Discovery the Canals that Transformed America

Two hundred years ago, the Erie Canal was boldly built to fuel America’s expansion. Through extraordinary vision and effort, it connected the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes by water, transforming New York State and our country forever.

Today, New York’s canals offer an unparalleled place to recreate with family and friends while rediscovering the incredible history and beauty of America’s most famous human-made waterway. From boat rentals to multiday bike rides to visiting state and national parks, there’s plenty to explore on and off the water.

On the Water
The New York State Canal System—which includes the Erie, Champlain, Cayuga-Seneca, and Oswego Canals—is the centerpiece of the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor. Relax and enjoy a canal boat tour or multiday voyage. You’ll find tours within an hour’s drive of every major city in the Canalway Corridor. You can also launch your own motorboat, paddle the canal, or rent a boat for a self-skipped vacation.

Along the Trail
The Canalway Trail is an ideal place for fitness and fun. Spend a few hours walking or cycling and seeing the sites or plan a longer cycling trip to really experience all the trail has to offer. The 360-mile east-west Canalway Trail from Buffalo to Albany parallels the Erie Canal and is part of the newly completed Empire State Trail, which also extends north-south from New York City to Lake Champlain.

Canal Communities
One of the best parts of visiting the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor is exploring the many cities, towns, and villages along the waterway. Many of these communities provide visitor centers with restrooms, showers, and other services for boaters, cyclists, and paddlers within walking distance of shops, restaurants, and attractions. Be sure to visit local museums where you’ll learn about people, places, and innovations along the canals.
The Canal Experience

Travel down dramatic rivers and through pastoral scenery. Navigate through towering locks and under lift bridges. Enjoy canal villages, towns, and cities where you can sample local food and beverages. When you cruise or paddle New York’s canals, you’ll discover why the “canal experience” is an incomparable way to enjoy New York State.

Take a Tour
Get on board one of the many tour boats for an hourly cruise, dinner cruise or themed tour. Most boat tours will give you the unique canal experience of going through a lock. Specialty cruises, sailing adventures, and wine tours are offered on lake and river sections of the waterway.

Launch Your Own Boat
Get on the water for a day, weekend, or vacation adventure. The Erie, Champlain, Oswego and Cayuga-Seneca canals connect the Hudson River with Lake Champlain, Lake Ontario, Cayuga Lake, Seneca Lake and Lake Erie. This inland waterway has been serving travelers since 1825, and you’ll find modern amenities and overnight accommodations at numerous marinas and public docks.

Enjoy a Vacation Boat Rental
Vacation rentals provide an idyllic way to experience the canal at a relaxed pace. You’ll get lessons in steering, docking, and locking before heading out, so you can feel confident on the water even if you’re new to boating. Rental boats are well-equipped with sleeping quarters, a galley, and deck space for relaxing; many come with bikes so you can enjoy the Canalway Trail too.

Visit a Canalside Park
Enjoy the water from shore at canalside harbors, visitor centers, and parks. Many of the NYS Canal System’s 57 locks include waterfront parks for picnicking, fishing, playing, or just sitting on the bank and watching boats go by.

Ready for an End-to-End Adventure?
It takes about 7-10 days by boat and 3 weeks by kayak to traverse the entire 338-mile Erie Canal.
Paddle the Canals

Join a growing community of paddlers who are discovering great day trips and multiday adventures along the NYS Canalway Water Trail. Well-marked with blue and gold signs and maintained by volunteer stewards, the 450-mile water trail includes 140 public access points that make it easy to launch a kayak, canoe, or stand-up paddleboard.

Paddlers navigate century-old locks; pass stunning stone aqueducts used to carry boats over rivers and streams in the 1800s; paddle alongside tugboats and cruisers; and experience narrow canal channels and wider river segments. You’ll find rental outfitters at numerous locations. Find the New York State Canalway Water Trail Guidebook and other paddling resources at eriecanalway.org/watertrail.

How a Lock Works

Locks are simple yet ingenious structures that raise and lower boats as they transit the canal. The 57 locks on New York’s canals are 310' long by 44’ wide with steel gates and valves at either end. Lifts range from 6' to 40'. Water fills and empties the lock by gravity, while small DC motors operate the gates and valves.

After an up-bound boat enters the lock, the lock operator closes the downstream gates and opens the upper valves. Water flows in through tubes cast into the concrete lock walls, filling the chamber and lifting the boat. When water in the chamber equals the level of the canal above the lock the operator opens the upstream gates, allowing the boat to continue its journey. The process is reversed going downstream. The trip takes 15-20 minutes per lock.

