A Traveler's Companion to Ithaca, NY: Nature, Culture, and Cuisine

Ithaca occupies a peculiar place in the American travel imagination. It is, on one hand, a college town—home to Cornell University and Ithaca College—and on the other, a landscape so dramatic that the local slogan "Ithaca is Gorges" has transcended pun to become a genuine descriptor. Perched above Cayuga Lake in the Finger Lakes region, the city packs waterfalls, a walkable downtown, and a food scene that punches well above its weight into a compact, navigable space. What follows is a guide for the traveler who wants all three: the natural spectacle, the cultural texture, and the meals worth planning a day around.

Nature: The Gorges That Define the City

The waterfalls are not a side attraction in Ithaca; they are the reason many visitors come. Taughannock Falls, about ten miles north of downtown, drops 215 feet—taller than Niagara—and is viewable from an overlook just steps from the parking lot, making it accessible even for those with limited mobility or time. For something more immersive, Buttermilk Falls State Park offers a 165-foot cascade with a natural swimming pool at its base (lifeguarded seasonally) and a gorge trail that climbs past a series of cascades through stone staircases built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The Gorge Trail here is steep and slippery when wet; sturdy footwear is not optional.

What makes Ithaca unusual is how quickly the wild begins. Cascadilla Gorge Trail links downtown directly to Cornell's campus, passing waterfalls along a stone-step path that is steady but manageable at a relaxed pace. You can leave a Click to find out more bookstore on the Commons and be standing beside a cascade within minutes. For a quieter experience, the Cayuga Nature Center's Denison Falls and its six-story treehouse overlook offer a woodland alternative away from the state park crowds.

Culture: A College Town With a Public Streak

The Ithaca Commons, a four-block pedestrian artery, functions as the city's living room. It is lined with independently owned shops, cafés, and galleries rather than chains, and it hosts events year-round—fall festivals, winter cook-offs, summer concerts. The Sagan Planet Walk begins here, scaling the solar system across a walkable route toward the Sciencenter. Book lovers should seek out Buffalo Street Books in the DeWitt Mall, a community-owned institution that hosts readings and functions as a genuine third space.

Cornell's Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art is the cultural anchor worth prioritizing. Admission is free, the collection spans a wide range of periods and geographies, and the I.M. Pei-designed building offers sweeping views over Cayuga Lake from its upper floors. For film, Cinemapolis screens independent and international work just off the Commons. Music runs deep here too: Cornell's Department of Music hosts over a hundred concerts annually, many free, and Ithaca College adds hundreds more performances across its ensembles and recitals.

Cuisine: More Restaurants Per Capita Than You'd Expect

Ithaca's food reputation rests on a few pillars. The first is Moosewood Restaurant, which has been serving creative vegetarian food from the DeWitt Mall since 1973 and remains a genuine institution rather than a nostalgic relic—its menu rotates through global cuisines and the quality has held across decades. The second is the Ithaca

Farmers Market, running for over fifty years at Steamboat Landing, with more than eighty vendors selling only what they produce within thirty miles. The prepared food stalls alone are worth a morning: Laotian, Cuban, Indian, Cambodian, Thai, Ethiopian, alongside locally roasted coffee and breakfast burritos that have achieved cult status.

Beyond the institutions, the city's restaurant density is striking for its size. Travel + Leisure notes the claim that Ithaca has more restaurants per capita than New York City, and while that statistic is difficult to verify, the depth is real. Mercato Bar and Kitchen on the Commons does proper Italian—carbonara with egg yolk and guanciale, pizza with the right char. Maxie's Supper Club serves serious Cajun and Creole cooking below street level, with beignets that justify the detour. The immigrant-owned kitchens are where the scene becomes genuinely exceptional: Mehak India in Collegetown goes beyond the standard tikka-masala template with layered biryanis and properly charred tandoori.

For a quick breakfast before a hike, Collegetown Bagels is the reliable starting point, with multiple locations and steady traffic throughout the day. And no visit is complete without ice cream from Cayuga Lake Creamery, known for small-batch flavors like blueberry cheesecake.

Practicalities for the Traveler

A car is useful but not essential. Many key routes—Cascadilla Gorge, the Commons, the campus museums—are walkable, and TCAT buses fill the gaps, though rideshare availability outside downtown can be limited. Parking downtown runs around two dollars per hour in the Cayuga and Green Street garages, free on weekends after Friday night. The gorge trails at state parks typically close in winter due to ice, though the overlooks at Taughannock and the lower falls at Buttermilk remain accessible year-round. Weather changes quickly; layers and comfortable shoes are worth the luggage space.

Ithaca rewards the traveler who arrives willing to move between registers—a morning waterfall, an afternoon museum, a dinner that ranges from vegetarian legacy to immigrant-run excellence. The city is compact enough to feel navigable in a weekend and deep enough to justify a return.

