

The Impulsive Traveler

Vt.'s country roads, taking you home

BY NECEE REGIS

The back roads of southern Vermont are a driver's dream. Lush with sugar maple, ash, beech, pine and white birch trees, the landscape reveals itself as the pavement dips and twists, cars gliding across asphalt as if on a gentle roller-coaster ride.

It's the kind of place that makes me open the windows and crank up the music — preferably a favorite CD from high school days — and sing at the top of my lungs as old weathered barns, new red barns and scenery so picturesque it looks fake scroll past. Every half mile, or so it seems, there's a handmade sign with an arrow pointing the way to maple syrup, fresh eggs, antiques, pottery and other Vermont-y things. Around each corner, a murmuring brook or a gently flowing river reflects small diamonds of sunlight onto the trees. In Vermont, even the wilderness seems well groomed.

On a recent visit, I was happy to find these idyllic qualities intact, even thriving, especially in the small towns along routes 30 and 100 that were hit hard last August by Hurricane Irene. That storm spared the Northeast coast but swept through Vermont with devastating consequences. Rivers swelled beyond their banks; roads, bridges and houses were destroyed in muddy deluges. Today, the roads are repaired. Though some projects are still underway, the area is ready for visitors.

West Townshend was my base of operations, specifically the impeccably landscaped Windham Hill Inn, where I stayed during my solo trip. The inn is located near three ski areas — Magic, Stratton and Bromley mountains — though you don't need snow to enjoy the region. I found pretty much everything I was looking for as I cruised the winding roads, stopping in Jamaica, Londonderry, Windsor, Putney and Brattleboro on my self-proclaimed Crafts, Cheese, Beer and Sheep Tour.

Dropping into the Jamaica Coffee House for organic fair-trade coffee and home-baked goods, I encountered Skip Woodruff, a custom furniture maker whose shop across the street is stocked with Adirondack and camp-style hickory furniture.

"In the 1980s, you couldn't find a place to park in this village," said Woodruff, looking out at the quiet street. "I don't know what happened. It's like some kind of switch got flipped and people want more glitzy vacations."

It's true. Most of these towns, with signs boasting mid-18th-century founding dates, are the opposite of glitzy. For me, that's a good thing. In Jamaica, time slowed down as I poked through the aisles of colorful recycled-glass objects for sale at Hot Glass Works, perused paintings and fine-art prints at Elaine Beckwith Gallery and took a brief stroll along the recreational trails in the 772-acre Jamaica State Park.

Then it was on to Londonderry, where the D. Lasser Ceramics studio, in a post and beam barn, and its adjacent showroom sprawl across a hillside, impressing with an array of handmade platters, bowls, teapots, pitchers, tiles, candlesticks and pie plates hand-painted in vibrant colors and patterns with names such as Galaxy, Marigold Poppy and Planet Green.

Farther down Route 100 toward Weston, the Waterwheel House Quilt Shop sells books, patterns, kits, wool, felt, thread, ribbon and bright contemporary fabrics by young designers. "People call us the home of happy fabric," sales associate Judith Ackerman said.

For shoppers like me who don't sew, there's a small number of sample quilts,



So well-groomed: Windham Hill Inn, top, in West Townshend, Vt., is impeccably landscaped. D. Lasser Ceramics studio, left, in Londonderry impresses with its array of handmade plates and bowls for sale. Harpoon Brewery, right, in Windsor offers hour-long tours.



I ARIS KARKI IS/THE WASHINGTON POST

bags and table runners for sale.

Saturated by Crafts, I decided that it was time for Cheese. Along Route 11 in Londonderry, I found Taylor Farm, a working dairy that's Vermont's only farmstead Gouda producer. Driving up the dirt road to a red house, I was greeted by the sweet smell of manure and by Mimi Wright, sister of Jonathan, who owns the farm.

Wright walked me to the barn, past free-wheeling chickens and roosters, where black-and-white Holsteins and red Jersey cows munched on hay from naturally fertilized fields. In a nearby

pen, enthusiastic pigs snorted hellos, begging for an apple or two from an unprepared visitor.

In addition to raw milk and a selection of Goudas, the modest farm shop is stocked with home-baked breads, pies, preserves, mustards and pickles, as well as other locally produced products, more than enough for a splendid picnic.

I drove to Windsor — "the birthplace of Vermont" — for the Beer portion of my tour. The Harpoon Brewery is in a business park slightly north of town, adjacent to Great River Outfitters (canoeing or kayaking, anyone?), the soon-to-be opening Vermont Farmstead Cheese Co. (expanding from its Woodstock location) and the Path of Life Sculpture Garden, a 14-acre New Age-y installation on the banks of the Connecticut River, where, according to a descriptive handout, 18 works of art "symbolize our journey from birth to death and beyond." (As my mom might quip: "If you say so.")

Boston's Harpoon Brewery acquired the Windsor property in 2000, taking over the defunct Catamount Brewery. It's now a popular destination, especially in summer months when visitors come for the hour-long tour of the facility, then linger in the Riverbend Taps and Beer Garden, sampling the 15 to 20 beers on tap and munching a pub menu of wings, salads, wraps and grilled panini, burgers,

barbecue chicken and bratwurst.

On Sunday, after a morning hike on manicured trails and a hefty breakfast omelet at the inn, I headed to Putney in search of Sheep. At the Green Mountain Spinnery, I found domestic wool yarns, including mohair, alpaca, angora, llama and fine blends, in a rainbow of colors. In the back of the small shop, co-op members operated a 1920s-era carding machine and a 1950s spinning frame.

I couldn't resist a stop at Basketville, a vast barn chock full of baskets, Vermont-made picnic foods (cheese, jams, crackers, mustards, maple syrup) and kitchen accouterments. It's also home to the Putney Mountain Winery, where I tasted the selection of handcrafted fruit wines.

Outside Brattleboro center, a last pit stop at Retreat Petting Farm yielded my only live sheep sighting. With more time, I could have hiked the adjacent Retreat Trails, a network encompassing more than 400 acres of trails, forests and agricultural land. Instead, I dashed into Grafton Village Cheese for a final cheese tasting. I purchased Leyden with cumin, and maple-smoked cheddar, small mementos of Vermont to carry home and savor.

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— N.R.

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