

Ithaca Is It!

By Brette McWhorter Sember

Looking for a weekend getaway for the family? Ithaca is a great destination for families and is conveniently located at the southern tip of Cayuga Lake, about an hour and a half from Buffalo. Home to Cornell University and Ithaca College, it is a college town with diverse cultural opportunities. Ithaca has a city feel to it, but a relaxed country attitude.

Ithaca has a huge assortment of accommodations, from a large quantity of bed and breakfasts to hotels and motels. The Holiday Inn Executive Tower (222 South Cayuga Street, 607-272-1000) is in the heart of the city and is in an ideal location as many things are within walking distance. The hotel offers family suites and special promotions allowing children to eat free. It also has that family necessity - an indoor pool. Just steps away from the hotel is the Ithaca Commons (corner of West State and Cayuga Street). The Commons is a pedestrian street lined with a variety of shops, including fine handicrafts, jewelry, china, pottery, clothes, gifts, books, Christmas items, toys and a kitchen shop. There are frequent free outdoor concerts, as well as street musicians. Diverse groups of people congregate at the outdoor tables. The Commons and the surrounding streets have a wide array of ethnic restaurants for some food adventures. Not very ethnic, but still delicious, is the Home Dairy (located directly on the Commons). It serves gourmet sandwiches and delicious baked goods (try a cow cookie). Pick up some lunch to go and have a seat at one of the many outdoor tables in the Commons. There is so much activity that you will be able to eat at a relaxed pace and finish your food before the kids get antsy.

One street over from the Commons is the Dewitt Mall (215 North Cayuga Street), housed in an old brick building. Inside are more shops, including antiques, hats and the Children's General Store. This last store is stop you won't want to miss. Let the kids play with the toy trains as you grab armfuls of creative, educational and just plain fun toys. The Dewitt Café allows diners to sample gourmet fare while surrounded by colorful tropical fish tanks. This is a great spot for breakfast and their pancakes are sure to be a hit. Next door is the famous Moosewood Restaurant (215 N. Cayuga Street, 607-273-9610), known worldwide for its original vegetarian food and cookbooks.

To take a break from the city life, stop at the Ithaca Bakery (400 N. Meadow Street) and buy a picnic lunch (in summer they offer picnic packages as well as interesting gourmet sandwiches on their wide variety of homemade breads) and some half moon cookies and cheesecake brownies. You can also order children's items such as PBJ and ham sandwiches. Enjoy a picnic at one of the many beautiful parks in the Ithaca area. Myers Point Park is a bit of a drive north, but well worth it for a picnic and a dip in Cayuga Lake (Route 34B to Myers Road to Marina Road in Lansing). Myers Point also has the most adorable little lighthouse and has lifeguards on duty as well as a large park area for picnicking. Buttermilk Falls State Park (Route 13 South) has swimming at the bottom of a magnificent waterfall, however on a recent visit the water was a brisk 52 degrees! The water temperature is posted on a sign at the park entrance. Taughannock Falls State Park is home to a spectacular 215 foot waterfall inside a gorge. The view here is something the whole family will be stunned by. Robert H. Treman State Park also has small waterfalls and swimming areas in the lake.

The Ithaca Farmers Market runs June through October (Sundays 10-2 at Steamboat Landing at the end of Third Street and Tuesdays 9-1 at Buffalo and Cayuga Streets). If you go on Sunday to

Steamboat Landing, you will walk through a large open air wood pavilion, where pets are welcome. The offerings are eclectic - produce, plants, herbs, homemade soap, baked goods, sticky rice, fresh fruit beverages, jewelry, woodworks, hair ornaments, paintings, photographs and delicious jams (try the Knapp Farms Brambleberry Conserve). Boat rides on the lake are also available at the end of the dock.

The Sciencenter (601 First Street, www.sciencenter.org, Tues.- Sat. 10-5 and Sun. 12-5, admission: Adults \$4.50, children \$3.50) is an experience that should not be missed. Every exhibit is hands on and designed to intrigue children into exploring science. Visitors can go inside a huge camera to explore how it works. There are computers that track real lightning strikes, a bee hive behind glass, microscopes, many identification and observation activities, an amazing two story ball machine, a moving water exhibit to experiment with, a toddler play area, a live boa constrictor and an outdoor area that has a working water pump, communication systems, lever and pulley system as well as a bridge building area and swings. A visit to this museum will tire even the most energetic visitor. The Sciencenter also maintains the Carl Sagan Planet walk that runs through the Commons. It is a scale model of the solar system and gives a very personal understanding of how far apart the planets really are.

Another well known museum in the area is the Sapsucker Woods Sanctuary (159 Sapsucker Woods Road, 607-254-BIRD, www.birds.cornell.edu, call for hours), run by Cornell University. 4.2 miles of trails for bird watching are available. There is also an observatory overlooking a large pond and a birdfeeding garden. Bird art and bird related items are on display inside the visitor's center.

While you're in town, take a drive through Collegetown for an adventure. Collegetown (College Avenue, Eddy Street and Stewart Avenue) is located next to Ithaca College and is filled with unique shops and restaurants. The area is filled with hills, twists and turns and provides quite an exciting driving experience.

Contact the Tompkins County Convention and Visitor's Bureau (1-800-284-8422, www.visitithaca.com) for more information about family fun in Ithaca.