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Lake Champlain is loaded with pleasures on both sides and in the middle



From geology to hiking to wine to the latest in farm-to-table offerings, the Lake Champlain region of Vermont and New York brims with pleasures on the water and off.

By **Eric Vohr**
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I grew up fairly close to Lake Champlain but until last summer had never sailed her waters or even paddled out in a canoe.

That being said, I'd spent enough time exploring the bucolic farmland and quaint eclectic towns along the shores of this lake, stretching 125 miles from Canada south between New York and Vermont, that I had to put sailing Champlain on my to-do list.

So, when I found out that Navtours operates a sailboat charter base in Plattsburgh, N.Y. (one of the largest cities on the lake), it was all the inspiration I needed to set up a trip.

As it turned out, my fellow traveler and I scheduled the cruise during the bicentennial celebration of the Battle of Plattsburgh (a decisive War of 1812 victory). Our first stop in this historic town was a funky-cool little restaurant on the main drag called the [Blue Collar Bistro](#). This place not only has awesome food, but the owner, Cindy Snow, knows pretty much everything and everybody in Plattsburgh and gave us some great tips on where to go and what to see.

After a great dinner and a great evening wandering the streets of Plattsburgh among the many re-enactors in full military gear, we were ready to head off on our sailing tour of Champlain.

Vermont wineries have gained some attention recently, and we were eager to give these local grapes a taste. North Hero Island is winery central, so it was high on our list of sailing destinations.

The inhabited islands in Champlain are linked via bridges to mainland Vermont, so even if you're not on a boat, they are accessible.

We parked our catamaran at North Hero Marina, where we had arranged to meet Walter Blasberg, the owner of the [North Hero House Inn & Restaurant](#), one of the oldest inns on the island, dating to 1891. He had happily agreed to direct us to a couple of Champlain's top wine and cider producers.

Our first stop was [Hall Home Place](#), a cider farm on nearby Isle La Motte. Here we toured the farm, enjoyed a tasting of the many varieties of cider and even got a tour of the old Hall family farmhouse that dates to the 1700s, when the Hall family started growing apples and pears on North Hero.

Back at North Hero House, we met David and Julie Lane, owners of [Snow Farm Vineyard & Winery](#). The Lanes brought along a selection of their wines to pair with some of the dishes served at North Hero House. Wine pairings are a regular part of the North Hero House program, as the inn works closely with local producers and features their products in the restaurant.

It was hard to leave the wine and food behind, but we had a date with one of Champlain's more wild and natural wonders, Valcour Island. This remote, 2- by 1-mile island on the New York side of the lake is a fantastic place to kick back and experience the abundant natural beauty of this New York state park.

The island, accessible only by water, is crisscrossed by hiking trails, where you can spend hours wandering aromatic fields of goldenrod and blue asters under sheltering hemlock and white ash. These trails connect Valcour's many idyllic bays and beaches, which have been christened with mysterious and inviting names like Smuggler Harbor, Butterfly Bay and Paradise Bay.

Geologists will love walking the shoreline, the remains of an ancient reef that dates back nearly 500 million years. If you look closely, you'll find many fossilized animals that lived here when this region was at the bottom of an ocean.

Another of our favorite ports on Champlain was the eclectic Vermont college town of Burlington. If you like cozy cafes, hip bars, farmer's markets and farm-to-table restaurants, Burlington is your kind of town. The "Berkeley" of the East Coast, Burlington is a bastion of laid-back cool that is in great contrast to the Northeast's more puritanical and uptight roots.

[Hotel Vermont](#) is the place to stay. (Rates start at \$259.) Expertly tuned in to the vibe of Burlington and Vermont, the hotel uses mainly Vermont products and Vermont themes and specializes in locally grown and inspired dining. It's also an evening hot spot with a popular bar, great music and a rocking fire pit in the back courtyard.

Our 10-day sail went by too fast, but we still had a few more days to check out some of the region's other

attractions by car. Just south of Plattsburgh is a relatively overlooked mini-Grand Canyon called the Ausable Chasm. Carved by the Ausable River over a period of 500 million years, this 2-mile-long gorge is as much as 150 feet deep in parts. You can walk or float through it or even strap on a harness and crisscross over the raging river using cable traverses and bridges.

For those who don't have access to a sailboat, Lake Champlain Ferries runs regular crossings leaving from a number of ports. The fare is reasonable, and the company has some very cool and historic ships. We took the Champlain, which shuttles between Port Kent on the New York side and Burlington. This 1930s wooden ship started its career taking people across the southern Chesapeake Bay before being moved to Lake Champlain.

Champlain holds a special place in my heart because I grew up in the Northeast. But whether you're a local or not, there is so much to do and see on and around Champlain, it's got something for everybody.

If you go

We rented from [Navtours](#), where rental options range from \$1,950 to \$5,000 per week (fuel not included).

For more dining and hotel information for Lake Champlain, visit <http://www.vermont.org> for the Vermont side <http://www.lakechamplainregion.com> for the New York side.

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