



Going WITH THE Flow

A FAMILY GOLF
HOLIDAY TO NIAGARA
FALLS

Story by David J Whyte

NIAGARA FALLS WITH ITS 1950'S HAPPY HONEYMOON, NO-TELL MOTEL REPUTATION MIGHT NOT STRIKE YOU AS THE MOST SOPHISTICATED OF GOLF DESTINATIONS. BUT WITH SEVERAL NEW COURSES AND AN ARRAY OF SWANKY HOTELS IN TOWN, THE FALLS ARE DEFINITELY ON THE WAY UP! TRAVEL WRITER & PHOTOGRAPHER DAVID J WHYTE TAKES HIS FAMILY TO THE BRINK TO GET A CLOSER LOOK.



It was holiday time and I was worried! We were in Ontario visiting the Canadian Clan, the family faction that had escaped to the New World decades ago. We were seeing the sights, trawling the malls and giving the Canadian economy a major cash injection. But what was really worrying me was 'how will I get a game of golf'? You know the situation. As a father you try and do the right thing! But there's only so much family quality time one can take! Right!

Home from Home

Our base was the city of Hamilton, halfway between Toronto and Niagara Falls. Hamilton is basically a suburb of Scotland! Everywhere you hear the soft burrs of Scots who, like my relatives have made this part of Canada their home. Even street names give a respectful nod to the Auld Country - Dunbar, Paisley, Fife, Greenock, Mackenzie, Strachan. We felt right at home!

And with the Scots came golf! There are 800 golf courses in Southern Ontario alone! That's 300 more than back in Scotland. I was bound to find a game somewhere! With two boys keen to avoid the mall-trawls and a Canadian cousin equally in favour of some fresh air, it seemed my initial golf 'cold turkey' fears were unfounded.

The great thing about Canadian golf is it's relatively cheap. Most decent courses, certainly away from the Greater Toronto conurbation, charge around \$50-\$80(Canadian), more than acceptable when you encounter their high standards.

Copetown Woods Golf Club

Our first outing was at Copetown Woods Golf Club near Dundas, just a few miles west of Hamilton. This predominantly agricultural area has recently seen farmers ditching their cash crops and diversifying into golf. Copetown's course was built on a broccoli farm with a sandy subsoil that proved ideal for growing greens - of the golf variety. The layout offers an array of exciting driving propositions and varying approaches that make it a shot-maker's Shangri La. Fescue-lined fairways and billowing, oversized putting surfaces kept us thinking all the way round.

I was impressed! Copetown is quite a swish operation all round, its red-roofed clubhouse putting me in mind of a miniature Turnberry. What made it even more appealing was the price (remember, you're talking to a Scotsman)! It was hard to believe that such a high standard of course & facilities were available for only \$55 for a round. That's around £30 in legal Scottish tender - and a steal at that!

Niagara Falls

Not wanting to put a damper on things, we jumped in the Clan Van and headed for one of the world's wettest wonders. Niagara Falls is a place you must visit at least once in your life. Every minute six million cubic feet (168,000 m³) of water slips across the Horseshoe Falls between Canada and the USA to the amazement of tourists who pour in here in equally voluminous numbers from every part of the world.



Niagara Falls comes with a Health Warning! The adjacent municipality, more specifically the Clifton Hill area smacks of the tacky tourist trap I usually steer a hundred miles clear of. Here you find every type of fast food outlet, raucous amusement arcade and cut-price t-shirt vendor all clamouring for your attention! While there's a fair chance you'll get wet at the Falls, this part of town exists solely to soak up your spare cash. And millions queue up every year to pay their cheques and respects. But hey! It was the kids' holiday so sometimes you just have to go with the flow. I lasted for about an hour! Sideshows such as Ripley's Believe it or Not were actually quite interesting. But again, be warned, everything costs aplenty in this sticky little tourist trap.

Strip of Sanity

The Niagara Parks Commission does a fantastic job of maintaining a strip of sanity between the actual Falls and Clifton Hill. This green belt, which includes the Niagara Falls



& Great Gorge, the Garden Trail, Heritage and Nature Trails is a most welcomed buffer. You could ride a bike along the delightful Niagara Parkway next to the gorge and never think there were 3 million tourists yelling and screaming just a block and a half away.

Whirlpool Golf Club

The Parks Commission also manage three separate golf operations. Teeing off at 6.30am at Whirlpool Golf Club was one way of getting golf in and being back on duty before certain clan members had even breakfasted. With whichever youngster we could prise out of bed, cousin Bob and I took to Niagara Park's most senior track, a Stanley Thomas design from the early 1950's. Whirlpool is a municipal golf course but very well presented and well run. Tree-lined, not too tight and undulating with, in spite of a high level of foot-fall good putting surfaces, the course has a great, traditional feel. It was even a course less experienced players like our bleary-eyed youngster could cope with.



18th on the Battlefield



Legends on the Niagara

On the south side of town and also run by the Niagara Parks Commission are the twin tracks of Legends on The Niagara, two exceptional courses that have proved very popular since opening nearly 10 years ago.

