

Travel

The Dallas Morning News
DallasNews.com

Sunday, September 8, 2002
Section G

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Special Contributor

MT. MORRIS, New York — I always dreamed my first kiss would be at Letchworth State Park. The lingering fantasy in those early teen years was to be invited for a picnic and hike with my redheaded summer love and then have it at Inspiration Point (yes, that's the real name).

Twenty years later, I still fantasize about that kiss. Letchworth casts a wicked and romantic spell if you hit it at the right time of year, usually late September or early October, when a vivid patchwork of red, yellow and orange foliage spreads over the entire Finger Lakes region of western New York. Letchworth and many surrounding areas equally as beautiful are budget-friendly alternatives to the bumper-to-bumper traffic and expensive bed-and-breakfast destinations of New England. And that's why, although I moved from the region more than 15 years ago, I make it a point to return whenever possible.

Last time I visited Letchworth, I took my 4-year-old nephew,

Shaun, allowing me to see the park through the wondering eyes of a child. Stepping out of the car on a crisp October morning, we walked to the fence high above the 17-mile river gorge below. The gorge, sliced out over thousands of years by the Genesee River, is the inspiration for the park's reputation as the "Grand Canyon of the East."

"That's a big hole," Shaun said, staring wide-eyed at the nearly 600-foot drop to the river. Letting his eyes move up the shale and sandstone cliffs, over a forest of brilliant colored leaves, he paused

and added, "those trees look like the fruit bowl in our kitchen." The colors did indeed resemble those of the apples, oranges and bananas kept on my brother's counter.

Thousands of pine, cedar, oak and maple trees packed into more than 14,000 acres create a visual effect easily rivaling that of Vermont, New Hampshire or Massachusetts. The park also offers more than 65 miles of hiking trails and three waterfalls, the most dramatic being the powerful Middle Falls with water cascading to the river more than 100 feet below.

Park in Finger Lakes area is a peaceful New York retreat

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Shaun and I wandered through Letchworth that day, by car and on foot, trying to hit the most scenic and interesting spots. My favorite was majestic Cathedral Rock, a jutting and craggy formation surrounded by blazing autumn colors. Shaun's, not surprisingly, was any place with squirrels and birds.

Letchworth, about 35 miles south of Rochester, is not the only notable stop for touring the scenic Finger Lakes area. The region is also gaining prominence as a premier wine-producing region, with many of the New York Rieslings

winning top awards at the 2002 San Francisco International Wine Competition.

Bathed in the radiant red and russet orange of autumn, the shores of Lake Ontario in Rochester also display intense colors, particularly at Eastman Durand Park, Ironduquoit Bay and the lakeside drive toward Charlotte Beach.

But, I choose Letchworth time and again: the soft, misty morning light; leaves dangling precariously, waiting for the next soft breeze to blow them to the blanket beneath; and the quiet peacefulness the

park provides for those who seek it.

Later, as Shaun and I relaxed and finished lunch on a park bench, I gave him one of the treats I'd packed. "Thanks, Aunt Wendy!" he exclaimed, as he turned and planted a kiss on my cheek. It wasn't the romance I'd imagined, but like the scenic landscape before us, it was warm and sweet.

Letchworth State Park is about 35 miles south of Rochester, N.Y. Contact: 585-493-3600; <http://nysparks.state.ny.us>.

Wendy O'Dea is a free-lance writer in California.