Canal Boating Basics

- The NYS Canal System is open from mid-May to mid-October.
- Boating is free and no permit is needed to go through a lock.
- Lock tenders are on hand to assist you and make your experience going through the locks easy and enjoyable.
- It takes 15 to 20 minutes to go through a lock.
- Power boats and paddlers share the canal, so be mindful of speed limits and wakes.
- There are more than 80 public boat ramps where you can launch a boat.
- The canal is open daily from 7am to 5pm, but many locks and lift bridges are open on demand until 10pm.

Longer Voyages

The NYS Canal System is part of a 6,000-mile boating route known as the Great Loop. Boaters traverse 15 states, 100+ locks, and typically take a year to complete it. Shorter loop options are also available. Find out how to take up the journey at greatloop.org.

Prevent the Spread of Invasive Species

Boats, trailers, and other equipment, as well as the disposal of live bait can spread invasive species from one waterbody to another. Follow these guidelines to stop the spread:

- Inspect your boat, trailer, and other equipment. NYS Department of Environmental Conservation regulations require boats launching or leaving launch sites to drain and remove any visible mud, plants, fish, or animals before transporting.
- Eliminate all water from equipment before transporting.
- Clean and dry anything that comes in contact with the water, including boats, trailers and all boating and fishing equipment.
- Disinfect if you cannot dry equipment.
- Never release plants, fish or animals into a body of water unless they came out of that body of water.

Learn more at: www.dec.ny.gov

Make Boating Safety a priority

- Always wear a properly sized PFD.
- Stay away from dams, buoys and barriers.
- Be cautious near hydropower assets, water levels can change quickly.
- Respect all signs and warning signals.
- Tell someone your plans, destination, and timing.
- Use designated launch sites.
- Boat smart, no drinking and boating.
- Leave no trace: carry in/carry out.
- Before heading out, check the weather forecast and canals.ny.gov for current conditions.

brookfieldrenewable.com
A State and National Treasure

Built between 1817 and 1825, the original Erie Canal traversed 363 miles from Albany to Buffalo. It was the longest artificial waterway and the greatest public works project in North America. Because the canal connected the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes, it enabled people and goods to flow from around the world to New York State. This put New York on the map as the Empire State—the leader in population, industry, and economic strength. It transformed New York City into the nation’s principal seaport and opened the interior of North America to settlement.

Come touch history and experience for yourself the canals that transformed the nation.
The canal also brought a flow of people and new ideas. As the Erie Canal carried immigrants westward, they infused the nation with different languages, customs, practices, and religions. World travelers embarked upon the Grand Tour to see the engineering marvel of the Erie Canal. Local residents packed tour boats for summer outings.

The canal was enlarged several times to accommodate larger boats and increasing traffic. The version in use today was completed in 1918 and remains fully navigable. In 2016 it was designated a National Historic Landmark for its exceptional national significance and historical integrity.
Welcome to the longest state multiuse trail in the nation. The 750-mile Empire State Trail includes the east-west Erie Canalway Trail from Albany to Buffalo and north-south trails from New York City through the Hudson River Valley to Lake Champlain. Whether you like to cycle, hike, run, or roll, the trail welcomes people of all abilities, from all walks of life, and all backgrounds.

The 360-mile Erie Canalway Trail closely parallels both active and historic sections of the Erie Canal. You’ll see unique canal structures like locks and lift bridges, as well as all types of boats, and you’ll discover canal communities and historic sites that are intriguing and fun cycling destinations. Eighty-seven percent is off-road. The remaining on-road sections are designated on the shoulders of public roadways, intended for experienced bicyclists comfortable riding adjacent to vehicle traffic.

The 65-mile Champlain Canalway Trail includes a mix of off and on-road segments from Waterford to Whitehall. The trail closely parallels the Hudson River/Champlain Canal through a region rich in Revolutionary War history. Forty percent of the route is off-road trail. At Fort Edward, the 9-mile off-road Glens Falls Feeder Canal Trail connects to the Glens Falls Bikeway and Lake George. North of Whitehall, the Empire State Trail route is a 110-mile on-road bicycle route running north through the Champlain Valley to the Canadian Border at Rouses Point.

