

ESCAPES | DAY TRIP

Where the Finest Antiques Can't Be Bought

FRED A. BERNSTEIN APRIL 7, 2006

IT'S easy to understand why people drive past Troy without thinking to stop. From the Interstate they see broken-down factories, ugly brick housing projects from the 1950's and, most egregiously, a concrete garage that hugs the Hudson River where there ought to be a park.

Whizzing by, you can't tell that Troy has a downtown — much less one of the most perfectly preserved 19th-century downtowns in the United States. Has there ever been a case of less effective civic advertising?

Drive into the city, and you'll find block after block of town houses, churches and commercial buildings that look almost exactly as they did 100 years ago. A 1,200-seat concert hall has stunning frescoes and astonishing acoustics. A row of antiques stores inhabits buildings at least as precious as the merchandise inside. And a remarkable Tiffany window forms the backdrop for the circulation desk at the beaux-arts public library; Troy, with only 48,000 people, has more than a dozen Tiffany windows.

In the 10th century Troy, at the junction of the Hudson River, the Erie Canal

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empty for decades, undisturbed by renovators. And so, 15 years ago, when Martin Scorsese needed to recreate the Manhattan of the 1870's for "The Age of Innocence," he went to Troy. It offered not just the perfect backdrop, but also precious little commercial activity to impede shooting. Now the city has begun a comeback, with new businesses opening and visitors discovering its charms. Kathy Sheehan, a lifelong resident who works for the Rensselaer County Historical Society, said, "I'm as excited about what's happening now as I was bummed about what happened 30 years ago."

The best day to tour Troy is Saturday, because the library is closed on Sundays and because Saturday is when a farmers' market comes to town. The market makes Troy's relative shortage of restaurants irrelevant: offerings include not only the makings of a perfect picnic (local artisanal cheeses, breads and wines) but also the Asian cooking of Thunder Mountain Curry, whose chef, Mike Gordon, may be one of the few graduates of the Culinary Institute of America selling food from a pushcart.

A perfect day in Troy might begin with coffee at Illium, a cafe in an 1830's commercial building on Broadway; a 1920's wraparound mural of the Hudson River Valley is visible from every seat. From there, it's about 100 yards to the antiques shops on two quaint blocks of River Street. One standout is Retropolitan (169 River Street; 518-428-2211) with mid-20th-century pieces at a fraction of their New York City prices.

But the best antiques in town aren't for sale. Plan to tour the old city center on foot. Ms. Sheehan leads walks on most Saturdays at 11 a.m. If you can't make one, the historical society can provide a free guide to walking Troy.

Either way, you'll want to stroll by Washington Park, between Second and Third Streets and Washington Place and Washington Street. It's a gated green comparable to Gramercy Park in Manhattan, with surrounding houses at least as appealing. From there, walk north on Second Street, where the Troy Public Library is at No. 100. After checking out the Tiffany window, head upstairs to see the Hudson River School paintings hanging in the main reading room.

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sterling 1835 Greek Revival church now used as a lecture and performance site.

Along the way, historic plaques offer local lore: how a Troy resident named Samuel Wilson became America's iconic "Uncle Sam"; how Clement Clarke Moore's "A Visit From St. Nicholas" (" 'Twas the Night Before Christmas") came to be published, for the first time, in Troy in 1823. Ms. Sheehan will drop every name from the Marquis de Lafayette, who visited Troy in 1825, to Washington Roebling, chief engineer of the Brooklyn Bridge, who lived in Troy while his son attended Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. (R.P.I. still towers over the city from a hill just east of downtown.) And she'll explain why Troy became known as the Collar City: in the days when laundering dress shirts was an ordeal, detachable collars were common, and Troy is where many of them were manufactured.

FARTHER north on Second Street, No. 57 is the headquarters of the historical society, incorporating a museum and the marble-fronted Hart-Cluett House, built in 1827 and retaining most of its original detailing. The upstairs, closed since the early 1990's for restoration (which continues), will have a grand reopening in May.

Also on Second Street is the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall, the bank's gift to the city in 1875. The magnificent building is rarely open except during concerts, so you may want to attend one. If you're tall or wide, try to get an aisle seat; the original wood chairs, upholstered in leather over horsehair, are beautiful but closely spaced.

Across the street from the music hall is Daisy Baker's, serving American fare in what was a residence for young women in the 19th century; period details remain to prove its pedigree. On a recent night, the shrimp cocktail was delicious and the filet mignon perfectly cooked.

But there is more to explore before dinner. Continuing north on Second Street, you'll pass the modern City Hall (built, foolishly, in the 1970's, when entire buildings like the massive, mansard-roofed Quackenbush department store stood unused) and the beautiful McCarthy Building, with a carved stone entrance that resembles a proscenium arch. A bit farther north is the city's Uncle Sam statue, marking the unofficial northern edge of the historic district

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It's time to head back south. This time, you may want to wander without any particular destination in mind. The pleasure of Troy isn't discovering a single old building, but finding yourself lost among dozens of them. You may feel as if it were 1880, and you were strolling home to Washington Park, perhaps just for a change of collar.

If You Go

TROY is three hours north of New York City and eight miles north of Albany. Signs on Interstate 787 clearly mark the route to Troy. Free parking is abundant.

Amtrak stops near Albany at the Rensselaer train station, a 15-minute drive south of Troy. Cabs are available at the station.

The Saturday farmers' market (www.troymarket.org) is held from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. in the Uncle Sam Atrium (Third Street and Broadway) until the end of April. From May through November, it moves outdoors to the Troy Town Dock and Marina on River Street near the Green Island Bridge, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

The Illium Café (9 Broadway, 518-629-0004) serves coffee and light meals.

Daisy Baker's (33 Second Street, 518-266-9200) is open for dinner Monday thru Saturday, and for lunch Monday thru Friday. The River Street Cafe (429 River Street, 518-273-2740) and Lo Porto (85 Fourth Street, 518-273-8546) serve dinner only.

The Rensselaer County Historical Society, 57 Second Street (www.rchsonline.org), is open from noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday from February to late December. The suggested donation for viewing the galleries is \$4. For walking-tour information, Kathy Sheehan, the society's registrar and historian, can be reached at 518-272-7232, extension 15. A special tour on Tuesday at 1:30 p.m. will focus on Troy's involvement in the abolition movement before the Civil War. A map of Troy's Tiffany windows is at www.troyvisitorcenter.org/tours/tiffany.html.

The schedule of events at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall (30 Second Street.

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