

The Impulsive Traveler

Spending a few Hours in Ithaca, N.Y.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

After summer vacation in Canada, I briefly mourned the loss of colored bills in my billfold. But the gloom was short-lived. On my drive home, I took a detour to Ithaca, N.Y., which I'd heard has its own currency. By day's end, my wallet swelled again with delightfully colorful money. In place of notes adorned with images of dead presidents, there were playful bills with pictures of salamanders and steamboats.

It's only fitting that this town — as dense with brainpower as it is with composting bins — would have a quirky alternative currency system. I set out, over a few days, to use the money for as many of my purchases as possible. What I didn't expect was the adventure I faced just trying to find places to spend the salamanders.

Ithaca, home of Cornell University and Ithaca College, is smack in the middle of New York. But it's far enough from any highway to maintain its middle-of-nowhere feel. I spent four years snowed under at Syracuse University, an hour to the north, but never enjoyed summer in the Finger Lakes region. Late summer in Ithaca blew me away: The city and its outskirts, filled with gorges and waterfalls, are surprisingly lush.

Plus, you've got to love a town whose 25-year-old mayor gives up his car and turns his parking space into a miniature park. And whose townsfolk are equally intense about saving the planet, killing the chain store and consuming locally produced you-name-it.

My first stop was GreenStar Natural Foods Market, where I was told that I could buy some Ithaca Hours — the currency created two decades ago to help promote the buy-local movement and encourage community building. People might use Hours to pay the local farmer or mechanic, instead of paying with greenbacks. And Wal-Mart and Amazon don't take Hours, so it keeps the money in town.

The founder has since moved away, and use of the once-popular currency has declined. But I'd heard that a local businessman was trying to single-handedly revitalize Hours and catapult them into the e-banking era.

At GreenStar, the first person I queried about Hours was, by chance, Steve Burke, a market manager who's the former president of the board for Ithaca Hours. Steve sold me \$50 worth of Hours (one Hour equals \$10). I marveled at the currency, including one-eighth- and one-quarter-Hour notes. They all said "In Ithaca We Trust" and "Ithaca Hours are backed by real capital: our skills, our time, our tools, forests, fields and rivers." But at the moment, I was thinking more about my growling stomach. I walked over the railroad tracks to Ithaca Bakery, where I peeled off a few colorful bills to pay for a bialy sandwich.

Just north of town, I stopped at Stewart Park and took in sparkling Cayuga Lake. Then I drove to the Ithaca Farmers Market, on Cayuga Inlet. The big social event of the week, the market is so well attended on the weekends that locals say it's the only thing that causes a traffic jam (largely consisting of Subarus, I suspect).

Ithaca has a fantastic, nearly complete waterfront trail, which will soon connect the market to the town's parks. I walked along sections of it, watching about a dozen sculls trickle out of the Cornell and Ithaca College boathouses for afternoon practice. Across the water, I explored



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

All green but the money: You might be able to use Ithaca's alternative currency, above right, at an independent bookstore like the one pictured above. It's one of four such stores in the chain-store-averse town on sparkling Cayuga Lake, below.



Cass Park, where there was plenty of activity — soccer games, a bustling marina, runners, cyclists and a dog park so fancy that I at first mistook it for a miniature golf course.

Back in town, I ate tacos on the patio of Viva Taqueria, then strolled through the Commons, an open-air plaza that serves as the cultural and retail center of downtown. At Home Green Home, which sells stainless-steel drinking straws (four for \$10), I bought a book and paid with plastic. They didn't accept Hours, but they did have free copies of the No Frack Almanac.

The next morning, I met Scott Wig-

gins, owner of La Tourelle Resort, where I was staying (Hours-friendly). Wiggins was born and raised in Ithaca, and his favorite part of the day is tending to the grounds. He described the town as brainy, with a surplus of PhDs who are overqualified for their jobs. "A lot of us," he added, "never grew out of the '60s."

I went for a hike at Buttermilk Falls State Park, around the corner from the resort, then tackled the short, steep hike along the Cascadilla Creek Gorge trail, which connects downtown to Cornell. Halfway up is a small commercial area called Collegetown. I stopped by Collegetown Bagels — CTB, as the locals call it



— which is part of the Ithaca Bakery family. Its outdoor picnic tables overflowed with students, while the Starbucks down the street was eerily quiet. (As Steve from GreenStar had confided, "A tried-and-true Ithacan wouldn't be caught dead walking out of Starbucks.")

