

# Experience Niagara Falls for less \$\$\$ than you think

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Berti pointed out how, around the world, "People save money their whole lives to come here."

And while those individuals will have to pay for transportation, lodging and meals, amongst other things, "You could come in here, walk around for free, spend an entire day and not spend a dime," Berti said.

Here are some popular and affordable options:

**What to do**

•**Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Welcome Center at Niagara Falls State Park, FREE to visit**

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Welcome Center at Niagara Falls State Park opened in 2023 and serves as an ideal starting point for guests.

This \$46 million, 28,000-square-foot venue has ticket and information stations; memorabilia that includes a piece of daredevil Nik Wallenda's 2012 cross-border wire-walk "rope"; a gift shop with Niagara Falls swag, and a concession area that serves DiCamillo Bakery pizza and biscotti, Fowler's chocolates and sponge candy, and even Dippin' Dots ice cream.

Last month, two new attractions opened inside the welcome center.

•**"Voices of the Falls," FREE**

The \$4.4 million permanent, interactive exhibit explores the past, present and future of Niagara Falls – the park as well as the surrounding community – in the voices of those who have been part of its history. Featuring first-person perspectives, historical narratives, artifacts, hands-on interactive and video presentations, the nearly 5,000-square-foot exhibit highlights the cultural, environmental and personal connections that have formed the nation's oldest state park.

Stories from the Indigenous who first inhabited the land to the Underground Railroad to the tragedy of Love Canal as well as the flora and fauna of the park are included and will provide visitors with a richer view of the park beyond the waterfall. Additional elements of the project include outdoor models, a lenticular mural and signage.

Berti said, "We in Niagara Falls worked very, very closely" with the community on this exhibit. "When we did the content for this,



we created a cocreation group, and it was Tuscarora and Seneca; and we met every single week for two to three years, where they told the stories; they put the stories together. We said, 'What do you want the world to know?' So, what you see is in their words, their stories, instead of us trying to do that."

Callouts to Old Fort Niagara and the Castellani Art Museum encourage guests to extend their stay and discover more Niagara Region history.

Berti said the creative team sought first-person accounts for the welcome center attraction so that it's "more meaningful. It tells a better story."

•**"Above the Roar," \$18**

State Parks' licensed concession partner, Delaware North, teamed with award-winning experiential design and media production firm MDSX on "Above the Roar," a 4-minute ride providing an incredible look at the falls. The fully immersive, multisensory vir-

tual reality (VR) experience takes participants on a thrilling journey around the most powerful waterfall in North America.

Through exclusive aerial footage, motion-enhanced seating and immersive sound, participants soar along the U.S. side of the Niagara River just above the rapids and then over the American, Bridal Veil and Horseshoe falls before gliding through the gorge and plunging into the depths below. There, under the water, encounter seven species of fish that are native to the river before returning to the brink of the American Falls and ending back inside the welcome center.

The room that houses the VR ride is tricked out with lights and music to further enhance the experience. A moving chair serves as a vehicle for the adventure.

Delaware North's Niagara Falls general manager, Michael Barnes, said, "The park has two iconic attractions – has for years – and they're different experiences (Cave of the Winds, Maid of the Mist). I challenged these guys for something that's not like those experiences – and that's what that is. It takes you where you can't go."

Indeed, even those who frequent Niagara Falls State Park haven't seen it from this vantage point.

But the ride is more than just thrilling.

"It's subtle, but the script in

there goes through a lot of the history and the information on the falls," Barnes said.

•**Welcome center plaza, FREE**

Outside of the welcome center plaza, there is a wayfinding map that points out attractions both in Niagara Falls State Park and the City of Niagara Falls.

On the outside of a dedicated restroom building, guests can take a picture in front of a lenticular mural. Native American art and history lines the periphery, and a reconfigured staircase doubles as a beautiful gateway to the water.

The courtyard will host music and special events throughout the summer.

•**Niagara Region Archive, FREE**

Last summer, State Parks announced the 7,000-square-foot former regional administration building was transformed into the Niagara Region Archive and multipurpose community room.

Headed up by Curator Courtney Geerhart, the building provides a rare opportunity to explore remarkable and special pieces of Niagara Falls' history.

"Niagara Falls is really unique," Geerhart said. "I always say there's something new to learn in Niagara Falls. So, if you haven't been to the area in a while, if you haven't been to the falls, this is a great time of year to come out, come visit and see it, experience it for the first time anew."

SEE NIAGARA, continued on Page 12



GRAPHIC BY MIA TOOLES

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