

A TRIP TO THE WELL-KNOWN WATERFALL IS AN EXPERIENCE

FOR EVEN THE MOST WEATHER-BEATEN TRAVELLER

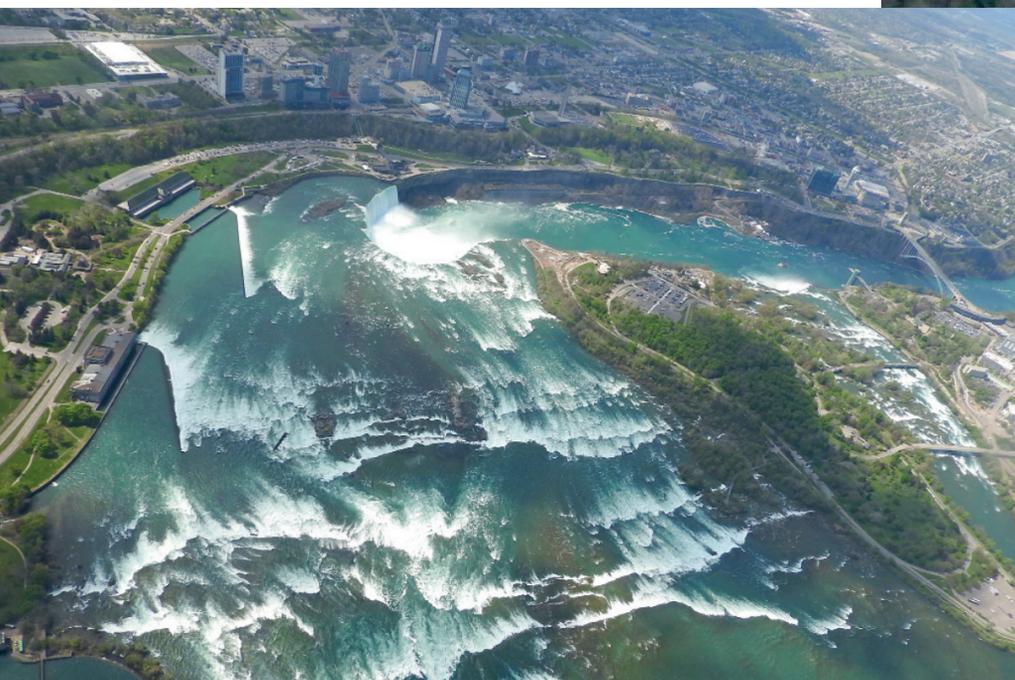
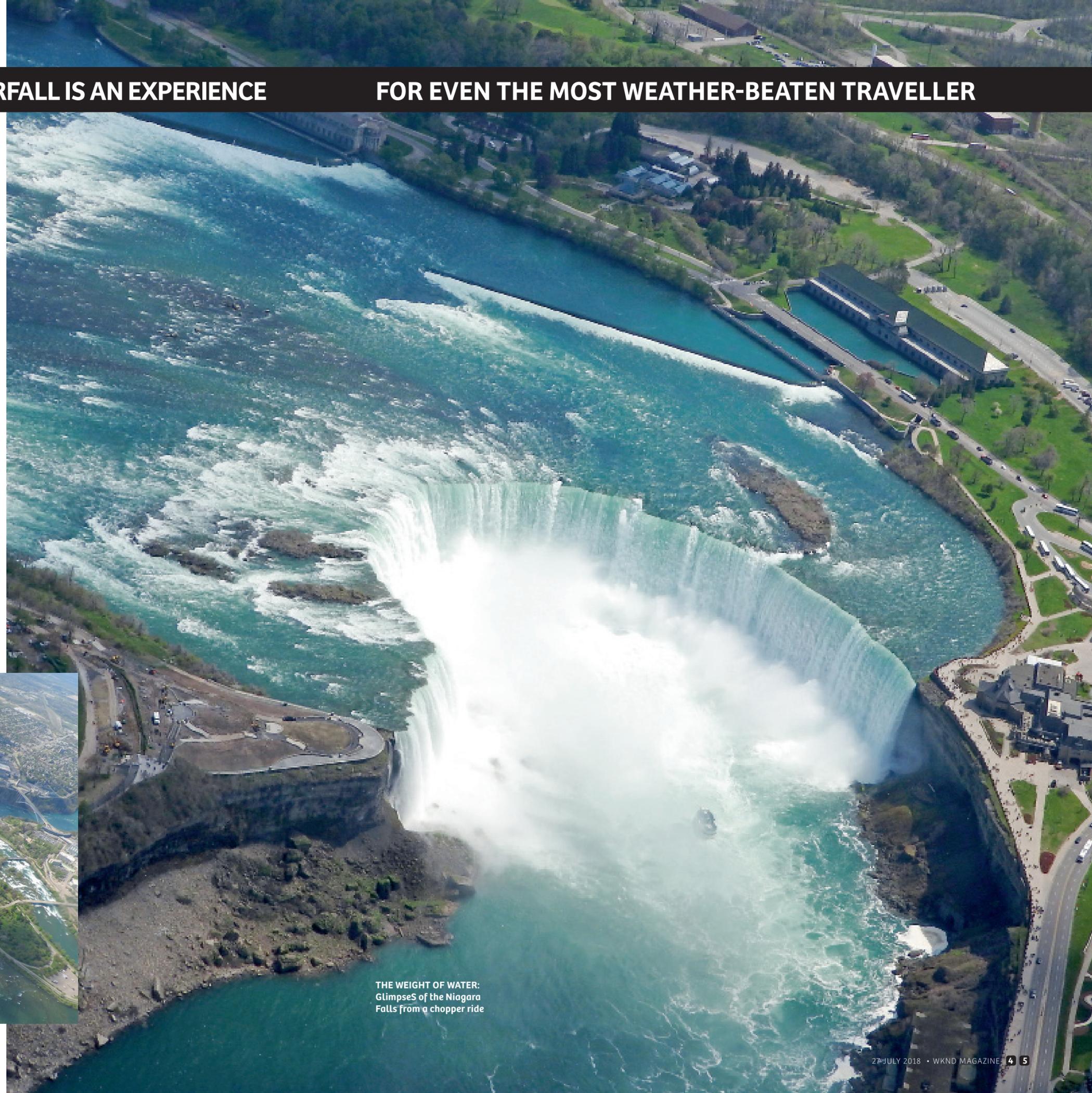
FALLING FOR NIAGARA