At the CTB counter, the cashier didn't bat an eye when I asked about paying in Hours, but she did need the assistance of a manager (wearing a No Fracking button) to process the sale. It was then that I realized what Ithacans have surely understood for years — that consuming is way more fun when your currency looks like Monopoly money.

That didn't, however, stop me from making purchases at non-Hours-friendly establishments. I bought shoes at Fontana; a fedora at a shop called Evaluation; lunch at Moosewood Restaurant (of vegetarian cookbook fame); and tomatoes at the miniature weekday farmers market. Shopkeepers who didn't accept Hours had either not heard of the currency or had once accepted it but then found themselves with a stockpile of bills and nowhere to spend them. Businesses such as Ithaca Bakery use them to pay people like their landscapers and snowplowers, who can spend them at places such as the bakery or the farmers market.

Before leaving town, I met the Ben Bernanke of Ithaca Hours, Paul Strabel. He's the Hours' new board president, and I'd expected to find a hemp-wearing, tofu-eating native. Instead, I sat down for coffee with a clean-cut Long Islander who teaches at Cornell. He has a financial advising and tax preparation business in town and accepts Hours for his tax work.

Paul said that when the recession began in 2008, "Even Obama said, focus on your community. So I did." He stepped up his Hours advocacy and is working on an electronic version of the currency, which may roll out this fall. He believes that paper currency is terribly inconvenient, and that more businesses and consumers will use Hours when they become virtual bills on a smartphone. He's optimistic that even Cornell may accept Hours as payment one day.

I said goodbye to Paul, but leftover Hours were burning a hole in my pocket. I spent the rest at GreenStar, stocking up on groceries for home. Then I hit the road, my back seat filled with colorful locally grown vegetables, the contents of my wallet once again monochromatic.

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IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

US Airways offers one-stop flights from Washington Dulles to Ithaca, with late-September flights currently starting at \$324 round-trip.

WHERE TO STAY

La Tourelle Resort & Spa
1150 Danby Rd.
800-765-1492
www.latourelle.com

About three miles from downtown, backing up to Buttermilk Falls State Park, pet-friendly. Rooms from \$149 weekdays and \$189 weekends through mid-November.

Hilton Garden Inn Ithaca

130 E. Seneca St.
607-277-8900

www.ithaca.hgi.com

Downtown, on the Commons, with a complimentary shuttle to and from the Ithaca airport, Cornell University and Ithaca College. Rooms from \$179 during the busy fall season, less starting in November.

WHERE TO EAT

Fine Line Bistro

404 W. State St.
607-277-1077

www.finelinebistro.com

A favorite among Ithaca foodies, serving dinner and Sunday brunch. Entrees include Angel Hare Pasta (braised rabbit over soba noodles in spicy tahini sauce), \$17, and rack of lamb, \$29.

Ithaca Bakery

400 N. Meadow St.
607-273-7110

www.ithacabakery.com

Local gathering spot and gourmet market for artisan breads, bagels, cheeses and more. Sandwiches from \$3.95, soups \$3.50 to \$7.95.

Viva Taqueria & Cantina

101 N. Aurora St.
607-277-1752

www.vivataqueria.com

Head to the Cantina for full-service meals and fresh lime juice margaritas, and to the Taqueria for burritos, nachos and authentic, bargain-priced soft-corn tortilla tacos, starting at \$1.49. Super burrito, \$6.48.

WHAT TO DO

Ithaca Farmers Market

545 Third St.
607-273-7109

www.ithacamarket.com

Saturday and Sunday from April through December. More than 150 vendors selling vegetables, cheeses, meats, breads, wines, flowers, gifts, crafts and jewelry.

Ithaca Commons

www.downtownithaca.com

This open-air plaza is home to vendors, entertainers and stores including Autumn Leaves Used Books, Angry Mom Records, Home Green Home, Trader K's (one of the best thrift stores I've seen) and Ithaca Hemp Co. Also hosts concerts and festivals, such as the Annual Apple Harvest Festival (Sept. 28-30).

Tiohero Boat Tours

866-846-4376

www.tioherotours.com

One-hour narrated tours depart from the Ithaca Farmers Market at Steamboat Landing, Saturdays and Sundays at 11 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. \$12, seniors \$10, children \$8.

INFORMATION

www.visitithaca.com

— M.D.G.K.