



# Cooperstown

## Baseball, Breweries and Bountiful Beauty

■ By Gregory J. Alexander

**C**ooperstown, N.Y. Cal Ripkin, Jr. Babe Ruth. Hank Aaron. It's understandable that when you think of Cooperstown, you think of baseball, as the majority of 500,000 annual visitors to Cooperstown come for the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum located downtown. However, what I learned during a recent visit here is that there is so much more to do than simply visit the Baseball Hall of Fame, as stunning architecture, antique shopping, historic inns and renowned cultural institutions make Cooperstown a destination for even those who don't know the difference between a double play and a lead-off double.

Besides the unrivaled beauty of downtown Cooperstown and all the fun activities to do, another great reason to visit is that the trip from Baltimore County will take less than five hours, an easy drive north on I-83 to I-81 and then on I-88 toward Albany, which you pick up in Binghamton, N.Y. You should definitely allow for three days minimum, and overnight accommodations run the gamut from inexpensive national chain hotels outside of town to historic B&Bs, inns and a world-class resort downtown.

For the first two nights, we opted to stay at the circa 1813 Cooper Inn in the heart of downtown, a 15-room federal style inn that features spacious rooms, free wireless Internet, central heat and AC and a lovely breakfast room (breakfast is included). Our suite included two bedrooms joined by a full bath, as

well as an additional single room, perfect for families. (We were traveling with my partner's parents for the holidays.) We were warmly greeted at the Cooper Inn and were given a handy information packet of area attractions and special events. Guests also can use the honor bar in the parlor; simply enjoy a glass of wine or beer and notify the front desk how much you consumed. Guests also are able to utilize all the amenities – including a heated outside pool – of the Cooper Inn's sister resort, the Ottesaga, and you receive a complimentary bottle of wine to enjoy with dinner at the Ottesaga.

After the five-hour drive, we decided to stretch our legs and familiarize ourselves with the town. For stunning views, take a quick walk over to the



Cooperstown sits alongside the beautiful Lake Otsego (top), while the Farmers' Museum pays homage to the area's rural heritage.



Orioles fans won't be disappointed by the Hall of Fame's ample O's exhibits (left). Quaint shops and local eateries dot the village's downtown.



famed Otesaga, a circa 1909 grand dame resort with stunning 30-foot columns that sits on Lake Otsego, a crystal clear lake that served as inspiration for James Fenimore Cooper's novels. Walk around the resort's massive property to see kids playing football on the lawn, sit in one of the rocking chairs on the veranda or just simply admire the beautiful lake. Also onsite is the Leatherstocking Golf Course, considered one of the best and most challenging courses.

After enjoying the sights here, head back downtown toward Main Street. Along the way, take note of the late 19th-century architecture found in the village in an array of styles. Back on Main Street, most of the shops are – not surprisingly – baseball related where you can get jerseys and hats, as well as a customized bat. There are also a handful of souvenir shops, Christmas shops and small boutiques.

After a glass of wine in the Cooper Inn parlor, we headed to dinner back at the Otesaga resort where a five-course, elegant meal is served accompanied by candlelight and piano music (by the way, jackets are required for gentlemen). The food is outstanding, the wine list extensive and the service is phenomenal. For a more casual meal, the resort's Hawkeye Bar and Grill is located downstairs and before and after

dinner drinks can be enjoyed at the Lobby Bar on the main level.

The next morning, get an early start and head straight to the Baseball Hall of Fame (if you prefer, you can hop on the trolley to tour Cooperstown all day long for \$3). The brick building sits right on Main Street and is massive. Since we were there in the winter, the crowds were thin; however, locals informed me that in the warmer months, the line can be massive, so go early (they open at 9am). Admission is \$18.50, and there is a combo pack that gives you a discount on other area attractions.

The museum dates back to 1939, but has been moved to a more modern home and now includes three floors and over 35,000 artifacts from baseball history. It's recommended that visitors start on the second floor where a gallery pays homage to the folklore that American baseball was "invented" in Cooperstown (this fact is debated by historians). Next, head to the Grandstand Theater to watch a movie that chronicles baseball history. The museum then progresses chronically from early incarnations of baseball by the Egyptians – a bat and ball game played for religious ritual in 1460 BC – to some of the earliest examples of equipment used in America, including



The National Baseball Hall of Fame brings 500,000 visitors to Cooperstown each year.

baseballs that had stitching made from animal intestines. The early mitts, bats and shoes are fun to look at, especially considering how high-tech equipment is today, as are the actual lockers of baseball greats, including Lou Gehrig and Sam Musial.

The 20th century area chronicles the early dynasty teams, including the Chicago Cubs, the most dominant team in the early 1900s. As a lifelong Cubs fan, it was nice to be reminded that although the team has gone without a World Series championship in over a century, for a while, they were tops in the sport. There is also a room dedicated solely to Babe Ruth, baseball's most notable star. On this level, there are also three special exhibits. "Diamond Dreams: Women in Baseball" pays tribute to the women who played, especially during World War II when men were at war. Any fan of the movie "A League of Their Own" will recognize the uniforms and the hard play and relentless determination by women players of the time.

A new exhibit "¡Viva Baseball!" shows the influence of Latin America and the Caribbean on baseball; however, the most moving exhibit is "Pride and Passion: The African-American Baseball Experience," which shows the history of African-Americans in baseball from the Civil War to today. Especially haunting are the threatening letters that players received, littered with hateful prejudice.

