

Shuttle promotes tourism, supported by locals

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Niagara's iconic landscape, rich history and thriving culture along the Niagara River corridor. Each is staffed by friendly, knowledgeable drivers who ensure every rider has an enjoyable experience.

Per COVID-19 restrictions, all vehicles will be running at 50% capacity to ensure social distancing. Masks are required, and shuttle windows will be open (weather-permitting). Hand sanitizers will also be readily available on the vehicles.

The shuttle's standard route includes stops at a number of premier locations, including (Niagara Falls) the Niagara Falls USA Official Visitor Center, Niagara Falls State Park, 3rd Street Entertainment District, Aquarium of Niagara, Niagara Arts and Cultural Center, Niagara Falls

Train Station/Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center and Whirlpool State Park; plus (Lewiston) Academy Park, Center Street and the Waterfront; and (Youngstown) Main Street and Old Fort Niagara.

The most exciting news this year is the debut of an all-new route that will connect Niagara County like never before.

Beginning May 28, Discover Niagara will feature a Lockport route, which will run 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekends until Labor Day. The route will have a feeder loop between Niagara Falls and Lockport that operates three times a day and connects to a continuous microloop to a number of destinations in Lockport, including the Erie Canal Discovery Center, Lockport Caves & Niagara Zipper, Old City Hall, Cornerstone CFCU Arena, Lockport Locks & Erie Canal Cruises, Widewaters Marina, Palace Theater, Challenger Learning Center, Kenan Center & Gallery, Erie Canalway Trail, Niagara County Historical Society and Niagara County Courthouse.

"The major drop-off/pickup is right there at the Flight of Five, so you're right there with the Erie Canal, the Discovery Center, the small businesses around there – the farmers market, Lake Effect Ice Cream. ... We're really excited to be starting



The Discover Niagara Shuttle (Image courtesy of the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area)

that this year," says Sara Capen, executive director of the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area, which oversees the shuttle.

"The Discover Niagara Shuttle expands the experience beyond the falls. It connects two national heritage areas – the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area and the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor – to really pool all of the remarkable history together and give you the authentic experience of diving into this place that we call Niagara – the culture, the people, the history, and the small businesses that make it up."

The Discover Niagara Shuttle is more than just a connection point to local tourist hotspots, however. It also provides outdoor enthusiasts with a new way to experience the natural splendor of Niagara County in a whole new way.

"For people who enjoy recreation, it provides a tremendous experience. Whether you are a walker, a biker, a jogger, it's a great way to experience the region," Capen says. "Niagara County has a remarkable asset in that, just within the Discover Niagara Shuttle's existing route, there are five New York state parks. ... Now, you have the new bike trails along the Erie Canalway and the Lockport area. So, you can go biking and then load your bike on (the shuttle-mounted bike racks) and just sit back and relax. ..."

"And then this year, you'll have smaller, local municipality parks that will be open again, as well as safe, socially distanced farmers markets and small events that are within the COVID guidelines. So, I think from an outdoor recreation perspective, there's a lot to do and experience that is relatively new that people can get outside this year and enjoy."

Last year, the pandemic significantly impacted the local tourism industry – and the Discover Niagara Shuttle was no exception. The shuttle had a late-start, opening in August for a drastically shortened season, and only two vehicles running at a time.

"Ridership was understandably a little low, but people – especially local people – were still using it," Capen says.

Although the shuttle's tourist season was shorter than anticipated, it did allow for a few exciting changes. For starters, Artpark in Lewiston became a regular stop on the traditional route.

"Even though it was a pandemic year, it was a good opportunity for us to pilot how to add Artpark in. That will be an additional stop on our existing route," Capen says.

2020 also saw the completion of the Robert Moses Parkway removal and the installation of several new hiking trails.

"I think one of the most significant changes is the new gorge trails from the upper gorge area that connects Niagara Falls State Park all the way down to Devil's Hole. I actually think that is one of our best kept secrets,"

Capen says. "It was slowly released last year because of all the people hiking. And the Underground Railroad Center seems to be the center point of that. With the opening of the viewsheds ... right from that location you can kind of stand there and you can see Niagara Falls there; and you go down a little bit and look both ways and you can see the Class 6 rapids one way. ..."

"It's remarkable what we have in our own backyard."

The pandemic has also showcased how adaptable the shuttle is and the many uses it can provide outside of tourism. It ultimately proved to be a vital and adaptable resource for a community struggling with the impacts of COVID-19.

