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MASSACHUSETTS

# In Williamstown, Mass., summertime is superb

**The leaf peepers have it all wrong. It's in the full bloom of summer that western Massachusetts really shines.**

By Susan Spano  
Reporting from Williamstown, Mass.  
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*In the cold, dark, dead of winter, when my thoughts turn to summer, I think of it in New England. I think of still nights with plenty of stars and the conversation of cicadas, the Boston Pops at Tanglewood, swimming in a lake, Friendly's ice cream and sweet corn on the cob.*

Much has been made of New England's colorful falls, but my cup is filled by its deep green summers.

I carry memories of them from when I worked at a summer stock theater in western Massachusetts in my college years. The theater where I learned my lines has closed. But the rounded old mountains are still here, so last month I returned to the Berkshires to spend a few summer days in Williamstown.

This was my first visit to Williamstown, a bit off the beaten track compared with other Berkshire towns, such as Lenox and Stockbridge. Williamstown is 40 miles from the nearest superhighway, reached along winding country roads dotted with classic New England barns and covered bridges. But it took me less than three hours to drive here from Boston to Springfield on Interstate 90 and then north toward Vermont on Interstate 91.

Right away I could tell I was in Massachusetts because everyone sounded like Tom and Ray Magliozzi, of National Public Radio's "Car Talk."

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has many idiosyncrasies: You buy beer in a package store. If you want a milkshake, you order a frappé, and in the western part of the state, at least, submarine sandwiches are grinders.

At Greenfield, I turned onto Massachusetts 2, the old Mohawk Trail, blazed by Native Americans and used by Colonial-era pioneers. It roughly follows the Deerfield River northwest past placid New England hamlets — Shelburne Falls, home of the Yale lock, and Charlemont with its Big Indian souvenir shop, a relic of the 1930s.

Soon the road started to climb into the mountains, cresting at 2,240-foot Whitcomb Summit and rounding a hairpin curve where the view opens over the town of North Adams.

Beyond it, Williamstown lies in the hills underneath Mt. Greylock, the highest peak in Massachusetts. I'm told that on a clear day you can see New York's Hudson River Valley from its 3,491-foot summit.

Henry David Thoreau liked to sit up here, looking over the roofs of Williamstown and its ivy-clad college, founded by New England Congregationalists in 1791. "It would be no small advantage if every college were thus located at the base of a mountain," he wrote.

Ephraim Williams, a colonel in the Massachusetts militia, gave his name to the town, college and students who call themselves Ephs. He died in 1755, leaving his fortune to start a free school in a western Massachusetts community that would change its name to Williams. West Hoosac stepped forward and got the school, now known as Williams College.

As soon as I arrived, I checked into the Orchards Hotel on the eastern side of town where I got a room the size of a suite for \$140. There are less expensive lodging options too, including mom-and-pop motels that keep shipshape for alumni and parents.

Then I took a look around, which didn't take long. Williamstown has one stoplight on Main Street, a public library, a white-steepled Congregational church and a Civil War monument. The business district on Spring Street boasts a pharmacy, deli, bank, post office and movie theater. Its Starbucks is Tunnel City Coffee.

Down the street I found the campus store selling, among other things, T-shirts that reflect the longtime rivalry between Williams and Amherst in nearby Pioneer Valley. One shirt said, "Friends don't let friends go to Amherst College."

Together with Wesleyan in Connecticut, Williams and Amherst are part of the Little Three sports conference founded in the 1920s, their answer to the Harvard-Princeton-Yale Big Three. The root of the Williams-Amherst rivalry dates to 1821, when a group of faculty and students abandoned Williams to start Amherst, which left the little college in the mountains on the brink of closing.

It managed to survive quite handily, I discovered while reading brochures in the Bascom Hall admissions office a few blocks west of Spring Street. Williams now has 2,000 undergraduates (a quarter of the population) and a teacher-student ratio of 1 to 7. It costs about \$50,000 a year, including room and board, but half the students receive financial aid. Williams' endowment is said to be valued at \$1.9 billion, among the largest in the U.S.

Campus tours weren't offered when I was there the week between finals and graduation. So I set out to see the college on my own, though it had turned into a rainy afternoon, with black clouds casting shadows on freshly mown campus lawns.

At a crosswalk on Main Street, which bisects the campus, I saw a group of pink-cheeked students heading into the mountains, carrying backpacks and sleeping bags.

Many Ephs are outdoors enthusiasts, seizing opportunities to hike, bike, ski and kayak. The Williams Outing Club was one of the first alpine organizations of its kind in America, founded in 1863.

