



Canada HIGH

MATT NEWBURY HEADS OFF TO TORONTO, HOME TO THIS YEAR'S WORLD PRIDE – TAKING IN THE BIG APPLE AND NIAGARA FALLS ALONG THE WAY

I'm precariously hanging off the roof of the revolving restaurant of the CN Tower, 116 storeys off the ground below, performing an exercise our instructor calls "Toes Over Toronto". The stunt involves each of our group sliding their feet to the edge of a platform so our toes are just over the edge and giving a hands-free wave to the people in the city some 365 metres below. That's like the height of 36 Olympic high diving boards on top of one another, Tom Daley fans! Not only that, but the chirpy instructor has just described the frankly terrifying manoeuvre as "a nice tame start" in a series of ever-more challenging dares he has up his sleeve for us.

I've done both a parachute jump and a bungee jump, but neither of these was anywhere near as butt-clenchingly petrifying as The Edge Walk, a dizzying guided walk around the circumference of the tallest building in the western hemisphere, on a platform barely five feet wide. And none of them involved a breathalyser test before we set off.

The daredevil experience is officially the world's highest external walk on a building, with adventurers attached by wire to an overhead safety rail that circles the building. I think it's the peer pressure of being in a group that prevents me from gripping the exterior door of the building, frozen and stubbornly refusing to move, and I soon find myself hanging both backwards and forwards off the building and somehow even enjoying the spectacular view of this incredible city.

The Edge Walk Experience (edgewalkcntower.ca) is a literal climax to a wonderful adventure that began 500 miles away in New York City. We'd discovered that it was far cheaper to fly into New York than direct to Canada and after a bit of research discovered the existence of the romantic sounding Maple Leaf Express train up to Toronto via Niagara Falls – a perfect three-centre holiday.

I first travelled to New York when I was 18 as part of the Camp America programme (yes, it really was called that), and then returned for two of the famous Stonewall Equality Walks that took hundreds of supporters on a 10-mile hike through the gay history of the city, finishing at the legendary Stonewall Bar. New York was also the first place I ever went on holiday with my boyfriend Aaron, so we were very excited to return and not only reacquaint ourselves with this magnificent city, but also discover what's new as well.

We stumbled upon the perfect place to stay, DoubleTree by Hilton in Chelsea (doubletree.com) which is located in a funky area within walking distance of Times Square and Broadway and only a short stroll from Penn Station for airport transfers and also for jumping on the train to Canada at the end of our Big Apple visit. We stayed in a stylish View King Bedroom. As the name suggests it had a wonderful view of the Empire State Building, which was lit in a pink colour for our arrival – or perhaps for Breast Cancer Awareness.

That said, the building is lit in rainbow colours at the end of June for New York City Pride Week.

Adding a somewhat surreal element to our stay, every corridor, elevator and table in the bar seemed to have been taken over by Lycra-clad superheroes. Comic Con was taking place in the area, which couldn't have been any more perfect as we'd booked evening tickets to see Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark, just before it closed and headed off to Vegas. The spectacular high-flying show with music from U2 is part of The Broadway Collection (broadwaycollection.com), which includes other shows that can't be seen in the West End, like Pippin, Newsies, and Kinky Boots (a collaboration between Cyndi Lauper and the amazing Harvey Fierstein). Having spent hours queuing for theatre tickets at some ridiculous time in the morning on our last visit, we'd highly recommend booking shows in advance.

For sheer convenience, we both purchased a New York City Pass (citypass.com) which cost around \$100 each and gives you something like a 40% reduction on half a dozen of the best attractions in Manhattan. This means you can go up both the Empire State Building (esbnyc.com) and Top of the Rock (topoftherocknyc.com) – perhaps one skyscraper in the daytime and another at night? – , as well as taking a Circle Line Cruise and visiting the rather wonderful MoMA (The Museum of Modern Art, moma.org). It also includes the American Museum of Natural

