

## History & Fun Combine to Make Syracuse a Family Destination

### FAMILY TRAVEL

—by Deborah Williams

canal boats to unload cargo without impeding traffic flow.

In Syracuse visitors can climb a wall at the science center,

eat a chocolate pizza, explore the country's only remaining weighlock building, hop on a go-cart in New York's largest shopping mall, experience a Dickens Christmas in an idyllic Finger Lake village, see an upside down traffic light, and explore a downtown full of restaurants, shops, and museums.

An easy two and an half hour drive down the Thruway from Buffalo, this city has been enjoying a downtown revitalization in recent years. The Syracuse area is also the ideal place for holiday shopping.

The first people who were known to live in the area were the "people of the Longhouse," or Haudensaunee. Today, these Native Americans are known as the Onondaga Nation. Ska nonh, the Great Law of Peace Center, is a new Native American museum that offers visitors insight into the culture of the Haudensaunee. The centerpiece of the exhibits is an educational film that features Native Americans explaining their heritage and values as they have been passed down from generation to generation. It was the Onondaga Nation who invented lacrosse and influenced our democratic system of government.

Clinton Square, in the center of downtown, was known as America's Main Street during the heyday of the Erie Canal. From the earliest years of the canal's history, Clinton Square had been a meeting point. The square's wide-water design allowed

The skyline in Clinton Square dates from 19th century canal days and includes some of the finest architecture in central New York. Many tolls collected on the early canals were deposited in the elegant banks that anchor the square.

Today, where the canal boats once discharged their passengers and goods, people can ice skate in winter or enjoy concerts and festivals during the warm weather months. Canal waters once flowed along the route of today's Erie Boulevard.

Downtown's most popular attraction is the Milton J. Rubenstein Museum of Science & Technology, otherwise known as the MOST. Housed in a former armory it is in the middle of the bustling Armory Square neighborhood that is full of restaurants and shops in 19th and early 20th century buildings. Admission permits you to leave and return later in the day if you wish to get lunch nearby.

The museum is host to New York's only domed IMAX Theater. There is an additional charge for the movies and schedules vary each day. We caught *Journey to Space*, an immersive and spine tingling ex-

ploration of space and upcoming missions including audacious plans for landing astronauts on Mars.

Kids love the Science Playhouse, a giant indoor playground with five levels of fun. Children of all ages were climbing through tubes and over bridges in a multi-color, multi-sensory escapade. They jumped through the flying foam balls of a volcano and through the maze of obstacles.

Parents and kids were testing their strength and coordination on the Climbing Wall. Just like an actual mountain, stability and balance are more important than strength. The background changes with the season or special event.

Did you know that Central New York was once covered by a shallow inland sea? That's why it is so easy to find fossils in the limestone mined in the area and in the pretend fossil bed inside the Earth Science Discovery Cave. There is also a miniature dig on a raised platform so people in wheelchairs can try their hand at uncovering a fossil.

As you enter the main exhibit hall take a step into the future. Welcome to Space Dock: Orion motion simulator and Capture the Crystal laser maze. There are also many hands-on exhibits, planetarium shows, and lively science demonstrations.

The Erie Canal Museum, another downtown attraction, is home to the Syracuse Heritage Area Visitor Center. This is the nation's leading museum dedicated to Erie Canal history and is housed in the 1850 Weighlock Building, the only structure of its kind in the world, and the sole survivor of seven original Erie Canal weighlock buildings.

It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and was the busiest on the canal, in part because it sat at the juncture of two canals—Erie and Oswego — that met in downtown Syracuse. These build-



ings were used to weigh canal boats to determine the proper tolls.

Museum displays include historic artifacts, models, dioramas, and photographs that tell the story of the canal's construction and canal life. A highlight of the displays is the Frank B. Thomson, a replica 65 foot-long canal passenger and cargo line boat. Climb on board for a look at canal life. What do you notice? People were definitely smaller.

Visitors learn about aquatic elevators or locks, sources for canal waters and types of Erie Canal boats. Start your tour with a 12-minute movie on the history of Syracuse and the canal. Learn about why Syracuse is known as "Salt City." Young visitors are invited to become "Towpath Detectives" and learn about the canal.

