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FEATURED

DELUCA: Gorge walk reveals delights of the lower river

Gorge walk reveals delights of the lower river to those who never gave it a whirl

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Jun 28, 2018

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INTO THE GORGE Hiking along the lower river offers rare glimpse of Niagara's beauty. Page 8,9



Until last week, I had only been in the Niagara Gorge once before.

It was a few years ago, and I only went about a third of the way down the trail into the gorge to get a photo of a historian who wrote about Devil's Hole.

That likely would have been enough for me until the other day, when I was invited to join a walk through the gorge by the publisher of the Niagara Gazette and the Lockport Union Sun and Journal, John Celestino.

John had recently hiked into the gorge with former publisher — and now Niagara Falls councilman — Chris Voccio, who ventures regularly into the gorge between Whirlpool State Park and Devil’s Hole State Park with his dog, Annie.

On that trek, John could not believe the breathtaking beauty of the place. He also was astonished to find afterward, upon questioning locals, how few had ever ventured down the steps and onto the pathways on the bank of the lower Niagara River between the two state parks.

Facing an adventure in a part of the region which I had not yet fully experienced, I couldn’t refuse. I pulled out my hiking boots —which I last wore on a mountain climb in Alaska more than a decade ago — dropped a mini-water bottle into my purse and considered myself ready for what I had already dubbed “the great gorge adventure.”

Joining us would be two intrepid fellow trekkers, Andrea Czopp, director of communications for Niagara Falls USA, who regularly takes travel writers into the gorge, and Diana Henry, business manager for the Niagara Gazette and the Lockport Union Sun and Journal who doesn’t adventure walk much due to time constraints from job and family.

For those who have never undertaken the trek, let me first discuss fitness levels. While I mentioned I’ve been mountain climbing in Alaska, it was only a small mountain and I haven’t done anything like that since. And while I am careening towards my retirement years, I consider myself reasonably fit. I walk the dog regularly, take a yoga class whenever I can, and drag myself to the gym if I can’t talk myself out of it. But I’ve always preferred a good book in a porch swing and besides, I have always heard the gorge was treacherous.

As with all of life, words like treacherous can best be defined by the person using it. Chris uses the word “arduous.” But, the pathway along the river in the gorge are — in most places — as even and walkable as the wooded pathways above the gorge. There are a couple of places where the trail thins and someone not paying attention might tumble down into the drink. My best advice: don’t do that.

We started our walk with Chris in the lead. He regularly takes groups into the gorge and plans another group walk 2 p.m. August 5, meeting at Whirlpool State Park.

On our adventure, we also met at Whirlpool, which is just off the Niagara Scenic Parkway a couple of miles from Main Street. We parked for free and proceeded on the upper trails towards Devil’s Hole, an easy walk through wooded paths with spectacular views of the gorge.

After a little more than a mile trek on the pathway above the gorge, we descended the Devil’s Hole steps into the gorge.

And despite having to turn sideways a couple of times to save my knees from the twists and turns and irregular cuts in the the stone, I made it down pretty easily, stopping for a moments rest with the others at a beautiful plateau about a third of the way down, where people can gaze at the view or have a picnic or use the restrooms.

Once we hit the path it surprising how many people were in the gorge, getting exercise, sight seeing and exploring the nooks and crannies. We saw a boy scout troop from Northern Pennsylvania climbing all over the rocks at Devil’s Hole.

As I walked along the trail with my quartet of fellow hikers, I couldn’t believe I had never been all the way down into the gorge before that day.

It was a beautiful as any place I’ve ever been including Ireland, where ancient rocks and emerald forests make a visitor feel like they’ve traveled back in time.

Ireland has nothing on the Niagara Gorge, where the raucous waters rage past the serene and ancient beauty of the rocky woods. It is spectacular. And visitors can easily step back 100 years by standing next to the Giant Rock where Great Gorge Route trolleys used to pass by on their travels back and forth to Lewiston.

Near the end of our walk, at this point a little over three miles, I would have been fine on the steps back up to Whirlpool State Park — which midway up offer a resting area with picnic tables — but we were hampered by time and so there wasn't much of a chance to sit and catch a breath. Admittedly, I did a lot of “breath-catching” on my way up, although my fellow travelers did a pretty good job with those steps.

Regardless, the experience was so unforgettable, I would do it again in a heartbeat. The great gorge is truly a bit of heaven on earth.

However, next time, I might start my journey the easy way, at the site of the former Schoellkopf Power Station, about a block down the Niagara Scenic Parkway from Main Street adjacent to the Discovery Center.

The location boasts a free elevator ride into the gorge. Skip the steps and press the down button. Your experience will be as arduous as you want it to be. And the views will be worth the effort.

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MORE ONLINE

- To experience a walk in the gorge, check out the video at www.niagara-gazette.com.