"We adapted the vehicles to serve the surrounding community and get important things and information into neighborhoods and to help out, especially with our local residents," Capen says.

Last summer, vehicles were used to distribute masks and sanitizers via community partners. During Niagara Falls High School's graduation parade, the shuttles were used to provide rides for families that didn't have access to cars. The shuttles also played an important community role during the election.

"We partnered with Create a Healthier Niagara Falls Collaborative, who actually sponsored the use of the shuttle to help residents get to early voting," Capen says. "Not only to residents who didn't have vehicles, but also residents that might have mobility impairments and didn't have any access to a vehicle as well. So, we worked with them and a couple other community partners over those couple weekends of early voting to get people who signed up to the polls."

Just this month, the shuttles were used to assist residents from Niagara Falls who don't have transportation to get coronavirus vaccinations at the pop-up clinic at True Bethel Church on South Avenue and 11th Street.

"We worked with the Health Equity Task Force to identify who needed rides and we provided the vehicle," Capen says.

Even as the tourist season kicks off, she says NFNHA will continue to work to find solutions to meet the needs of the community.

"We'll be doing that as much as we can until the shuttle starts up, and then it becomes a little bit more challenging," Capen says. "We can do it during the weekdays until we're into July where we're running seven days a week. But even if it's not a Discover Niagara vehicle, a lot of times what we do is we work with Niagara Majestic (Tours) to rent another vehicle for that day to meet that community need."

Capen went on to appeal directly to local organizations that may require the shuttle's services and affirm her commitment to continuing to allow for the utilization of the

shuttle in meaningful ways.

"All of these were strong community partnerships that work together," Capen says. "For our community stakeholders: We are a community-based organization; we do everything in our power to make the shuttle available to community needs. ... We'll work with you."

While the pandemic certainly amplified the Discover Niagara Shuttle's community role, its impact has been felt in the communities it services since its inception in 2016. Capen says rider data has consistently shown locals make use of the shuttle simply to get to where they need to go – appointments, grocery trips, even just getting to work. She says the shuttle fills at least some of the transportation deficiencies the region has long dealt with.

"One of the things we don't talk about enough in our communities is accessibility to transportation. That goes in our small communities in Lewiston and Youngstown as well as Niagara Falls," Capen says. "The shuttle will pick up seniors who don't have rides to medical appointments. They're getting off at their grocery stores. We're getting people to their jobs. But we just don't have a true understanding of all those people that need that type of service."

Making sure the shuttle services the local community was something Capen says was planned from the start – and not simply to increase its usage. She says resident involvement actually bolsters the tourism side of things.

"A lot of times, you don't think that residents are tourists. But residents are our best tourists and our ambassadors," Capen says. "They're spending money locally too, right? And that's something that we learned years before the pandemic is that there are (residents and locals) who really just enjoy taking the shuttle to do bird-watching, watching people; some enjoy it to go out on a wellness walk. And so they're often the ones talking to tourists about what their favorite things are to do – and you couldn't have a better formula for success than that."

Aside from the general community services the shuttle provides to residents, Capen says she hopes they also will use it recreationally and blow off some of the steam that built up during one of the most stressful years on record.

"I think for residents, it's been a really, really difficult year – especially for families that have been struggling with virtual schooling – I know my family has. So the shuttle, hopefully, will provide a reprieve so that families can get on board, relax a little bit, not have to worry about the driving and experience all the things I mentioned before: Visit our nature, go for a bike ride, visit Fort Niagara, have an ice cream in Lewiston, stand at the edge of the falls, take the Erie Canal boat ride, right?" Capen says. "Look at it as a full staycation where you can maybe let go of some of the stress from this past year and enjoy yourselves right in your backyard."

For more information about the Discover Niagara Shuttle, including an updated list of all available stops, visit www.discoverniagarashuttle.com; @discoverniagarashuttle on Facebook; or call 716-222-0729. Riders are also encouraged to download the Discover Niagara Shuttle app (available for iOS and Android devices), which also features an up-to-the-minute GPS shuttle tracker for better convenience.

The Discover Niagara Shuttle is supported by the New York Power Authority; New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation; NFNHA; Niagara County; City of Niagara Falls; City of Lockport; Town of Lewiston; Niagara University; and Destination Niagara/Niagara Falls USA.

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