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Adirondack Park a great American getaway in upstate New York



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New York state is best known for the mega-metropolis that bears the same name, but it's also home to a mega-park, one of America's greatest natural wonders: Adirondack Park. As state tourism officials like to point out, the 6 million-acre wilderness area is larger than the national parks of Yosemite, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Glacier and the Great Smoky Mountain Parks combined.

Back in the Gilded Age when robber barons ruled the land, the Adirondack Mountains were the "in" place to be. Families like the Vanderbilts, Astors, Guggenheims and Rockefellers all built "Great Camps" here to experience and enjoy the simple pleasure of the great outdoors. Though the era of these camps has passed, the Adirondack region retains that special wonder and magic.

My favorite vehicle for exploring the park is a canoe. First, there are more than 3,000 lakes and 30,000 miles of streams and rivers here. Second, unlike traditional backpacking, canoes can carry lots of stuff. That means, instead of the bare-bones, lightweight backpacking gear that's never really all that comfortable, I can take a heavy, roomy tent, comfy sleeping bag and pad, and a gourmet cook set. I can also take real food, as opposed to the less-than-tasty freeze-dried fare. I'm talking juicy steaks, fresh vegetables, luscious fruit, desserts, and plenty of beer and wine.

The best time to canoe the Adirondacks is in late summer and fall, when the mosquitoes and black flies that the region is known for in spring and summer have subsided. Warmer weather also brings more rain and thunderstorms, whereas fall generally is dry and clear. And in October (my favorite month there), you can bask in the beauty of the Adirondacks' amazing fall foliage.

A good base for any Adirondack adventure is Lake George. One of New York state's top vacation draws, this 32-mile-long crystal-clear spring-fed lake has hotels and restaurants for all budgets. Being just off Interstate Highway 87, it's easy to get to.

But one of my favorite canoeing destinations in the area is Lake Lila. The former home to William Seward Webb's famed Great Camp, Nehasane Lodge, Lake Lila is a 1,400-acre, 2.6-mile-long, 2-mile-wide, motor-free canoeing paradise in the wilderness with six delightful islands and 20-plus campsites. One warning: Getting there is not for the faint at heart. You have to drive 6 miles down a very sketchy gravel road that screams 4-wheel drive and good ground clearance. Once you arrive at the parking lot, you still have a long portage across some rather rough terrain to get to the lake. But when you finally get done lugging your gear and push off into the glassy waters of Lake Lila in the glow of a warm fall afternoon sun, it's all worth it.

The last time my photographer and I were there, we found a fantastic island campsite with a nice sandy beach and an expansive view of the lake. I had brought along some seasoned tenderloin beef, which we grilled over an open fire and enjoyed with arugula salad, braised small red potatoes and a bottle of cabernet. For dessert, we headed out to our beach and enjoyed some New York cheesecake and chilled ice wine. Mr. Rockefeller, eat your heart out!

As we relaxed there, sipping our wine, the lake as flat as glass, we enjoyed the haunting call of the loons as the day sank behind the distant purple mountains. One by one, the stars emerged, until the sky was ablaze in stellar light. With no major towns or cities for hundreds of miles, stargazing in the Adirondacks is legendary, especially on a clear fall night.

Aside from exploring Lake Lila's many bays and coves as well as the rivers that feed and drain her, there are some great hikes along her shores. Our favorite is 2,220-foot Mount Frederica on the southwest side of the lake. The trailhead is clearly marked, and a short, invigorating hike takes you to a wonderful rocky lookout where you can catch a sweeping aerial view of the lake and the region. If you catch the fall colors, the blue of the sky and lake framed in red, orange, rust and yellow leaves is breathtaking.

Lake Lila is just one of many fantastic canoe destinations in this region and also one of many with a history tied to the Great Camps. In fact, Saranac Lake (another great canoeing destination) is where you will find the last of the few remaining Great Camps that are still operational.

One of the most impressive of these is William Avery Rockefeller's Wonundra, built in the early 20th century. Today this Great Camp is a high-end resort called The Point, where guests can stay in rooms furnished with the knickknacks the Rockefellers collected on their many travels around the world. The camp is preserved almost exactly as it was when the Rockefellers lived there, including the main house, boathouse, the pub, the great hall, and William's photography studio, which has a huge picture window looking onto the lake.

Whatever part of this wonderful park you choose to visit, the Adirondacks are magical. And while the Gilded Age may be long past, and travel options are many, I still make my yearly pilgrimage back to the Adirondacks with my canoe and paddle. For me and many others, this is still the "in" place to be.

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If you go

Getting there: The nearest major airport is in Albany, 73 miles southeast of the park. United and Southwest fly some nonstops to Albany, ranging from about \$350 to \$380 round trip. Amtrak starts at \$186 round trip. By car, the park is about 800 miles east of Chicago. Not including stops, that's about 12 1/2 hours.

Lodging: For the varied accommodations on Lake George, see lakegeorge.com.

On Saranac Lake, contact The Point at 800-255-3530 or go to thepointsaranac.com. Luxury doesn't come cheap. Rates at this time of year start at about \$1,500, not including fees.

Lake Lila info: The lake lies within the William C. Whitney Wilderness Area. For directions and information, go to tinyurl.com/wildwhitney. For specific info on Lake Lila, go to tinyurl.com/lakelila.

Outfitters: There are several outfitters in the area. Though we took our own canoe, other campers recommended St. Regis Canoe Outfitters. Daily rates for a two-person Royalex canoe start at \$52. Lighter Kevlar models start at \$64. Rates drop for multiple days. 518-891-1838, canoeoutfitters.com.

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