You'll come across a lot of references to the War of 1812 in this area, a 4-year tussle between the newly-independent Americans and the rather miffed Brits who, having just lost the Continental USA, were worried about getting kicked out of Canada too. One of the larger skirmishes, the Battle of Chippawa took place on the 'Battlefield Course'. What a mess they made of greens! Only joking! You can test your own combative skills against some superb, long-short holes such as the 3rd, 14th and 17th on the Battlefield course. The neighbouring Usher's Creek is equally challenging. There's no preferred track here; both courses provide diversity and highly agreeable golf. We managed two rounds that day. The girls had found a pleasant indoor swimming pool in the Cairn Croft Best Western Hotel, our hotel of choice and a Factory Outlet right next door where they were spending hours of cash, sorry fun!

Appealing Accommodation

I've got to say, having visited many times now, Niagara Falls is looking better these days than it ever did except for the big name hotels trying to out-ribe one another and claim a better view of the Falls. Not exactly my cuppa but if you follow Lundy's Lane a little further west, there are some great old motels straight out of Happy Days.

"What are they, Dad?" my youngster asked as we passed The Penthouse Club & The Sundowner Lounge along with a few other faded relics of Niagara's seedier days. "Ah, those are Gentlemen's Clubs, son" I evasively mumbled. "Peelers," piped up cousin Bob, never frightened to tell it like it is! "What happened to them Bob?" I asked spying their dilapidated frontages and tumbleweed car parks. "Did the local council shut them down?" "Yeah, they must have rubbed someone up the wrong way!" Bob's quick with the one-liners!

Niagara still appeals to the wild side especially for stag parties coming up from the States. There are two Casinos in town which my aunt & uncle reliably inform me, seeing how



Grand Niagara



they spend a lot of their leisure time and kid's inheritance there along with dozens of other retired high-rollers, are top notch!

Grand Niagara

Being a boring old fart and addicted only to one vice— golf, I managed to wangle another couple of rounds before it was time for home. Grand Niagara is a superb Rees Jones design divided by long lakes and strips of forest. It's RTJ II's only design here in Ontario and according to my cousin 'the best course he's ever played'. It certainly offers lots of thrills, all the more remarkable considering this was once pan-flat farmland. Grand Niagara's extensive, flawless greens were to me its most outstanding feature. You had to run it up close to avoid excessively long putts.

Peninsula Lakes

Another grand land-reclamation project, the three distinctive 9's of Peninsula Lakes Golf Club between Hamilton and Niagara Falls were built on the site of a large sand & gravel quarry. Pen Lakes is a delight on the eye. The original Quarry Course drops down into what must have been the quarry bottom - now a verdant, tree-lined dell. The Hillside Course offers wide water hazards, certainly more than the Quarry and expertly positioned to provide a challenging gala. The Orchard Course is the most recently constructed but it looks like it has existed forever. A truly gorgeous circuit occurs at the 6th, 7th, and 8th holes playing around a meandering lake.



Grand Niagara



Peninsula





Beechwood

Beechwood Golf & Country Club

A more family-friendly outing was had at Beechwood Golf & Country Club just west of Niagara Falls. For our two youngsters this was probably their most enjoyable round. It's a relaxed, open-to-all-comers course with no pretensions of being anything else and therefore ideal for novices. The fairways are accommodating but not without challenge for more ambitious play. Beechwood turned out to be an unassuming hit.

Niagara on the Lake

If you've had enough of the Falls, time to get out of town! We took the long, serene drive along the Niagara Parkway with its soothing views across Lake Ontario and picturesque communities. Wine production flourishes throughout the Niagara Peninsula and you can pull up at any of the vineyards and sample the produce.

The municipality of Niagara-on-the-Lakes is the antithesis of Niagara Falls. Whilst here you might want to avail yourself to Niagara-on-the-Lake Golf Club, rumoured to be the oldest golf course in North America. Laid out by John Geale Dickenson in 1875, this is a charming little 9-hole track, perfectly flat and ideal for a family round with a bit of history thrown in.

What Else to Do

A trip on the Maid of the Mist is compulsory. For a better view without having to pull on those silly rain macs (and still get wet) take to the skies with Niagara Helicopters. Or strap yourself into the Whirlpool Jet Boat Tour (we never managed this but a fireman friend of my cousin reckoned it was the best thing on offer)!



Beechwood

Where to Stay

In Hamilton, you could stay at my Auntie Margaret's – she always wanted to run a B&B. Otherwise, in Niagara Falls there is an influx of new hotels transforming the misty skyline. All the big names are now in town; Marriott, Hilton, Embassy Suites, and Sheraton offering swanky accommodation with superb views of both the Canadian and American Falls. Check out www.niagarafallshotels.com Being cost-conscious, we stayed at the Cairn Croft Best Western Hotel on Lundy's Lane, a bit further back from the Falls but better-priced with an indoor pool and recreation area for kids. It also seems to be one of the most popular golf hotels in town. They work with all the key courses in

the area and offer a one-stop golf booking service. For more information visit www.cairncroft.com

Another less frenetic might be the Prince of Wales Hotel in Niagara-on-the-Lake; not your ideal kids' escape – more an escape from the kids - www.vintage-hotels.com. There are also a host of B&B's throughout the hinterland that look most appealing – www.niagarabedandbreakfasts.com. For more pampering, White Oaks Spa Resort is reputed to be the swankiest place to stay in the area www.whiteoaksresort.com

