

Man bites dog. Buccaneers spend big for a quarterback. Travel Writer goes to Buffalo in January. (Record-scratch sound effect.) What? This writer found there's plenty to do if you look beyond the blowing snow, hidden ice and below-zero windchill.



Photo credit: Visit Buffalo Niagara and Jimmy Bush

Yes, I grew up in Buffalo, but I left for a reason years ago. I don't like winter. Anything less than 75 degrees is chilly to me. I don't even like a change of seasons. The only four seasons I want involves listening to Frankie Valli—ideally on the beach.

Having said that, I went back to Western New York during the coldest winter in nearly thirty years. I don't do anything half-way.

(By the way, I learned a lesson on renting cars before even leaving the airport: Reserving a car on-line can save lots of money. Walk-up customers are treated to more expensive rates. We wound up literally stepping away from the counter, and renting a car on the smart phone to save about \$20 per day!)

First stop, dinner at the birthplace of Buffalo chicken wings. Even though I'm originally from Buffalo, I rarely went to the Anchor Bar. The only thing better than all the proclamations and pictures that line the wall are the wings. Wikipedia says the restaurant was initially established in 1935. Teressa Bellissimo is credited with the creation of the dish when she deep-fried some wings and covered them in hot sauce and butter. Definitely a Bucket List destination.

From dinner it was on to an NHL game farther down Main Street at the First Niagara Center. The Buffalo Sabres were looking for a win against the visiting Carolina Hurricanes. The 'Canes blew through town and beat the home team, but that didn't diminish the fun we had people-watching and enjoying all the extra-curricular activity around the rink. We sat in a restaurant overlooking the ice and enjoyed hot coffee and dessert. There are plenty of choices for food and drinks and some sections have servers. The arena opened back in the mid 1990's and is nearly identical to the St. Pete Times Forum in downtown Tampa.

After the game, we went for a nightcap at a popular downtown hotspot called the Pearl Street Grill & Brewery. The four-story building was first owned by a dressmaker in the 1870s before becoming a hardware store. It became a restaurant in the 1980s. They brew their own beer and have eight separate bars. In the summertime, you can sit upstairs on the New Orleans-style wrap around patios and see the sunset over Lake Erie.

We stayed a few blocks away at a Hampton Inn near the busiest strip in Buffalo, Chippewa Street. But high above the action, we were enjoying the jacuzzi IN the room. Not in the bathroom, but rather feet from the bed. I thought I was in a ski lodge in the Poconos! There's an active restaurant/bar off the lobby with a delicious-sounding name: "Chocolate Bar." It features everything from martinis to dessert.

After a hot complementary breakfast in the hotel, we bundled up to head to Niagara Falls. My girlfriend, Erin, had never been to the Falls—or Buffalo, for that matter—so she was excited. Since the temperature was in the single digits, we certainly had no problem with traffic or crowds. It was so cold, the parking toll booth and the gift shop were both closed! (It's usually \$8 to park.)

We got a tip about a unique restaurant less than a mile away, and found it was absolutely worth it. The Niagara Falls Culinary Institute operates a restaurant called "Savor" and that was a good word for it. We savored a nice lunch while looking out at Old Falls Street. Prices were reasonable and the food was top-notch. They even had plenty of gluten-free choices for this hamstrung writer.

Outside of running back and forth to our car, we didn't get a lot of exercise. We changed that with a spirited game of indoor tennis at the popular Miller Tennis Center. Todd Miller and his wife, Debbie, bought the club several years ago and made it even nicer. There are eight indoor courts, and ten "Har Tru" courts outside. Todd is also a PTR International Master Professional, so the guy knows tennis! He also began a "Hall of Fame" for Buffalo tennis legends. (Ironically, the best player of all time from the region, Jimmy Arias, lives here in Sarasota.)

We stayed in a different Hampton Inn out in the suburbs for our final night. It also had a jacuzzi in the main living area. Just outside the door, the Village of Williamsville has a quaint Main Street area that's pedestrian-friendly and prime for window-shopping. We found a fun comedy club down the street that was holding a fundraiser. Rob Lederman is the longest-running comedy club owner in Buffalo and a generous friend to charities. One of the comics said, "For guys, shaking hands these days has changed. You never know what you're going to get: A chest bump, a fist, a hug with back slaps? I just sort of do paper, scissors rock."

The comedians were great, but the weather outside still wasn't funny. I was expecting a few jokes about Global Warming. The windchill never got above zero the whole time we were there, and the forecast called for even colder weather in the near future. I didn't think it was possible.

I also wouldn't have thought it was possible to have that much fun in Buffalo in the dead of winter, but take it from this fair-weather writer, it CAN be done! RAY COLLINS



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