

Good times don't stop in Ontario just because the temperature drops.

# ICE IS NICE

## Head north to Ontario for winter fun

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There's at least one great thing about winter – ice wine.

Many New Yorkers plan tropical escapes as temperatures start to drop, but there's good reason to head north to Canada. Off-season travel anywhere often means cheaper rates and fewer crowds, and the same is true in Canada's province of Ontario. As an added bonus – in the winter, sweet, frost-ripened grapes are harvested from their frozen vines, and once pressed, they're ready in a few months to be poured into glasses and enjoyed.

Winter is a celebratory time here. It's ice wine season, when the pride of Canadian vineyards comes out to play.

While Ontario is worth visiting any time of year, you may want to plan your vacation around the Niagara Ice-wine Festival – taking place at participating wineries throughout the region from Jan. 9-25 on select days.

Or, just plan your own agenda in your own time.

Ease into your trip with a stop in

Toronto, the capital city of Ontario. It sets the right tone. My flight from Newark airport to Toronto on Porter Airlines took an hour, if that, and it was one of the more pleasant experiences I've had with air travel in some time. Even before flying, I started to get comfortable,

a feeling I don't often have at the airport these days. It helped that the line at the security checkpoint was nonexistent, and that the Porter airport lounge, which is open to all passengers, was fully stocked with unlimited free beverages (including an excellent cappuccino) and shortbread cookies. Porter offers wine (free!) and an in-flight meal (free!): in this case, a boxed lunch with

a tasty sandwich.

The Toronto airport sits on an island, and a free ferry shuttles travelers back and forth across the western channel of Lake Ontario. Swans and ducklings wiggled across the icy water during my trip last winter,

nature's counterpoint

to Toronto's expanding urban skyline in the background.

"You have a nice day now," a ferry operator says with feeling as passengers disembarked.

A few faces were familiar to him. Others

smiled and returned the greeting. The city has a rapidly growing population (currently at 2.6 million), but Toronto maintains an unhurried manageability. Public transportation



Niagara Falls is a sight to see in the winter.

TRAVEL

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and taxis are easily accessible, as is a bike share system, which I wasn't bold enough to test when the temperatures were still in the teens last winter. I walked everywhere instead, and since my personal biases tending toward walking towns, I had lots of fun.

My strolls revealed a diverse and international populace. In a few seconds along a single block in the Annex, a neighborhood in downtown Toronto, I heard thumping bhangra music coming from a sedan, while backpack-toting students spoke animatedly all around. I heard Korean, Japanese, French.

You'll spot uniquely local establishments like Soma Chocolatemaker (somachocolate.com) in the Distillery District, an absolute must-stop for chocolate lovers. You'll find lots that's familiar too. Canada Goose outerwear abounds, though disappointingly, it is no more affordable in its origin country than it is here in the U.S. Even if you've never been, Toronto has what you know well already: H&M, Zara, Tiffany, Chanel, McDonald's, Subway, Starbucks, Tim Hortons.

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Then there's the Four Seasons' flagship hotel, a favorite among celebrities and home to Café Boulud Toronto. This outpost of the Daniel Boulud empire shares the name of its Upper East Side forefather, but its menu is more of a best-of album than a carbon copy. Managed by chef de cuisine Tyler Shedden, Toronto's Café Boulud brings together the hits from places like Daniel on the Upper East Side of Manhattan (the potato-wrapped sea bass) and Boulud Sud on the Upper West Side (the grapefruit givré), and in some cases, the cover version is better than the original.

If the dinner menu makes your wallet nervous, go to Café Boulud for breakfast, where I had the rare kind of dish that lingers in the memory. Called Oeufs Meurette, it's made with a braised short rib whose deep brown juices soaked through the piece of sourdough toast on which it sat, while an egg poached in red wine sat perched atop that soft, meaty heap. The dish costs about \$19 at current exchange rates, but after having eaten it, I felt like I had gotten a bargain basement deal.

But enough about Toronto. We need to get moving. Onward, south and east, to Niagara wine country.

