

TRAVEL

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Made for strolling

Cooperstown delights even the non-baseball fan

BY MICHAEL BENEDICT

We are lunching outdoors at one of America's grandest hotels, savouring a sumptuous buffet, enjoying the storybook view. The 100-year-old Otesaga Hotel nestles in the southern tip of Lake Otsego in Cooperstown, N.Y., where the attractions go well beyond the Baseball Hall of Fame that made the town famous.

"There's a lot more to Cooperstown than baseball," says Carol Gentile of Montville, N.J., who is treating her ball-addict husband Russ to a first-time visit to the Hall as a 42nd wedding anniversary present. "I'm a fan by necessity," she says. "But I've enjoyed it here so much that we're planning to come back with the grandkids."

The Gentiles might want to start with a visit to the palatial Otesaga with its massive 10-metre columns and terrace dining tables overlooking fictional "Lake Glimmerglass," taken from the Leatherstocking Tales of James Fenimore Cooper, son of the town's 18th century founder. If the hotel room rates, starting at \$330 US per night in the summer, are beyond reach, the open-to-the-public, all-you-can-eat buffet is a very reasonable \$18 US, including

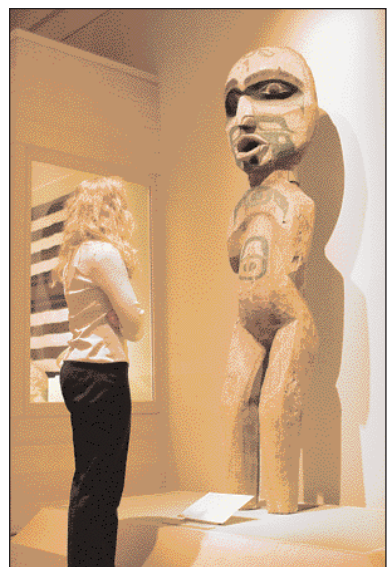
tax and tip. And the town is replete with inns and bed and breakfasts with more affordable accommodations.

Otesaga's luncheon tables overflow with local hams and cheeses, the requisite hot roast beef, a not-too-creamy seafood Newburg and a wide selection of salads. We particularly enjoy the shrimp-crab salad with dill as well as the chicken salad with mayonnaise and pineapple juice "to sweeten it a bit," according to executive chef Michael Gregory.

Our 15-year-old boy had always wanted to visit the Hall of Fame. Little did we know that this picture-postcard Finger Lakes town offers a banquet of enticements for adults who are interested in more than baseball's Holy Grail. Take its award-winning museum and summer opera company. Or the magnificent 18th and early 19th century structures in this upstate New York settlement of just 2,000 people with a single traffic light and a main street that is called, yes, Main Street.

The view a few kilometres across from the hotel is of unspoiled forest and fields, protected from development by the Clark family, heirs to the Singer sewing machine fortune. The Clarks built and own the Otesaga, among other properties. Family scion Jane Forbes Clark regularly checks out the menus and floral arrangements.