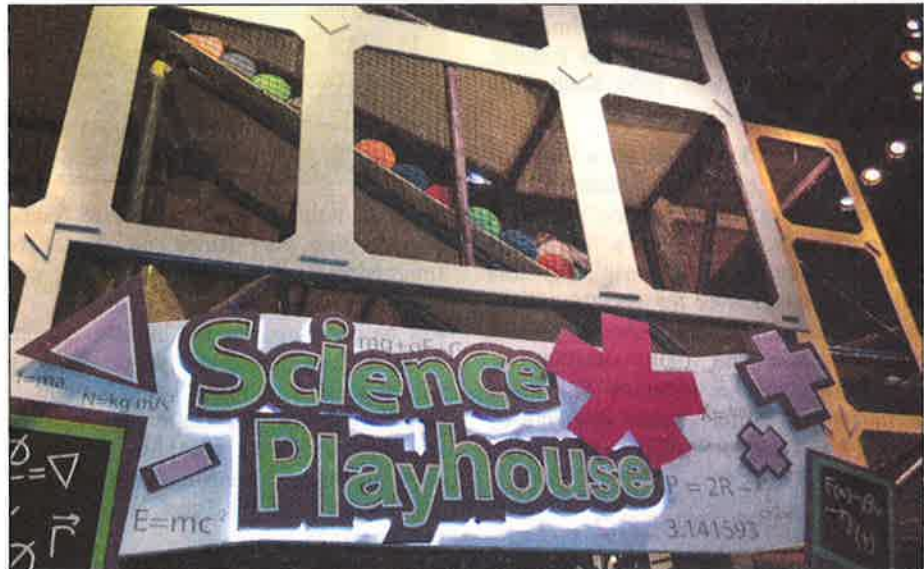
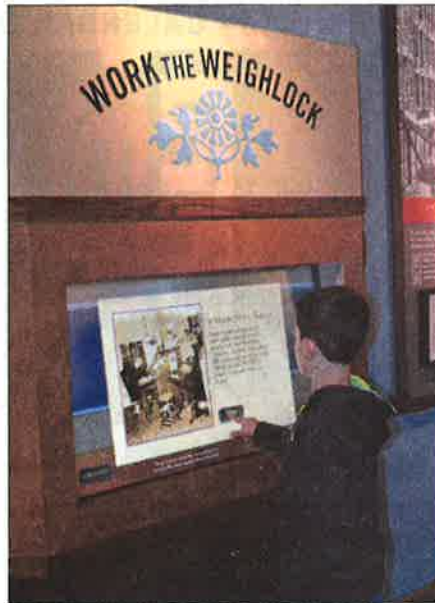
Boys were used to tend the mules and horses that pulled the 19th century canal boats. Across from the museum a sculpture of a boy and a mule honors those early canal days.

After the canal was completed and later enlarged, many Irish canal workers from County Tipperary settled on a hill overlooking the canal that became known as Tipperary Hill. When the city started to install signal lights in the 1920s, a light was put up at the corner of Tompkins Street and Milton Avenue.

According to local lore, some youths were incensed that British "red" was above Irish "green" and broke the light. The city replaced the light several times thereafter. Exasperated city officials then decided if there were going to be a light at the intersection, it would have to be an inverted one with green on top. It remains a unique green-on-top light to this day.

Destiny USA, near the shores of Onondaga Lake, is one of the country's largest shopping and entertainment malls. It even has its own zip code. There are more than 250 places to shop, dine, and play and it attracts more than 26 million visitors a year.

The mall makes a perfect family destination since shoppers can do their thing and others can get into an electric go cart and travel as fast as 45 mph along a one quarter mile indoor track. Or the non-shoppers can ride a carousel, play laser tag, experience a mirror maze, and take up the challenge of the world's largest indoor suspended rope climbing course. There is even a Sky Tykes Kids rope course.



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## FAMILY TRAVEL *continued...*

The 26th Lights on the Lake continues nightly through January 8, 2017 in Onondaga Lake Park. Thousands of lights are crafted into life-sized displays, animated scenes and themed sections including a Victorian Village, Under the Sea, Santa's Workshop, Holiday Traditions and Land of Oz that light up the night on a two-mile drive through the park.

This year marks the 23rd Annual Dickens Christmas in Skaneateles, a charming lakeside village about 20 minutes from downtown. The whole village comes alive with Dickens and his cast of more than 50 characters. Carolers serenade shoppers and strollers. Visitors are invited to enjoy chestnuts roasted over an open fire, cocoa, cider, and doughnuts. There are also free horse-drawn carriage rides.

The celebration begins the day after Thanksgiving and runs every weekend through December 24 from noon to 4 pm.

While visiting Skaneateles chocolate lovers should make a pilgrimage to the Chocolate Pizza Company in nearby Marcellus at 3774 Lee Mulroy Road. This is the birthplace of the company's signature gourmet chocolate pizza and peanut butter wings, both featured on the Food Network. It is also an inspiring story for young people to see first hand what hard work and a dream can accomplish.

It is housed in a gleaming new production and retail facility that is open daily and is owned by 28-year-old Ryan Novak, who began working at the chocolate shop washing dishes and mopping floors when he was only 15. Six years later in 2010 he achieved his dream of buying the company.

Since then he has transformed the business from a small town chocolate shop into an emerging national brand, available online and at thousands of retailers across the country. Chocolate pizzas are served in signature pizza boxes and there are more than 150 premium unique handcrafted confections.

As a lifelong chocoholic, I try to get my chocolate fix and marvel at the store's many creative taste treats whenever I am in the area. I never miss the free samples.

If weather conditions are favorable, Beak & Skiff Apple Orchards may be open through the first weekend in December (call first: 315-677-5105) in nearby LaFayette. This is a fourth generation family orchard that has been producing premium apple products on the hills south of Syracuse since 1911. *USA Today* readers voted it Best Apple Orchard in the Country in 2015.

There's a playground in the orchard for kids, a country store, café, and a wide array of apple products for sale including hand picked apples, cider, artisanal hard cider, and gluten-free handcrafted vodka. On a fine fall day the views are spectacular.

**Travel tip of the month:** For more information on the Syracuse area go to [visitsyracuse.com](http://visitsyracuse.com) or call 1-800-234-4797. Family hotel packages are available.

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