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

Standing in front of the Niagara Falls on the Canada side, I send up a quick thanks to my patron saint of travel for giving me a chance to enjoy this spectacular sight. It wasn't even part of my original itinerary on this trip, my first to Canada. I had spent the last week in the state of Alberta, exploring the delights of Banff and Jasper National Parks, and had decided to stop over in Toronto on my way back on a sudden whim. After all, I couldn't leave the country without seeing the Niagara, I reasoned to myself.

And so, I set off from my Toronto hotel early in the morning as part of a minibus day trip. I am still too sleepy to take in the drive, opening my eyes fully only as we get closer to the town of Niagara Falls. As soon as I spot signboards announcing our imminent arrival, I imagine that I can already hear the roar of the rapids. I start craning my neck to see if I can get a glimpse of the Niagara, and surely enough, at the first sight of it, from a long distance, my heart begins to beat just a bit faster.

Apart from being perhaps the most famous waterfall in the world, the Niagara is one of the largest and certainly one of the most impressive. The cascades are broken up into three parts: the concave Horseshoe Falls that spans across Canada to America, the American Falls that's in the state of New York and the Bridal Veil Falls



THE WEIGHT OF WATER:
GlimpseS of the Niagara
Falls from a chopper ride



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located between these two.

An hour and half after leaving the hotel, we pull up at the parking lot of the town, already filling up with cars and tour buses. Our guide sets us loose with instructions on when and where to meet. There are 15 of us in this group from all over the world, most of whom have opted for lunch as part of the deal, while a few, like me, have chosen to forage for our own food.

The town Niagara Falls in Ontario is touristy and somewhat tacky, filled with amusement arcades and expensive restaurants. But oh, what a stunning location, right at the edge of the Niagara gorge! It is a short walk from the parking lot to the first viewing point and when I stop there to take it in, I think I never want to move from there again.

But the Hornblower cruise beckons with the promise of an up-close and personal experience with this monstrous marvel of nature. I walk into the Visitors Center, my ticket already included as part of the tour, for the cruise that takes me to the base of the Horseshoe Falls. It is only when the catamaran glides and stops in the water, rocking strongly against the current, that I feel the full might of the falls. Sure, I have on the red plastic poncho that all visitors get along with their tickets, but that is scant protection against what feels like rainfall.

The sheer volume and force of the cascade is overwhelming and the thunder is so deafening I can barely hear myself think. But it is magical; I stand there with a silly grin on my face, as the spray hits with a vengeance, leaving me completely soaked.



PICTURESQUE SCENES: 1. Seeing the falls from the top; 2. The mist from the falls is so strong it feels like rain on the face; 3. Tulips in bloom at Niagara-on-the-Lake; 4. Niagara-on-the-Lake is fittingly considered one of Canada's prettiest towns; 5. Multiple rainbows are a common sight at the Niagara Falls

Suddenly, I remember reading stories of people who have gone over the falls in a barrel. What prompts such reckless acts of adventure, I wonder to myself. Where is that fine line between bravery and stupidity?

Back on the shore, I grab a quick sandwich and then walk along the pathway towards the point where the falls fall, so to say. From across the railing, bordered by layers of sunshiny daffodils, I can see the Niagara take the plunge 57 metres into the gorge deep below. The mist that rises up is hypnotic and as I peer down, I can see multiple rainbows arching across the gorge, a sight that makes me catch my breath in disbelief.

And then it is time for me to experience the falls from another angle, from way above in the sky. A chopper ride is the ultimate way to take in the splendour of Niagara, I have been told, and so I book myself in for a 12-minute Classic Tour with Niagara Helicopters. I manage to bag a seat in the front by the window, and the next few minutes, am in a world of my own. The greens and browns of the town soon give way to the aquamarine blue of the American Falls, before the pilot follows the steep curve of the Horseshoe Falls. On this quick tour, we also manage to trace the path of the waterfalls, all the way from Lake Erie, as it tumbles over Niagara gorge on to Lake Ontario.

The next stop on the tour is the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, often called the prettiest town in Ontario (and sometimes even in Canada by enterprising tourism officials). This town on the shores of Lake Ontario has a long and interesting history,

originally being the site of the native Indian village of Onghara, before it was renamed Butlersburg, and then Newark. Even today, it retains the charm of a rustic village, despite the number of tourists who cross its streets every day of the year.

Right at the beginning, there is a pit-stop for photographs at the Living Water Wayside Chapel just outside town, believed to be the smallest chapel in the world. It feels like something out of a Disney animation movie. From the outside, it looks like it can hold only one person at a time, but, as it turns out, it is capable of seating six. My guide says that this chapel is popular for weddings among not just locals, but people from all over the continent.

As soon as we enter the town, we get over an hour free to explore the quaint shops and cafés on its main street. And there is an eclectic collection of them to keep me occupied for well over an hour. From the BeauChapeau Hat Shop, which stocks over 8,000 hats of all kinds, to Ten Thousand Villages, a fair trade shop marketing handicrafts created by artisans in developing countries across the world, it is an interesting mix on offer. I get a taste of some local maple leaf fudge (from the shop of the same name), and high on the sugar rush, buy a few packets to take back home as presents.

All too soon, it is time for us to clamber on to the bus and head back to Toronto. As I doze off on my seat, I find myself lulled by the thundering sound of the Niagara. **W**

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