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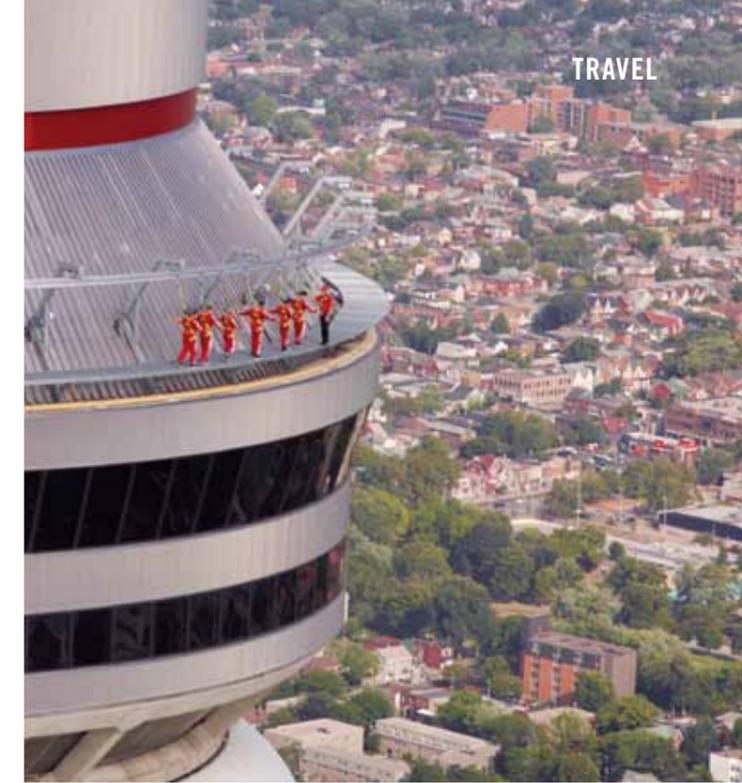
History (the one from Night at the Museum, amnh.org) which is conveniently located looking over Central Park, making it a perfect stop before exploring this magical green heart of the city. Don't miss the Planetarium visit (it's also included) with Whoopi Goldberg as your guide!

Our hotel in Chelsea was also perfectly located to stroll over to the start of The High Line (thehighline.org), an extraordinary public space that has seen a friends' group convert a mile long length of an abandoned elevated railway line into an amazing green walk through the Lower West Side of Manhattan. Naturalised plantings inspired by the self-seeded landscape that grew on the disused tracks add amazing colours to the walk through Chelsea and the Meatpacking District. It then continues past some amazing architecture (the project kick-started a renaissance in the area that has made it a highly desirable area to live, and with a significant gay population) with unexpected views down over the Hudson River. There are loads of art installations and live performances to stumble upon along the way, as well as places to just chill and escape the hectic city below.

Neither of us had ever visited the 9/11 Memorial (911memorial.org), a genuinely moving tribute of remembrance and honour to nearly 3,000 people who lost their lives at the World Trade Center site in 2001, as well as those aboard Flight 77 and the six people killed in the World Trade Center bombing in 1993. The architecturally breath-taking memorial includes two twin reflecting pools, each nearly an acre in size and features the largest manmade waterfalls in North America. Designed by Michael Arad, the pools sit within the footprints of the Twin Towers with the names of every person who died inscribed into bronze panels edging the pools. An eco-friendly plaza surrounds the main memorial, planted with 442 swamp white oak trees, a natural reminder of life, resilience and rebirth.

After two hard days of sightseeing and being in a city that never sleeps, a bit of nightlife was also on the cards. Although Hell's Kitchen has become the new gay-trendy place to hang out (check out the spectacular OUT NYC Hotel, theoutnyc.com, and XL Nightclub, xlnightclub.com), I still have a fondness for Greenwich Village and the bohemian charm of the area around Sheridan Square and Christopher Street. After a pilgrimage to the Stonewall Bar (thestonewallinnyc.com) for a first beer, nothing beats exploring the piano and cabaret bars around the area enjoying a social sing-along with some talented inebriates.

The following day we jumped on the 7.15am (ouch...) Maple Leaf Express Train to Canada and were soon sitting in some incredibly comfortable seats ready for the scenic nine hour journey to Niagara. Two top tips – if you book early (amtrak.com) Business Class seats are only a few dollars more than the regular ones, and sit on the left hand side in the direction of travel for the ▶



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: TORONTO'S CB TOWER, THE TALLEST BUILDING IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE; TOWER EDGE WALK; MATT AND AARON WITH TOES OVER TORONTO

best views. The early part of the journey takes out of the urban metropolis of NYC through the spectacular Hudson River Valley (it was autumn when we took the trip, so the foliage was magnificent) and then on into the dramatic gorges of the Finger Lakes region, New York's wine country.

