



Glaciers' Bequest: Rochester's Natural Wonders

The Rochester and Monroe County area has been gifted with many beautiful natural wonders, thanks to the ice age glaciers that shaped western New York. Within the county's boundaries lie the shores of a great lake, a raging river, three sets of waterfalls, and glacier-carved bays, drumlins, gorges, and wetlands. Located on our nation's "fourth seacoast" (the Great Lakes), Rochester is also within a 90-minute drive of additional geographic attractions such as Niagara Falls, Letchworth State Park (Grand Canyon of the east), and the Finger Lakes. Visitors often use Rochester as their home base, visiting the sights here first, then making short trips to Niagara Falls, Letchworth, the Finger Lakes, Montezuma Wildlife Park, and other natural wonders.

Lake Ontario

Lake Ontario is the smallest of the five freshwater seas better known as the Great Lakes. Holding a fifth of all the potable water on the surface of our planet, the Great Lakes sometimes behave more like oceans than lakes. Storms on Lake Ontario are reputed to be as fierce as those on the saltwater seas; anyone viewing them comes away with a fresh appreciation of the formidable power of Mother Nature.

As do the other Great Lakes, Ontario has ocean-like characteristics: coastal currents, short-term fluctuations in water levels that are similar to tides, moderating effects on air temperatures, and increase in precipitation on adjacent land areas. Although Ontario is fond of blessing its neighbors with varying proportions of lake-effect snow, its climate-moderating effects keep winter temperatures bearable and provide Rochesterians with some of the most enjoyable summers in the country.

The Lake Ontario shoreline is home to a variety of beaches popular with locals and visitors alike. Ontario Beach Park, located at the mouth of the Genesee River in the city neighborhood known as Charlotte, boasts a sandy bathing beach, two piers, boardwalk, picnic pavilions, the historic 1905 Denzel Carousel, summer concerts, and the occasional festival.

Other Ontario beaches in the county include Hamlin State Park, Durand-Eastman Beach, and Webster Park. In summer, the lake is home to power boating, sailing, water-skiing and jet-skiing, fishing derbies, and offshore races. When the ice forms next to shore each winter, ice fishing, snowmobiling, ice boating, and skating take over as favorite pastimes.

Genesee River

Other Rochester wonders owe their existence to the glaciers as well. The Genesee River (and its gorge in Letchworth Park), Irondequoit Bay, the Finger Lakes, and the drumlins known as Cobbs Hill and Pinnacle Hill were created by the scouring action of the area's last glacier, which was formed approximately 125,000 years ago and retreated 10,000 years ago.

The Genesee River, raging in places, placid in others, originates in northern Pennsylvania and empties into Lake Ontario. Cutting through the middle of the city, its gorges and series of three waterfalls provide breathtaking scenic views as it runs north into Lake Ontario.

High Falls

High Falls, 96 feet tall and most famous as the largest urban waterfall in America, is located on the edge of downtown just a few blocks from Main Street. The historic mill area adjacent to the falls is home to a museum, gift shop, restaurants, and night life. The Pont de Rennes bridge offers prime viewing of the falls.

Irondequoit Bay

Irondequoit Bay stretches over four miles inland from Lake Ontario and is the size of a small, relatively shallow lake. A water-lover's delight, the bay's placid waters host power boaters, sailors, water-skiers, and fishing enthusiasts in spring, summer, and fall, while ice-related sports take over in winter. Some of the most beautiful vistas in the Rochester area can be found in the steeply-sloping hills surrounding the bay.

Cobbs Hill

As for picturesque scenery, arguably the best views in the city can be had from Cobbs Hill, one of a line of drumlins (a hill formed of glacial till and shaped like an overturned spoon) stretching east to west. Home to one of the city's drinking-water reservoirs, the hill's winding roads offer breathtaking views of the city. Cobbs Hill and its neighbor, Pinnacle Hill, are popular with hikers, joggers, sledders, and picnickers.

Montezuma Wildlife Refuge

Wetlands, another legacy of the glaciers, abound in the Greater Rochester Metropolitan Area. Attractive to wildlife and humans alike, many have been designated wildlife refuges with nature trails. The largest, the Montezuma Wildlife Refuge, is located about an hour's drive east of the city. With its nature trails, observation towers, self-guided auto tours, and enormous numbers of waterbirds and other wildlife, the refuge's 7,000 acres provide plenty of surprises for even the most seasoned nature observer.

Finger Lakes

Another gift from the glaciers, the Finger Lakes comprise a necklace of rare gems strung across the western New York countryside south of Rochester. Legend has it that God once placed his hand on the earth and left his fingerprints filled with water ----- hence

the name. This beautiful countryside is home to some of the best wineries and most beautiful fall foliage in New York State, as well as quaint shops, charming restaurants, and picturesque parks.

Grand Canyon of the East

Just west of the Finger Lakes is Letchworth State Park, known as the “Grand Canyon of the East.” Here the Genesee River Gorge is 600 feet deep; the area boasts three waterfalls, scenic roads and trails, numerous overlooks, and some of the most magnificent scenery in the United States. The park itself sprawls over 14,340 acres, and is perhaps the most popular western New York destination for fall foliage fanciers. Visitors can enjoy hiking, swimming, whitewater rafting, horseback riding, birdwatching, canoeing, kayaking, picnicking, and even hot air ballooning.

Niagara Falls

A 90-minute drive west from Rochester brings a traveler to the most spectacular of the glacier’s gifts: Niagara Falls. With its parks, museums, tours, exhibits, and two separate waterfalls, Niagara Falls is a favorite stop for visitors in the area.

###