

AUTUMN IN THE **ADIRONDACKS**

In northern New York's "forever wild" preserve, brilliant fall foliage paints the forests around Lake Placid, a family-friendly destination the kids won't want to leave

Our first fall morning in the Adirondacks was crisp, clear and bright. We filled our travel mugs with coffee, packed snacks for the three boys, and headed directly to the Olympic Jumping Complex, just 12 miles southwest of the Lake Placid/Whiteface Mountain KOA in Wilmington, New York, our base camp for the week. As we drove to the complex, we were amazed that the red and orange leaves had become even brighter and more vibrant overnight. We had heard about peak foliage but were still stunned by the natural show unfolding in front of our eyes.

Parking our tow vehicle at the base of the complex, we caught the chairlift that rose above the colorful tree line and deposited us near a glass-enclosed elevator. Minutes later we found ourselves on the observation deck of the 120-meter ski jump enjoying a panoramic view of the Adirondack High Peaks. Goosebumps broke out on our arms, as we stared down the steep and dramatic arc of a ramp that launches ski jumpers over the length of an entire football field.

The experience left us awestruck at the bravery of Olympic athletes and the blazing glory of the Adirondack

Mountains in autumn. The unique combination of sports history and natural beauty defines this storied region of New York and beckons visitors back season after season. Lake Placid offered our family the chance to immerse ourselves in the annals of the Winter Olympics, held here in 1932 and 1980, and simultaneously enjoy one of the country's greatest wild spaces, where rivers and streams wind their way through forests filled with maple and birch.

The size and scope of New York's Adirondack Park is astonishing. It covers more than 6 million acres of land, including 3.4 million privately owned acres and 2.6 million acres held by the state and designated "forever wild." Glacier, Yosemite, Great Smoky Mountains, Yellowstone and Grand Canyon national parks could all fit within the boundaries of the forest preserve with room to spare. So while the park has scenic wilderness that compares to many of our great national parks, it also has more than 100 towns and hamlets, the crown jewel of which is Lake Placid.

When we arrived at Main Street in Lake Placid, we were returning from the ski-jump venue, located a few miles from

The 2.1-mile trail to the top of Mount Jo rewards hikers with spectacular views of Heart Lake.



(Far left) The \$35 Olympic Sites Passport covers the chairlift ride up to the Olympic Jumping Complex and offers discounts on other Lake Placid attractions. **(Left)** Plan on spending an entire day at the 81-acre Wild Center in Tupper Lake exploring the elevated Wild Walk trail and the Hall of the Adirondacks.

downtown, and looking to visit the Olympic Center and Lake Placid Olympic Museum. The museum is small, and we spent only 45 minutes there. Nevertheless, it was pivotal in setting the stage for our trip down Winter Olympics memory lane.

The uniforms, medals and photos in the museum are fascinating, but the real star of the show is the looping original footage of the remarkable triumph of the 1980 U.S. hockey team, dubbed the “Miracle on Ice.” This exhibit captivated the imagination of our boys, and we were coerced into purchasing the 2004 Disney movie version, *Miracle*, from the museum gift shop. The DVD was practically worn out by the end of our vacation.

When Lake Placid hosted the 1932 Winter Olympics, it marked the first time the event was held in North America. Many of the original facilities were revitalized for the 1980 games, and as we walked through the echoing halls of the Olympic Center, it was easy to believe that more Olympic athletes have come from Lake Placid than from any other American town. Standing in the dim hockey arena, we could imagine Olympic sports feeling like a birthright for children growing up in these surroundings.

At this point during our visit, we were bitten by the bug. Although we had long planned on exploring Winter Olympic history during our visit to Lake Placid, seeing the jumping complex, the museum and the hockey arena had turned a mild interest into a fascination. We had already purchased the Olympic Sites Passport (\$35 per adult), and now we were determined to take full advantage of the offerings, including riding the Cloudsplitter Gondola to the top of Whiteface Mountain and touring the Olympic Sports Complex, where we watched athletes race down the bobsled, luge and skeleton tracks.