It's a tad odd clearing customs in a train station (although greatly helped by some rather buff Canadian security staff), but we were soon unpacking at the Radisson Hotel and ready to go exploring. Our first view of Niagara Falls was at night from the top of the iconic Skylon Tower (skylon.com), with impressive lighting showing the waterfalls off in spectacular fashion. Niagara Falls is the collective name for the three waterfalls that straddle the border between New York State and Ontario - Bridal Veil Falls, the America Falls and Horseshoe Falls. The latter is closest to the Canadian side and is the most powerful waterfall in North America.

It was up bright and early the next morning to be picked up by Vintage Wine Tours (niagaravintagewinetours.com) for a highly quaffable tour around the nearby wine region. We'd booked the Appellation Wine Tour which consisted of a full day of tastings around four award-winning wineries, learning everything there is to know about wine from our ridiculously knowledgeable guide Gus. As well as visiting some fascinating family-run wineries (and making a fair few purchases along the way), the tour also included a stop for delicious à-la-carte lunch at the 4-diamond Oban Inn situated in the charming town of Niagara-on-the-Lake. Niagara Vintage Wine Tours consistently win the award for the best thing to do in the region on Trip Advisor and as we floated back into the hotel, mellowed by delicious local ice wines, it's easy to understand why. Hic...

Niagara itself has a touch of the Vegas about it, boasting casinos and endless entertainment distractions, but it is the natural wonder of the falls that wins hands down and we enjoyed them from every possible angle. Journey Behind the Falls, as the name suggests, takes you behind the powerful curtain of water, and close up on an observation deck at the foot of the falls, although our favourite way of enjoying them was from the air in one of the rainbow-coloured Niagara Helicopters (niagarahelicopters.com). It's a genuinely thrilling experience and we both had satisfied grins on our faces for at least an hour afterwards. The company also do weddings, should you fancy saying "I do" in the chapel in the sky!

Two other top places to visit if you are staying in the area are Nightmares Fear Factory (nightmaresfearfactory.com), a genuinely terrifying haunted house attraction, and the Niagara Sand Sculpture Exhibition (v2niagara.com) which is not only the biggest of its kind in North America, but covers a fascinating part of Canada's history so you learn a little something as well.

We jumped on Mega Bus (yes they have them too...) for the short journey to Toronto and checked into the rather wonderful SoHo Metropolitan Hotel. The SoHo Met is a member of Preferred Pride (preferredpride.com), Preferred Hotel Group's worldwide collection of hotels and resorts that are either TAG-certified or a member of the IGLTA.

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THIS PAGE FROM TOP: DISTILLERY DISTRICT, TORONTO; CHASE FISH & SEAFOOD RESTAURANT IN TORONTO; NIAGARA FALLS; NIAGARA HELICOPTER; WINE TASTING IN NIAGARA



Not only does this mean you are totally welcome as an LGBT traveller, you'll also get a welcome treat. Checking into our suite we were delighted to find a bottle of sparkling wine on ice and chocolate-dipped strawberries in rainbow colours tastefully presented on a banana leaf. What a nice welcome!

We'd really wanted to come to Toronto, as not only is the city supposed to be amazing but the gay scene is regarded as being one of the biggest and best in the world. Toronto is also hosting WorldPride 2014 in June and we'd heard that the organisers are taking the honour very seriously. To find out more we met up for an incredible seafood lunch at The Chase Fish & Seafood (thechasetoronto.com) with Michelle Simpson from Tourism Toronto and Kevin and Trevor for Pride Toronto. And after chatting to the enthusiastic, passionate and professional team, the celebrations do sound like they will be out-of-this-world.

Pride Toronto is already one of the largest events of its kind in the world, attracting more than 1.22 million people. For WorldPride Toronto they are expecting to shatter these figures with a 10-day festival that promises to "turn streets into parades, parks into parties and strangers into friends". Highlights will include spectacular opening and closing ceremonies, the prestigious WorldPride Gala and Awards, an international human right conference, the vibrant and colourful Pride Parade, the Trans March and the Dyke March, bustling street fairs and one of the biggest and best arts and culture festivals in the world.

We were eager to find out where the festivities would be taking place, so after finishing the sumptuous seafood banquet it was off for a guided tour of Toronto's gay village with the wonderfully named Liz Devine from Rainbow High Vacations (rainbowhighvacations.com). The Village, which is centred on the intersection of Church and Wellesley Streets, is home to Canada's largest gay community and is packed with cafés, restaurants, shops and a staggering number of gay bars and restaurants.

