



NOW BOARDING
THE

POLAR EXPRESS TRAINS IN NEW YORK

- Medina Railroad Museum
Medina
- Adirondack Scenic Railroad
Utica
- Saratoga & North Creek
Railway, Saratoga Springs
- Catskill Mountain Railroad
Kingston

IN SARATOGA SPRINGS:

POLAR EXPRESS

By Dave Parfitt

Turn a classic children's book into a weekend getaway the whole family will

love

A charming upscale town nestled in the foothills of the Adirondacks, Saratoga Springs has a rich history tied to mineral springs, spas and thoroughbred horse racing. It's also home of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center and the National Museum of Dance and Hall of Fame – meaning there's always some sort of concert or performance going on, year round. But late last year, we visited this vibrant and artsy cultural hub for a completely different kind of show: a family train ride on The Polar Express at Saratoga & North Creek Railway.

Just a 3½-hour drive from our home in Rochester, Saratoga Springs was free from the crush of tourists who flock there for racing season in the summer. That's usually when Broadway, Saratoga's main street, is packed with pedestrians, its eclectic boutiques, national retailers and walkways lined with art making it a draw for all ages. In the colder months, though, the sidewalks are less congested, the traffic a little quieter. A crisp December evening is the perfect time for a night out in Saratoga Springs – whatever kind of show you choose.

ALL ABOARD

The Polar Express train ride experience brings the classic children's book to life in Saratoga Springs, and in several other locations around New York state. Most rides typically feature holiday treats and a reading of Chris Van Allsburg's famous book, which tells the story of a young boy who travels by train to meet Santa at the North Pole. On this particular night, throngs of pajama-clad children milled about the station as we waited to board the passenger cars, which were festooned with the trimmings of the holiday season. Our daughter, Evie, could barely contain her excitement, waving her golden ticket for the conductor before she stepped onto the train.

We settled into our first-class dome car seats around the dinette table, and admired our souvenir keepsake mugs that waited to be filled with steaming hot cocoa. Eventually, the train inched forward, picked up speed, and our trip to the North Pole was underway. Songs and music floated through the air, and, before long, chefs cavorted up and down the aisle bringing "hot, hot, hot ... hot chocolate! Hot, hot, hot ... hot chocolate!" Oh, they've got it!

They've also "got" delicious homemade (yes, homemade) sugar cookies, with a lovely hint of vanilla. And then ... what to our wondering eyes appeared? Look, out the window ... why it's, it's, the North Pole! (And just 30 minutes from Saratoga Springs too; boy, that train moves quickly.) With a lurch and a jerk, Santa boarded the train, greeted each child and gave everyone a special gift: a jingle bell cut directly from his sleigh. But the North Pole is a busy place this time of year, so we were soon on our way back to Saratoga Springs to continue our weekend getaway.



THE SARATOGA & NORTH CREEK RAILWAY



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PHOTO BY: DAVE PARFITT



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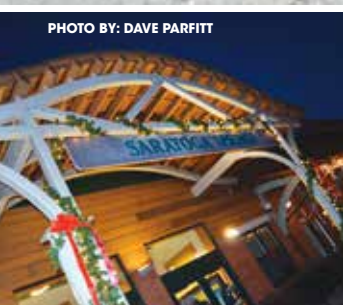


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THE SARATOGA & NORTH CREEK RAILWAY

ACT II

After our train ride, we nestled down for the evening at the Inn at Saratoga, surrounded by antique Victorian fixtures and the amenities of the boutique hotel. In the morning we fueled up for a day of exploring with a hearty complimentary breakfast buffet at the Inn.

Saratoga Springs is a compact destination, with the historic Congress Park and downtown area just a short walk from the Inn. (If you don't care to walk, the Inn loans out vintage Roadmaster bicycles for guests to tool around town, weather permitting.) I was excited to explore the park, designed by noted landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Many know Olmsted for New York City's Central Park, but our family is more familiar with his Western New York contributions such as Niagara Falls State Park and our hometown Highland Park (home of Rochester's annual Lilac Festival). We spent some time wandering the grounds and sampling the unique flavors of the mineral springs. (Tip: If you go, you'll want to be sure to bring your own cup or water bottle.)

Just a short walk from Congress Park, lunch at the Circus Café was a riotous affair filled with circus memorabilia, heavy theater curtains and colors that evoked the greatest show on earth. The menu was stuffed with burgers, fries and comfort food, but also had a nod to the Big Top with its signature homemade cotton candy.

Too soon, it was time to point our family's minivan back toward Rochester. The star of our quick weekend getaway was the Polar Express train ride to the North Pole. But with Saratoga's excellent supporting cast of attractions and restaurants, we can't wait for the encore. ■

IF YOU GO

WHERE TO STAY

INN AT SARATOGA

The oldest operating hotel in Saratoga Springs, this Victorian inn features luxurious modern amenities and a convenient location in the heart of downtown Saratoga Springs.

GIDEON PUTNAM RESORT & SPA

Some might say that no visit to Saratoga Springs is complete without a spa experience, so consider staying at this resort, surrounded by the Saratoga Spa State Park and home to the Roosevelt Baths & Spa.

WHERE TO EAT

WHEATFIELDS RESTAURANT & BAR

Here you'll find a relaxed, kid-friendly atmosphere and a tasty farm-to-table menu. We like the fresh pasta made in-house and the wood-fired pizzas.

OLDE BRYAN INN

This historic, casual Saratoga restaurant was originally established as an inn in 1773. Today, its menu features favorites like prime rib, an old-fashioned turkey dinner and a homemade apple crisp.



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