For Oriole fans, there are plenty of displays to remember former greats and the glory days of past. One exhibit focuses on Jim Palmer, Frank Robinson, Brooks Robinson and Earl Weaver; the great teams of the late 1960s; and the 1983 World Championship team.

On the third floor, historic ballparks are celebrated, as is Hank Aaron, a new exhibit that examines the home run king. Baseball records are also documented, and a baseball from every no-hitter game since the 1940s is also on display. A video room with iconic moments from the postseason will allow you to relive some historic moments, and here every Major League team gets its own exhibit. Down on the first floor, you can browse the Hall of Fame Gallery, where the bronze plaques for all of the Hall of Famers are housed.

Nearby is Doubleday Field, and if you are more of a soccer fan, the National Soccer Hall of Fame and Museum is located about 20 miles away in Oneonta.

If you ready for lunch, there are few casual eateries downtown. We chose TJ's Place, and, although the sandwiches were good, the prices seemed awfully high. A better bet may be the Cooperstown Diner or Doubleday Café. After lunch, head to the Farmers' Museum on Highway 80 right outside of town. The massive museum pays homage to the area's agricultural heritage (today the region contains over 220,000



*Historic homes of varying architectural styles show the historic character of Cooperstown.*

acres of farmland) and allows visitors to see interactive exhibits on blacksmithing, candle and broom making and printing. One of the highlights is the Empire State Carousel, made by over a thousand volunteer artisans and featuring fun riding animals (you can take a ride for just 50 cents). One of the most interesting exhibits is the one on the Cardiff Giant, the greatest hoax of the 19th century. In October 1869, workers digging a well discovered what they thought were the remains of a giant. The landowner, George Hull, charged 50 cents to view the giant, a hefty price when the average laborer made \$1 a day. Later, Hull admitted it was a hoax to show how gullible Americans were and to challenge the literal interpretation of the Bible. Across the street is the Fenimore Art Museum, home to a large collection of American folk art and American Indian art, as well as gardens that overlook Otsego Lake.

That evening, we dined at "The Pit" restaurant downtown at the Tunnick Inn near the Hall of Fame. A wide menu of American fare is offered, and every Friday and Saturday, the specials include a one-pound whole lobster, prime rib or filet mignon, all only \$14.95 each.

The next day, we moved to the Best Western just outside of town, which offered more economical accommodations that boasted a great location and an indoor pool. Since we had wrapped up most of our "to-do" list for the downtown area, the next day, we headed outside of town a couple miles to follow the Cooperstown Beverage Trail, New York State's very first official cuisine trail. Once the hops-growing capital of North America, Cooperstown now boasts two breweries, a farm winery and an historic cider mill.



*The Fenimore Art Museum boasts a large collection of American folk art.*

The trail consists of four stops – Fly Creek Cider Mill, Brewery Ommegang, Cooperstown Brewing Company and Bear Pond Winery – and you can get a brochure to be stamped that entitles you to free gifts at each stop. Our first stop was Fly Creek Cider Mill, a historic water-powered mill three miles from Cooperstown where you can enjoy fresh cider while sampling over 40 specialty foods. The shop is packed with gifts, and next door is a restaurant where you grab some lunch or ice cream (or both!)

Next stop is Brewery Ommegang, a 135-acre former hops farm that produces five Belgian-style beers. The building mimics Belgian farmhouses and monasteries, the original producers of Belgian beer. Tours are given and last about 25 minutes. We learned that Ommegang means “walk about” in Belgian, and our informative guide walked us through the entire eight-step, five-week process. Even though the brewery produces 130,000 cases of beer, most of the work is still done by hand, from tossing the hop to feeding the bottles to be filled; no Laverne & Shirley assembly lines here! At the end, guests go to the warm cellar where newly bottled beer will slowly and naturally form its effervescent carbonation and must remain there for nine days.

At the end of the tour is the fun part – the tasting

room! My favorites were the Hennepin Farmhouse Saison, Ommegang Witte Ale (a summer beer) and the award-winning Rare Vos Amber Ale. Be careful at the end when tasting the Three Philosophers Quadrupel, a beer that approaches the 10 percent alcohol content mark. We stocked up in the gift shop and bought a mix-and-match case to take home.

The small Bear Pond Winery was also a treat where for \$5 we sampled six wines (the \$5 is waived if you purchase wine). The choices are plentiful, but I particularly liked the Riesling, Baseball Merlot and the Castle Cabernet Sauvignon. For \$1 additional, try one of the iced wines, a New York State specialty. The winery just celebrated its 10th anniversary and uses New York State fruit and grapes. Unfortunately, we ran out of time to try the Cooperstown Brewery but enjoyed one of its beers that night at dinner.

Along the trail on Route 28, you will also see several antique shops, as Otsego County is an antique-lover's paradise with everything from china and glassware to furniture, textiles and historic home elements.

Since we were in Cooperstown in the off-season, some attractions were closed; however, if you visit in the spring or summer, check out Hyde Hall, an 1880s neoclassic country mansion on the lake, along with America's oldest existing covered bridge that sits on the property. In the summer, the Glimmerglass Opera gets rave reviews, and recreational opportunities can be found at Glimmerglass State Park where you can swim in Otsego Lake and go hiking.

One of the great reasons for families to visit Cooperstown is the diversity of activities. Baseball fans will obviously feel right at home, but even for the non-sports fans, you'll find plenty to keep you busy.



*The informative guides make the beer tastings at Ommegang Brewery fun, even for a novice beer drinker.*