



COURTESY OF DON FOLEY

BEST THING NEXT TO A REINDEER. Horse-drawn carriage rides are one of several offerings that make this spot an unexpected holiday destination.

Winter in Niagara-on-the-Lake

by Ingrid Sapona

Niagara-on-the-Lake is a well-known summer getaway for theatergoers, wine lovers and shoppers. But few people, I suspect, have discovered the charms of the place in winter.

I hadn't until a few years ago when a friend and I showed up in December for the Candlelight Stroll, described as a "guided stroll through the historical town, accompanied by local choirs and seasonal entertainment." The description didn't do the event justice.

For the stroll (this year it's at 6:30 p.m. Friday, Nov. 30), the town's main thoroughfare—Queen Street—is closed to traffic. The scene as we approached was straight out of a Victorian postcard. The street was aglow from end-to-end with lights and ornaments,

boughs, wreaths, ribbons and candles, and it seemed as though the whole town had come out for the event.

Among the people mixing and mingling, we spotted people selling candles. As we paid our \$3, we noticed the candles actually were keepsake votives printed with a winter scene by Trisha Romance—a beloved local artist who specializes in scenes of small towns and family life. Proceeds from sales of the candles were being donated to a children's charity.

Promptly at 6:30 p.m., the town crier beckoned from the steps of the historic courthouse, inviting all to come near and welcome the honorary marshals as they arrived in a horse-drawn sleigh. The Lord Mayor said a few words, and the festivities got under way with a carol sing-along. Father

Christmas was on hand for the youngsters and to help collect food donations.

The courthouse caroling continued as people headed in different directions to hear—and join in with—some of the other groups performing. There were church choirs, fife and drum corps, barbershop quartets, madrigal singers and an assortment of choruses. The Bethany Bell Ringers, a group of girls who play songs on hand bells, were my favorite. The combination of crisp winter air and the dulcet tones of the multiple-octave bells was spellbinding.

The sights and sounds of the season were warming our hearts—but not our fingertips. Eventually we needed some relief from the cold, so we headed to a stand for hot apple cider and roasted chestnuts. Many of the shops



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COURTESY OF RIVERBEND INN

WINTER WONDERLAND. Niagara-on-the-Lake exudes as much charm in winter as in summer. The Weather Pine Inn (top) offers five guest rooms with down-to-earth comfort. Riverbend Inn sits just outside Niagara-on-the-Lake. The Georgian mansion was recently restored (above). The clock tower (right) is a familiar landmark for visitors.



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stayed open that evening, as well as the restaurants, bakeries and pubs, so when we needed to warm up a bit more, or when our stomachs started to grumble, relief was only a few steps away.

The leisurely pace of the Stroll provided ample opportunity to read the plaques designating historic spots in the town and to make mental note of the places to tour another day (the town was the first capital of "Upper Canada" and played an important role in the war of 1812).

As it turns out, the Stroll was just the start. With an eye toward getting people to visit year-around, the town's Chamber of Commerce, civic groups, local retailers and folks in the hospitality trade (nearly 300 B&Bs and inns, hotels and restaurants) have come up with lots of reasons to visit for a winter getaway.

In conjunction with the Candlelight Stroll, the Rotary Club holds its annual Holiday House Tour that same weekend. Tickets for this popular fundraiser, which are \$20, allow you to tour six houses, at your leisure, over two days. Every year, different homes in town are chosen and professionally decorated in holiday themes.

The following weekend, Saturday,

Dec. 8, brings the Santa Claus Parade—a popular tradition in most Ontario towns. You can follow it up with a 3 p.m. screening of a film from this year's Toronto International Film Festival. The Shaw Festival—better known for its theater productions—hosts the films every Saturday from December through February at the Festival Theatre (tickets usually sell out, so consider ordering in advance—see "Event Info" sidebar below for more information).

In between, you can get off your feet by taking a horse-drawn carriage ride, which includes a narrated tour of the town. The carriages are a year-round favorite (weather permitting, horse-drawn sleigh rides also are available).

The winter festivities will continue into the New Year. Local hotels, inns, wineries and restaurants will feature "Winterglow" specials and packages. And in January, the annual Niagara Icewine Festival showcases the area's award-winning vintages.

So forget summer for now. Winter in Niagara-on-the-Lake brings its own unique rewards.

Ingrid Sapona is a Toronto-based writer.



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Event Info

- This year's Candlelight Stroll is on Friday, Nov. 30, at 6:30 p.m.
- The Rotary Holiday House Tour runs Nov. 30 through Dec. 1. For information or to order tickets, call: (905) 351-3807.
- The Santa Claus Parade begins at 11 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 8. For information on this and other events, visit www.niagaraonthelake.com or call (905) 468-1950.
- For information on the Saturday film screenings at the Festival Theatre or to order tickets, contact the Shaw Festival's box office at: (800) 511-7429 (the films often sell out in advance, so ordering tickets in advance is recommended).
- For information on carriage rides, visit www.sentinelcarriages.ca or call (905) 468-4943.
- The Niagara Icewine Festival runs January 18-27. For information, visit www.niagaraicewinefestival.com.

On the way...

On your way to Niagara-on-the-Lake, you might want to stop at Niagara Falls, Ontario, to take in the Winter Festival of Lights from Nov. 3 to Jan. 8. The decorations include more than 125 animated lighting displays and three million lights on trees and the ground. And every evening (weather permitting), fireworks light up over the falls.

There's no admission to see the lights, but a donation of \$5 to \$10 per car is suggested. For more information, visit www.wfl.com.

Accommodations

There are too many B&Bs and inns in Niagara-on-the-Lake to list here. The Chamber of Commerce maintains a list and will even book a room for you. For more information, visit www.niagaraonthelake.com or call (905) 468-4943.

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and receive a 2007
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