The Olympic Center is located on the south end of Main Street, and after our tour we walked north along the edge of Mirror Lake, peeking into the boutiques and shops and enjoying the views of fall foliage popping against a brilliant blue sky. Starbucks is located a few blocks away, but we enjoy seeking out local roasters whenever we travel. In the back of the Alpine Mall, we stumbled upon Coff E Bean, bought steaming cups of java and perched on stools that offered a panoramic view of the lake. Unfortunately, the posted operating hours were estimates at best. We dropped by at other times during our visit to find the shop had closed early for the day.

At first glance the stores along Main Street seemed to be of the souvenir T-shirt and mug variety, with every manner of Adirondacks slogan one could imagine. But upon further inspection, we discovered the Bookstore Plus, pleasantly crammed with towers of well-curated book selections. We also stumbled into the Saratoga Olive Oil Company, where time passed quickly as we sampled delicious oils, vinegars and seasoned salts, purchasing a few to enjoy later. Our shopping highlight was the Cornerstone Rustic and Craft

Atop the 394-foot tower at the Olympic Jumping Complex, visitors get an athlete’s perspective of the ski jump and a scenic view to boot.





ADIRONDACK ESCAPES

WHERE TO PLAY

Departing daily from the Lake Placid Airport, **Adirondack Scenic Flights** give a whole different view of fall foliage. Prices are relatively reasonable at about \$55 per person. 866-439-2399 www.flyanywhere.com/adirondack_scenic_flights

When the autumn leaves change color, Adirondack Scenic Railroad's **Fall Foliage Train** departs twice daily from Lake Placid, chugging its way to the small town of Saranac Lake. Passengers have time to wander around and eat lunch before boarding the train for the return trip. 800-819-2291 www.adirondackrr.com/adkrr/fall-foliage-saranac-lake

At **John Brown Farm State Historic Site**, visitors can tour the North Elba farm and grave of America's most famous abolitionist, who was captured in Virginia while trying to liberate slaves. Six days after being hanged on December 2, 1859, Brown's body was buried in front of his house. 518-523-3900, www.nysparks.com/historic-sites

The fabulous **Wild Center** is worth every minute of the hour-long drive from Lake Placid to Tupper Lake. Regional exhibits, guided hiking tours, art studios, animal feedings and films will keep the family busy all day and may even entice you to return. The real star of the show is the Wild Walk, a treetop installation with huge nests, spider webs and hammocks. Good luck getting your kids to go home. 518-359-7800, www.wildcenter.org

WHERE TO STAY

Close to downtown Lake Placid, **Draper's Acres Campground** (formerly Spring Pines Campground) is getting a facelift from its new owners but is open for business. 518-523-9322, www.drapersacres.com

Two miles from Whiteface Mountain and 20 minutes northeast of Lake Placid in Wilmington, **Lake Placid/Whiteface Mountain KOA** is open year-round, making it a good choice for shoulder-season visits. 518-946-7878 www.koa.com/campgrounds/lake-placid

Also in Wilmington, **North Pole Resorts** has some sunny sites right on the banks of the Ausable River, plus two outdoor pools, a couple of playgrounds, and hiking and biking trails. The Good Sam Park is open from May through October. 518-946-7733, www.northpoleresorts.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Lake Placid Convention and Visitors Bureau
518-523-2445, www.lakeplacid.com

Walk on the wild side: Suspended 30 feet above the ground, the Wild Center's trail of swinging bridges takes hikers into the treetops for a unique forest experience.

Gallery, where the owner showcased souvenirs that would remind us of our New York trip without feeling kitschy or cliché.

Our favorite time in downtown Lake Placid, though, was spent doing something we would not have found in a travel guide. The Lake Placid Public Library drew us in with its quaint, white-clapboard front and promise of a children's reading room. We whiled away many hours in this cozy and welcoming space. Chairs are situated in front of floor-to-ceiling windows that offer views of Mirror Lake. Mazelike staircases led out to a lakefront garden with Adirondack chairs, where we were surprised to find a haven of calm nestled in the middle of a bustling downtown.

The kids' floor was full of beanbags, armchairs and dollhouses. We hadn't been there a minute before the librarian introduced herself and offered a few choice reading picks to the boys. Our time in the library brought us away from the tourist attractions of the region and gave us a taste of the local culture.

