and blushingly rare. The accompanying freekeh and smoked shiitakes are grown-next-door fresh. Dessert is a silken chocolate chèvre cheesecake and a glass of aromatic, port-style Hellbender. This seems like a fitting end to the day.

**GLASS ACTS**
The Finger Lakes region corners the American wine market

Wine drinkers are spoiled for choice in the Finger Lakes. The region boasts some of the most exciting new wineries in the country, and many of the most highly regarded Rieslings and Gewürztraminers in the U.S. are made here. Don’t miss the Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard, on the west side of Seneca Lake, a 20-minute drive from Watkins Glen. The tasting room looks like a modest dark-wood barn from the outside, but its interior is impressively appointed, with beaten copper accents, shining steel fermentation tanks and hand-wrought light fixtures that hang from a soaring ceiling. Call ahead for a tour of the vineyards and plan to spend at least an hour in the tasting room as Oskar Bynke, the jovial Swede who co-owns the winery with Fred Merwarth, pours you glass after glass of lush, complex wines. Try the 2013 semi-dry Riesling—it will send your senses reeling in a summery rush of fruit and honey.
The moon is high and bright as you drive back to Watkins Glen. The landscape, so green by day, is black, puddled with silver. Back at your hotel, you leave the balcony door open and drift off to the sound of the wind murmuring across the lake.

**D A Y T H R E E** | You’re up with the birds today—or with the worms, because the plan is to spend the morning beefing up your outdoorsy credentials with a fly-fishing lesson. First, you grab a cup of coffee from the lobby and sip it on the hotel’s outdoor patio, watching the swaying masts in the marina.

Soon, you’re standing on the bank of Catharine Creek with Mark Moskal, a guide from local outfit Summit to Stream, trying unsuccessfully to tie a lure to your line. “This is a brown woolly bugger,” he says, tying up a feathery fly. “This will pretty much catch fish all year.” You practice your casting, successfully hooking some staghorn sumac and a low elm. “It’s not a day of fly-fishing unless you snag at least one tree,” Mark offers gamely. By the end of the session, you’re stripping the fly-line along the running water like a pro—albeit one who fails to catch a single fish.

Next, you have another macho activity lined up at the Watkins Glen International racetrack, a few miles outside the town center, which allows drivers to test their mettle on its banked oval. Instead of Firebirds and muscle trucks, you arrive to find an orderly line of VW buses at the start line, driven by a group of Volkswagen aficionados who’ve come to take a tour of the course. “The hippies have landed!” shouts a wiry woman holding a clipboard, and then you’re off, whizzing around the track in your rental, occasionally glimpsing the tootling Technicolor vans shuddering around a bend. You watch them dawdle over the checkered line and head outside for a different kind of drive.

You’ve decided to take a short and scenic road trip up the west side of Seneca Lake to the college town of Geneva. You stop along the way at the Windmill Farm & Craft Market, named for the full-size windmill twirling outside. Having...
DAY ONE
La Tourelle Resort & Spa
1150 Danby Rd., Ithaca; Tel. (607) 273-2734
Buttermilk Falls State Park
112 E. Buttermilk Falls Rd., Ithaca; Tel. (607) 273-5761
Moosewood
215 N. Cayuga St., Ithaca; Tel. (607) 273-9610
Cornell Plantations
1 Plantations Rd., Ithaca; Tel. (607) 255-2400
Johnson Museum of Art
114 Central Ave., Ithaca; Tel. (607) 255-6464
Ithaca Beer Company
122 Ithaca Beer Dr., Ithaca; Tel. (607) 273-0766

DAY TWO
Ithaca Farmers Market
Steamboat Landing, 545 3rd St., Ithaca; Tel. (607) 273-7109
Museum of the Earth
1259 Trumansburg Rd., Ithaca; Tel. (607) 273-6623
Lively Run Goat Dairy Farm
8978 County Road 142, Interlaken; Tel. (607) 532-4647

DAY THREE
Summit to Stream Adventures
Tel. (607) 535-2701
Watkins Glen International
2790 County Route 16, Watkins Glen; Tel. (607) 535-2486
Windmill Farm & Craft Market
3900 State Route 414A, Penn Yan; Tel. (315) 536-3032
Red Dove Tavern
30 Castle St., Geneva; Tel. (315) 781-2020
Watkins Glen State Park
State Route 14, Watkins Glen; Tel. (607) 535-4511
Dano’s Heuriger on Seneca
9564 State Route 414, Lodi; Tel. (607) 582-7555
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Whether you’re a wine aficionado ready to discover a new vintage, a nature lover looking for an undiscovered paradise or a foodie craving fresh taste delights, you can reach the hidden joys of New York’s Finger Lakes region with our new twice-daily service between Chicago and Elmira, N.Y. United is committed to preserving the beauty of natural treasures such as the Finger Lakes. To help reduce the climate-change footprint of your travel, you can purchase carbon offsets online before you fly. For more information or to book a flight, visit united.com.

chickened out of buying a Davy Crockett hat, you stop at a stall overseen by an ornery moustachioed man in a leather vest, from whom you purchase a lucky rabbit’s foot. As you pay for the foot, you consider saying “Not so lucky for the rabbit!” but the man’s expression persuades you to keep quiet.

You stop for lunch at the Red Dove Tavern, a gastropub in downtown Geneva, where you belly up to the bar and a heap of crisp fried chickpeas. The PEI oysters are shockingly good—a cool, briny jolt to your taste buds. You compliment co-owner Rune Hilt on the oysters. “I love my fryer as much as the next guy,” he says with a shrug, “but you’ve got to just let some things be.” You agree, and order another half dozen.

Back at the southern tip of Seneca, you set out on a late-afternoon hike through Watkins Glen State Park. The forest trails lead you through a kind of fairy-tale landscape, over stone bridges and behind waterfalls, snaking upward beneath glowing leaves. On the way down, you walk a narrow ridge, the less traveled route that skirts the gorge, and come across Greenwood Cemetery. You wander the grassy cliffside grounds for a while, contemplating the weatherworn 19th-century gravestones and grand mausoleums. Then the shadows lengthen and you resume your descent into town.

From here you head for Lodi, 20 miles north of Watkins Glen, on the east side of the lake, and take a porch table at Dano’s, a Viennese-style restaurant. You're lucky if you get a quarter-cup a day.” He disappears into the kitchen and comes back with a bowl of Slovakian bryndzové halušky, a creamy mound of cheese-slicked spaetzle topped with caramelized onions and bacon. He also delivers a plate of sausage, unbidden, along with the observation, “I don’t smoke cigarettes, so I have to smoke meat instead.”

You take a long draft from your mug of local wine and a forkful of spaetzle and look out at a nearby stand of quince and apricot trees, and the glimmering lake beyond. A few waiters and diners have come outside to watch the sun go down. Its last rays have brought the shore into blazing relief—every fold and plot of land is lit bright, every hidden crevice momentarily revealed.

The teat thing is now the primary piece of sheep-related trivia in New York City–based writer ROHAN KAMICHERIL’s arsenal.

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PE Li E R I S T I M E
From left: Meat and cheese platter at Dano’s; fairy-tale landscapes at Watkins Glen State Park.
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