Liz provided a fascinating insight into how the LGBT community has become one of the most established and proactive in the world. It's a captivating and often moving tour looking at how gay civil rights have been won, taking in everything from the Bathhouse Riots (Toronto's Stonewall) to the establishment of the 519 (an amazing LGBT community centre), the Toronto AIDS Memorial and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives. It's worth noting that if you are thinking of going to Toronto WorldPride, Rainbow High Vacations have put together some amazing activities you

can book including open air rooftop dining, a meet a drag queen experience, and our favourite – a mystery date night in the dark. They will take you to a restaurant that is completely dark (the entire waiting staff are blind) and match you with a dinner date you'll only get to know through dinner and conversation! Are you brave enough...

The Village looks really familiar as the American version of Queer As Folk was filmed here, while many places in the city are recognisable as film locations. One of the most popular places to film is the Distillery District, a charming redevelopment of the former Gooderham and Worts Distillery, packed with cafés, restaurants and shops housed within 40 heritage buildings. Films that have used the area as a location include X Men, Cinderella Man and Chicago (obviously...). One of the most fun ways of exploring the area is on a tour organised by Segway of Ontario (segwayofontario.com), taking in a little chocolate and beer tasting along the way. Neither of us had ever been on a Segway before, but they are incredibly intuitive and easy to use, while our brilliant guide made the experience one of the highlights of our stay.

For pure unadulterated fun, a visit to Canada's Wonderland (canadaswonderland.com) just north of the city is a must. The theme park is open from May to September and again for Hallowe'en and

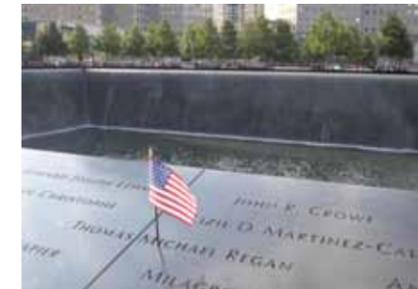


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features 16 roller coasters, more than any park outside of the United States. The park boasts one of the world's biggest and tallest coasters, the aptly named Leviathan, as well as Canada's longest wooden coaster, the Mighty Canadian Minebuster.

Toronto also boasts some world-class restaurants and one of our favourites while in The Village was Smith Restaurant (553church.com). Both the décor and food are funky and nostalgic, while the cocktails are dangerously moreish. While in Yorkville (the Beverley Hills or Toronto), Sassafras (sassafras.ca) is the place to for lunch surrounded by the glamorous and beautiful, even if you didn't arrive by Ferrari. Finally Mengrai Gourmet Thai (mengraithai.com) could very well be the best restaurant in Toronto. The Red Chicken Curry with Lychee, served in a fresh carved pineapple is ridiculously delicious and it's no wonder that the restaurant attracts all the stars when they're filming in the country. Chef Sasi and her charismatic husband Allan are also a delight to meet – make sure he shows you the Samuel L. Jackson pics on his phone, taken in the restaurant's kitchen.

Our final meal is in 360 The Restaurant at the CN Tower and somehow food seems to taste incredible when you've just survived half an hour hanging off the roof above. Enjoying a glass of wine from the world's highest wine cellar, we take in the incredible views from the revolving restaurant, from the stunning waterfront area to Casa Loma – a majestic castle that served as the Xavier Institute in the X Men films. The city really is one of the most exciting and fun cities in the world and by combining it with a visit to New York made the whole adventure a holiday of a lifetime. We certainly can't wait to return to Toronto (we only scratched the surface on our all too brief visit) and WorldPride seems like the perfect opportunity. Who fancies coming? ●



THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: THE HIGH LINE IN NEW YORK; 9/11 MEMORIAL, NEW YORK; VIEW FROM THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

WAY TO GO

Matt and Aaron flew to New York with United Airlines, who offer several flights a day from Heathrow. united.com

NEW YORK

In New York they stayed at the DoubleTree by Hilton. Prices start from \$199 per room, per night, excluding taxes, on a room-only basis. For more information, go to doubletree.com or call 0870 590 9090.

TOURIST INFO

nycgo.com

GAY INFO

newyork.gaycities.com

Theatre tickets were provided by the Broadway Collection, who recommend buying tickets before you travel through ticketmaster.com or telecharge.com

NIAGARA FALLS

TOURIST INFO

niagarafallstourism.com

TORONTO

In Toronto they stayed at the SoHo Metropolitan Hotel through the Preferred Pride Collection. preferredpride.com

TOURIST INFO

seetorontonow.com

GAY INFO

toronto.gaycities.com

Toronto World Pride takes place 20 – 29 June 2014. For more info go to worldpridetoronto.com