

Buffalo, New York: America's coolest summer city

Frank Lloyd Wright, chicken wings and good living on the lake in New York State's second city

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The Buffalo harbourside MIKE SHRIVER – BUFFALO PHOTO BLOG

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Sunset on a summer night in Buffalo. Fifty-odd people are practising their downward dogs on the lawn by the waterfront, the shoreline of Canada appearing upside down between their knees. In front of them, dozens more are on the river, taking to the water in kayaks, sightseeing boats and even — because this is America — motorised floating tiki bars.

A few miles south, people are packing up after a day on the beach at Lake Erie: sand the best kind of beige, water glassily still, accessed via a sylvan glade. And across the water from the yogis, a mother deer is guiding Bambi quietly through the reeds in the marshland of a nature reserve.

Welcome to the Rust Belt.

Tell an American you're going on holiday to Buffalo and they'll splutter. To them, the Queen City — nicknamed during its 19th-century heyday, when it was coining it in as a transport hub, at the mouth of the Erie Canal — lost her crown decades ago. For many, it means little more than chicken wings, harsh winters and postindustrial decay.

They have a point. The Buffalo wings — deep-fried and tossed in hot sauce — are inescapable. There was an ice storm when I was there the time before last, in (late) April. And as for that decay — well, that yoga class takes place under a giant flyover. The nature reserve, Times Beach, was created on a former industrial dumping ground. The river that people kayak down without a care in the world was so toxic back in the days when its banks were lined with grain silos and factories that by taking a dip you'd likely have caught either a superbug or a superpower. Today, I'm planning my fifth visit.

The first time I went to Buffalo, I only expected to sleep — it's a stopover for Niagara Falls, half an hour north. Instead, I ended up falling for the architecture: a Miss America parade from the 19th and early 20th century, including nascent skyscrapers, Frank Lloyd Wright houses and a network of parks by Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Central Park. I returned for the regeneration: hipsters playing shuffleboard and munching from food trucks in self-styled "Larkinville", a retro-looking revamp of an inner-city neighbourhood that draws New York Staters priced out of New York City. My third visit was pure gluttony — 48 hours and several pounds of chicken on the official Wings Trail, which launched this spring.

This time, I wanted to sit back and absorb the summer. Because if you want an all-American, easily accessible summer holiday — addictive junk food, worryingly friendly locals, blue-collar grit and millennial charm — Buffalo is your place. It's California meets Coney Island.



Buffalo wings SALAMY

To do Buffalo right, skip the Big Apple. Fly instead to Toronto — traffic allowing, it’s less than two hours away. Cross the Canada-US border at its most spectacular point, with Niagara Falls steaming to your right (£4.60 to enter the US). From here, the road follows the Niagara River upstream, rushing over “sky bridges” — grand metal bridges painted cerulean blue. Next, those ancient skyscrapers loom into view: the phallic, art-deco City Hall; the Liberty Building crowned by twin Lady Liberties, torches winking at Canada; the terracotta-tiled Guaranty Building, one of the world’s first skyscrapers now 122 years old. Then that magisterial waterfront: the dead Erie Canal reborn as a summer yoga space (Mondays 12pm, Fridays 6pm; free; canalsidebuffalo.com). Beyond that, elegantly decaying, are the grain silos that made Buffalo’s fortune a century ago. Stay at the Hotel Henry, a dark, forbidding twin-towered building that looks like a Victorian mental asylum, because it was one. It’s now been converted into an airy, high-ceilinged resort of astonishingly good taste (doubles from £125, B&B; hotelhenry.com). Eat at one of “new” Buffalo’s restaurants, such as Dapper Goose, where you sit on a plant-fringed patio and eat the kind of veg-heavy farm-to-table food you last tried in San Francisco. I recommend the mustard-laced Brussels sprouts (mains about £15; thedappergoose.com).



On the up: a repurposed silo ODREW BROWN / VISIT BUFFALO NIAGARA

During the day, you'll want to hit the water. Drive eight miles south, following the lake, and turn right at the giant Ford plant, to Woodlawn Beach State Park. A boardwalk takes you through a primeval-looking, tree-plugged marsh, over 12ft dunes and down to Florida-grade sand, where boisterous Buffalonians wedge their beer coolers into the sand and a bar blasts gems such as Will Smith's Miami. It's blue-collar America at its raucous best, and in August the water's a comfy 24C.

From there, Frank Lloyd Wright's Graycliff is 10 miles further south. A sober lakeside retreat built for the soap-magnate Martin family, its extensive renovations are due to finish next month, though it's already open for guided tours. Either way, for once, Wright isn't the star — it's the sunken garden, shaded by enormous pines and with views across Lake Erie that you're going for (tours from £14; experiencegraycliff.org).



Make sure you're back in town at dusk to catch the Queen City Bike Ferry — a little barge for cyclists and pedestrians — from Canalside to the Outer Harbor, on the other side of the river. It runs until Labor Day weekend, which this year is September 3 (75p; queencityferry.com). Head to Times Beach, where a patch of woodland gives way to marsh, and walkways cantilevered over the water get you closer to the wildlife: owls, terns and those Bambis.

And you'll need some river time. Start with the Buffalo River History Tour, which spins you round the harbour, towards Canada, and along the river, telling you about the Erie Canal, Buffalo's heyday and its regeneration (90min £16; buffaloriverhistorytours.com). It takes you past those monumental silos that now stand empty — of grain, at least, if not of soul. Because as great as the regeneration and the hipsters and the beaches are, Silo City — a collection of six gently corroding titans dating back to 1906, south of the city centre — is where you'll really fall for Buffalo.

Today, these cathedrals of industry have been turned into art spaces, with aerial installations in cavernous cement chambers that were once filled with ton upon ton of grain, and host events, such as poetry readings and concerts, throughout the summer.

Caretaker “Swannie” Jim Watkins (nicknamed after the Swannie House, a dive bar he used to frequent, on the other side of the river) lives here in an old maintenance shed, with his dog, Gonzo. Swannie has a big white beard and the air of a prophet. Wander on site (you can also book tours or come for a specific event — see silo.city for details) and, depending on how much beer he’s drunk, he’ll either shoo you off or hand you a Bud and proselytise about dying concrete. Soon enough, you’ll realise your love for Buffalo is as solid as its silos.

Niagara Falls? Not when there’s a barbecue at Swannie’s on the cards.

Julia Buckley was a guest of Visit Buffalo Niagara (visitbuffaloniagara.com) and British Airways.

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