The town of Niagara-on-the-Lake is where you'll want to set up

your ice wine tasting headquarters. Utterly charming and nearly magical in the wintery snow, Niagara-on-the-Lake looks like the amalgamation of every movie set in a small town you've ever seen on screen. Victorian architecture? Check. Horse-drawn carriages? Check. An apothecary museum and a sailing club? Check, check.

From Niagara-on-the-Lake, it's easy to tour the region's vineyards. If you stop at Reif Estate Winery (reifwinery.com), check in with sommelier Archie Hood. A throwback to vintage mustaches and gruff exteriors that mask sweethearts underneath, Hood will single-handedly bring you up to speed on ice wine: how to drink it (by holding it for six to eight seconds in your mouth); and how to pair it with food (blue cheese and dark chocolate are great friends of ice wine). Nearby Trius Winery at Hillebrand (triuswines.com) and Stratus Vineyards (stratuswines.com) are other standouts; the former is casual and friendly while the latter is contemporary and sleek.

A visit to the region demands a stop at Niagara Falls, which turns out to be an absolutely spectacular sight in winter. The water flows blue over patches of white ice and snow. The attraction Journey Behind the Falls takes visitors through chilly tunnels and to a view of Niagara Falls framed by icicles frozen solid in the cold. The drive along the lake provides lovely views and a

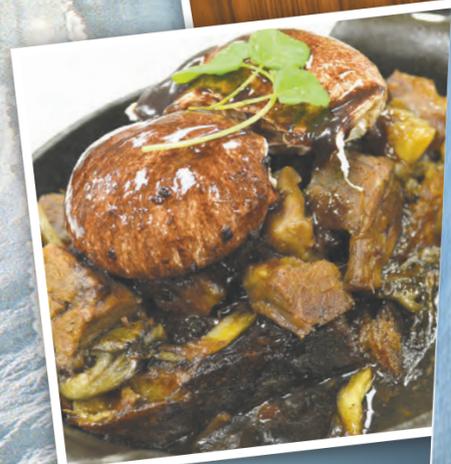
pleasant surprise; with New York just on the other side, I was getting cell service. Hello, Internet!

Back at Niagara-on-the-Lake, I rushed back to Kurtz Orchards Farm & Marketplace's culinary shop (kurtzorchards.com) on Queen St. It's essentially a store that sells sauce, and it's every human's dream shopping experience come true, with nearly every sauce on sale at the store available for sampling. I had earlier tried an incredible asiago tapenade, the memory of which I couldn't shake, and with just a few minutes left in town, I ran to the store and bought a few jars to take home.

Back at the airport, while I waited for my flight in the Porter airport lounge with cappuccino and cookies in hand, it seemed everyone was tucked into their chairs and smiling. Canada has a way of doing that to you. For all the cold I'd suffered, I didn't mind much, having found warmth to spare wherever I went.



Niagara Falls in winter.



Oeufs Meurette, a breakfast dish at Café Boulud at the Four Seasons Toronto.

Above, Soma Chocolate-maker in Toronto's Distillery District; left, the Four Seasons' flagship hotel in Toronto.



Clockwise from top: Ponchos are a must at The Journey Behind the Falls attraction; the Falls' fury is majestic; Toronto's airport ferry; Stratus Vineyards in Niagara-on-the-Lake; Inni-skillin ice wine.



### IF YOU GO

**Fly:** Porter Airlines ([flyporter.com](http://flyporter.com)) flies nonstop several times a day from Newark to Toronto.

**Stay:** Four Seasons Hotel Toronto ([fourseasons.com/toronto](http://fourseasons.com/toronto)); and the Shaw Club in Niagara-on-the-Lake ([niagarasfinest.com](http://niagarasfinest.com)).

**More info:** Wine Country Ontario ([Winecountryontario.ca](http://Winecountryontario.ca)) offers info on traveling to different wine regions in the province year-round; and the Niagara Wine Festival site ([niagarawinefestival.com](http://niagarawinefestival.com)) provides info on the Niagara Icewine Festival, as well as other annual festivals in the region.

**Tip:** Leave room in your luggage for the wine you'll want to bring home. Many wineries sell bubble wrap made specifically for bottles.