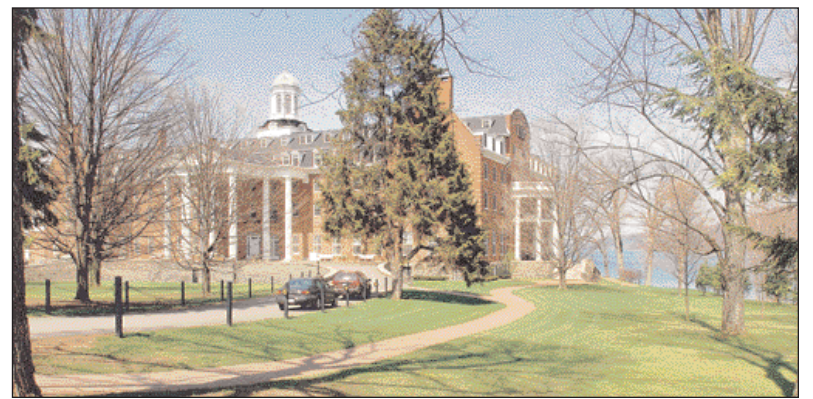
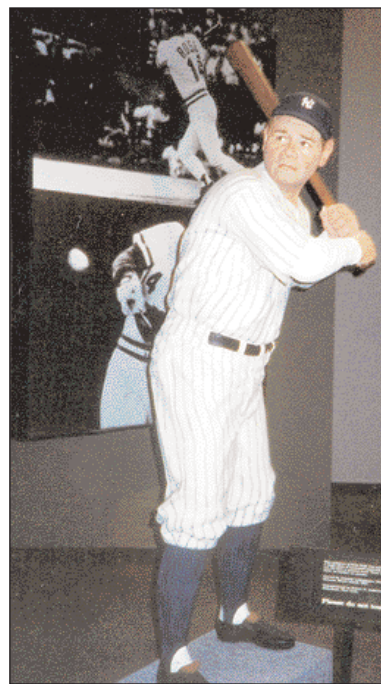
Hugging the lake and part of the hotel is its Leatherstocking Golf Course, one of New York's top courses, and open to the public (\$99 US or \$70 US after 3 p.m.). After lunch, we walk alongside the course for 15 minutes to the Fenimore Art Museum, whose building and many of its holdings came from the Clark family. The Fenimore is small, but has an international reputation for its collections in four fields: American paintings, especially the Hudson River School, folk art, photography and, more recently, North American native art including numerous pieces from Canada. It also has a room devoted to Fenimore Cooper, featuring first editions and books from his library.



Art displays include a Kwakiutl sculpture from Vancouver Island.



The terrace at the Otesaga Hotel offers a splendid view of "Lake Glimmerglass."



ABOVE: Massive columns mark the front of the Otesaga Hotel. LEFT: A life-sized figure of Babe Ruth at the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Last summer, the museum garnered raves from the New York Times and Wall Street Journal for America's Rome: Artists in the Eternal City, 1800-1900, a 120-painting exhibit that took chief



The Clark family has protected much of the forest in the area.

curator Paul D'Ambrosio two years to assemble. This year's showcase is John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Praise of Women.

The next day we visit the Farmers' Museum, across the street from the Fenimore and also a gift from the Clarks. It is an 1840s-style pioneer village where visitors immerse themselves in the past with activities such as hand-milking cows.

The museum is also the resting place of one of the biggest hoaxes of the 19th century—the Cardiff Giant. The 10-foot-4 3,000-pound petrified "man" was found buried in a nearby farm. Hucksters made a fortune exhibiting the figure before the ruse was exposed a few months later.

One of the few area institutions that does not trace its origins to the Clarks is the Glimmerglass Opera, some 12 kilometres north of Cooperstown. The intimate 900-seat house has sliding doors on the sides to allow for cooling breezes on hot nights, but it was so cool during our performance—a riveting La Traviata—that staff closed the doors but ran out of the blankets that patrons can borrow for a performance. Bring a sweater, just in case. Next season, the company has landed superstar soprano Deborah Voigt for her first

musical, the lead in Gershwin's Annie Get Your Gun.

Still, Cooperstown remains mainly about baseball, although not all the locals are dazzled by the legends and lore that animate the three-storey museum. "I don't even know how many people are on a team," says 22-year-old university student Megan Scrafford who has lived here almost all her life. "Is it nine or 14?"

The Hall of Fame works hard at keeping a fresh face. A two-year renovation finished in 2005, and it opened two new exhibits last summer. The first is dedicated to Henry Aaron, one of the last sluggers of the pre-steroid era, and the other, Viva Beisbol, to the impact of Latino ballplayers. Our son knows about Aaron and learns for the first time about Ferguson Jenkins, the only Canadian in the Hall.

Above all, Cooperstown is ideal for strolling. We are staying at an inn that is an easy walk to the main attractions. Many of the large clapboard and stone homes are more than 100 years old—several more than 200. Most of the porches have rocking chairs. And there's not a Starbucks or McDonald's around.

Special to *The Hamilton Spectator*



The streets of Cooperstown are ideal for strolling.

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