Lake Placid has turned itself into a year-round destination for festivals and events of every kind. Visitors stream into the town for one shindig after another, from the annual Ironman triathlon to barbecue festivals and classic-car shows. We prefer a quieter experience, and though the area never truly shuts down, we made sure to schedule our visit when no major events were on the regional calendar.

After being immersed in the Olympic sites and enjoying the downtown culture, it was amazing how much outdoor adventure still awaited us during our stay. There was no better way to soak in the majestic beauty of fall foliage than to take a drive on Veterans Memorial Highway (State Route 431), which brought us to the top of Whiteface Mountain, New York's fifth highest peak. There we found a

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stone castle and an elevator that led to a tower offering a 360-degree view of the Adirondacks.

The campground manager had warned us about chilly temperatures at the top, so we were prepared with hats and gloves. Hot chocolate from the Castle Café also kept us warm, while we attempted to identify the many lakes and peaks in the distance.

We discovered the hard way that the peak of Whiteface Mountain is often socked in when we headed up one day only to be forced back because of fog. After that experience, we paid close attention to the weather and scheduled our next journey on a clear day. Another thing we discovered? The toll to drive Veterans Memorial Highway is a bit steep for a family of five, so we were happy it was included in our purchase of the Olympic Sites Passport.

The Adirondack Park contains more than 3,000 lakes and ponds, and 30,000 miles of rivers and streams, making the region a paradise for kayakers, canoers and fly-fishers. We met angler Evan Bottcher at the Hungry Trout Resort, perched on the banks of the Ausable River in Wilmington. Evan was raised at the Hungry Trout and was happy to tell us about his family's small business that has grown into one of the area's most distinguished outfitting companies. The resort has a long roster of fly-fishing guides, and Evan took his role as matchmaker seriously, considering experience and temperament when scheduling a guided wading trip.

We also enjoyed one of the best meals of our vacation at the Hungry Trout Restaurant, where a fine-dining experience is complemented by river views. Even though this restaurant

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(Above, from left) Take advantage of the Adirondacks' many roadside pull-offs to discover autumn foliage photo ops and trails through forests of changing leaves.

has a hushed and elegant air, the staff welcomed our young children with friendly smiles, coloring pages and crayons. The menu offers everything you would want from a steak house, and then fittingly includes plenty of trout dishes. We enjoyed the crisp blue-cheese wedge salad and then created our own surf-and-turf meal, splitting a bone-in rib-eye steak and grilled rainbow trout.

If the restaurant's fireplace and dining room had not seemed so inviting, we might have tried the more casual R.F. McDougall's Pub, owned by the same family and located just down a flight of stairs. For our next visit, the McCheesy fries are high on the agenda.

We woke up early on our last morning in the Adirondack Park, made coffee, packed lunches and laced up our hiking shoes. Our trusted Appalachian Mountain Club guidebook described Mount Jo as an "easy climb" of 2.1 miles that leads to "spectacular views" of Mount Marcy in what is often called the region's "finest square mile." With

three kids in tow, this sounded like our kind of hike.

The climb up was stunning. Blankets of bright red leaves covered the ground, and shallow streams of crystal-clear mountain runoff sluiced past us, as we picked our way around rocks and thick tangles of trees. But halfway to the top, we started to realize that while the hike might be "easy" for an Olympic athlete, it was not so for us. Our twin six-year-old boys are troopers on the trail, as long as snacks are packed and frequently provided, but our two-year-old still gets carried in a hiking pack, and he's not exactly light.

By the time we reached the top, we were sweating and short of breath, but the views of the High Peaks were astonishing, particularly because they were awash in radiant fall colors. We pulled out a picnic blanket, unpacked our lunches and stretched our legs across the cool rock. Red and yellow leaves filtered down around us, but the majesty of that perfect fall day seemed like it would last forever. 🚗

(Far left) The waterfront garden at Lake Placid's public library offers a beautiful view of Mirror Lake and classic seating to relax and enjoy it. (Left) A good location for enjoying the area's attractions, the Lake Placid/Whiteface Mountain KOA serves up a full breakfast every morning. Open year-round, the RV park has roomy sites and friendly management.



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