Did you know?
Aqueducts are “water bridges” that carried the Erie Canal over rivers and creeks. Stone arches supported the towpath and wooden channels carried the water and boats. The canal system no longer uses these original aqueducts but you can see surviving remnants at the Nine Mile Creek Aqueduct in Camillus, Schoharie Aqueduct in Fort Hunter, and Richmond Aqueduct in Montezuma.
There are numerous places along the canals and Canalway Trail that are accessible and several that offer adaptive bikes and kayaks. Learn more at: eriecanalway.org/1st-Mile

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Get On the Canals

Free Activities, All Year Long

On the Canals is a year-round program of free activities along the waterways and trails of the New York State Canal System. From kayaking, biking and hiking, to birding, fishing, and snowshoeing there is so much to do during every season. A variety of less intensive activities that take advantage of the unique canal setting and historic infrastructure are also offered.

Lace up your sneakers, hop on your bike, or get your paddling gear ready. The Canalway Challenge is your ticket to fun and fitness along the canals. Register online and choose a mileage goal of 15, 90, 180, or 360 miles. Or begin your journey with the 1st Mile Challenge to get up, get out, and get active.

You can complete the Canalway Challenge in one big trip or many small ones. Walk, run, cycle, or paddle on the Canalway Trail and NYS Canal System to achieve your goal. You’ll earn mileage status and a recognition sticker, magnet, and bandana when you finish to show off your accomplishment.

Participation is free and registration is open to individuals, teams, and organizations.

SIGN UP TODAY!

canalwaychallenge.org

Through partnerships with selected organizations and businesses, this year’s On the Canals lineup includes recreation and arts programs, as well as visits to historic canal buildings and guided insider tours of locks and power houses operated by the NYS Canal Corporation. Come autumn, the program offers world-class fishing on several tributaries that flow to Lake Ontario, enhanced with water from the Erie Canal.

Experience all the New York State Canal Corporation and Reimagine the Canals have to offer…On the Canals.
Sunken Treasure
Unlocking the Secrets of Seneca Lake

“On Wednesday last occurred the most terrific gale of the season. As a mariner would say, it “blew great guns,” and our usually quiet little Lake was lashed into a perfect fury of billowy foam.” – Geneva Gazette, October 1868.

In 2018, researchers from the NYS Canal Corporation, the Finger Lakes Boating Museum and Middlebury College were looking for a coal-laden canal boat that sank in Seneca Lake during a November storm in 1869. Using sophisticated side-scanning sonar and Remote Operated Vehicle cameras, the team not only found the shipwreck, but discovered seven additional canal boats in remarkably good condition on the cold lake bottom.

Seneca Lake is the largest of the Finger Lakes, 36 miles long, three miles wide, and 600 feet deep. Carved by retreating glaciers and flowing south to north, the lake has long provided water transport for commerce and recreation. During the heyday of commercial shipping by canal, the Erie, Chemung, and Crooked Lake canals connected Seneca Lake to markets to the north, south, and west.

The research team returned in 2019 and 2021 to continue inventorying and mapping the lake bottom in partnership with the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. Their findings now number 24 canal boats, including original Erie Canal cargo boats and the only known example of a passenger packet boat ever to be located.

These intact time-capsules, most with cargos still present, are making a major contribution to our understanding of the commercial history of the region, as well as the evolution of historic canal watercraft. In addition, mapping efforts, in-conjunction with scientists from the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, are providing new tools and a better understanding of the geology, water-quality, and fisheries of this stunning place.

As research continues in the coming years, plans are already underway to share findings and engage students and the general public in discovering the treasures that lie deep in Seneca Lake.

Honoring Harriet Tubman
This year marks the 200th Anniversary of Harriet Tubman’s birth. A leading abolitionist and champion of equal rights, Tubman is known for her extraordinary contribution to leading enslaved people to freedom on the Underground Railroad. Many used New York’s canals as routes for escaping to freedom in Canada. Other African Americans settled in canal towns. A nine-foot Journey to Freedom sculpture will travel this year to Auburn (July-August) and Rochester (September-October) to honor Tubman.

Events are back!
From weekend waterfront concerts to heritage festivals to paddling tours, you’ll find events that will draw you to the canals all season long. Find a listing of events at eriecanalway.org.

Enter the Erie Canalway Photo Contest
Share your photos of fun on the waterway and trail and views of the places you love for our annual photo contest. Winning images will be published in the 2023 Erie Canalway calendar.
eriecanalway.org/get-involved/photo-contest
Deadline: August 26, 2022
Images must be horizontal.

Gear Up for Your Canal Adventure!
Find shirts, hats, fleece vests, and more in a variety of styles and designs. All net proceeds support Erie Canalway programs.

The New York State Canal System is operated by the New York State Canal Corporation, a subsidiary of the New York Power Authority. The canal is typically open for boating from May through October.

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