Main Street is lined by some of the oldest and handsomest buildings on campus, including the president's house, Gothic Revival Thompson Memorial Chapel, cupolaed Griffin Hall and Hopkins Observatory with its 19th century telescope.

Others are fine examples of contemporary architecture, especially the '62 Center, opened in 2005 and named for the Williams College class of its chief donor, investment banker and Coca-Cola Co. director Herbert A. Allen. It houses the theater and dance departments, but come July and August, the Williamstown Theatre Festival takes occupancy.

You'll find summer stock theaters all over New England, part of what's known as the Straw Hat Circuit. But the one founded in Williamstown in 1955 is on a different level, a Tony Award winner in 2002 for the consistent quality and ambitiousness of its productions. It gives the town a cosmopolitan air, attracting some of the country's most accomplished directors, designers, playwrights and actors. On a summer afternoon visitors might see Joanne Woodward, Kate Burton or Blythe Danner and her daughter, Gwyneth Paltrow.

I visited Williamstown before the summer theater season opened but wandered around the smashing, window-lined '62 Center, designed to incorporate the old Adams Memorial Theater, first home to the theater festival.

The Williams College Museum of Art is in a contemporary building nearby, unmistakable because of the bizarre bronze eyes (big enough to sit on) by contemporary French artist Louise Bourgeois. Even if there were no Clark Art Institute, the college museum, one of the best in the country, would still attract art lovers to Williamstown. It is said to contain the world's largest collection of paintings by Charles and Maurice Prendergast, one of four extant copies of the official 1789 printing of the Bill of Rights and iconic masterpieces that include Marc Chagall's "Flying Cow" (1912), Frederic Remington's "Bronco Buster" (1895) and Andy Warhol's "Jackie" series (1964).

The rest of the campus -- residence halls, vast sports fields and reedy Eph's Pond -- spills north toward the Hoosac River, which merges with the Green in Williamstown. The two fast mountain streams attracted paper and textile mills in the 19th century, along with workers from Italy and Poland.

The mills lie derelict, big, brick, broken-windowed behemoths. One of them on Water Street is being turned into condominiums, according to a sign. Given the soft economy, the conversion's prospects would seem doubtful, except that another old mill complex in neighboring North Adams recently returned to vibrant life as Mass MoCA, New England's premier museum of contemporary art.

The big houses I saw around town, set behind gates way back from the street, were built by rich city people, including Cole Porter, who spent most of the year at his New York City apartment in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. But one summer in the 1940s he wrote "Kiss Me, Kate" in Williamstown.

Eventually, I returned downtown for the early showing of "Harvard Beats Yale 29-29" at Images Cinema. The documentary tells the story of the legendary 1968 Yale-Harvard football game, with Tommy Lee Jones playing for underdog Harvard and Brian Dowling quarterbacking for undefeated Yale. In the last 42 seconds of play, Harvard rallied from a 29-13 deficit.

Afterward I dined on English pea risotto and a steak at Mezze. The stylish bistro's menu features locally produced ingredients, among them Cricket Creek Farm cheddar and Mighty Food Farm spinach. This is an obsession at restaurants all over town, reflecting the rise of small, artisanal farms in western Massachusetts run by a new breed of New England farmer. They send tender, organic asparagus, wild strawberries and baby lamb to area markets.

It was still drizzling the next morning, so I went to the Clark Art Institute, set at the base of a hill about half a mile south of town. It opened in 1955 as a showcase for the collection of paintings amassed in the early 20th century by Singer Sewing Machine Co. heir Robert Sterling Clark and his wife, Francine. It was a good way to spend a rainy day.

The Clarks had an eye to go along with their deep pockets. Almost every item in the museum is a stunner: Frederic Remington's "Friend or Foe," known as "The Scout" (1902-1905); Winslow Homer's moody "Sleigh Ride" (1890-1895), Jean-Léon Gérôme's "The Slave Market" (1867) and "Nadar Elevates Photography to the Level of Art" (1862), a delightful cartoon by Henri Daumier showing the French photographer taking pictures from a hot air balloon.

I saved the best for last -- the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist galleries, with paintings by Renoir, Monet and Pissarro in such profusion that you'd think you were at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

When the rain stopped late that afternoon I drove to the summit of Mt. Greylock and sat for a spell on Stony Ledge, Thoreau's old perch, trying to figure out why I love the Berkshires.

None of them would take your breath away, not even Mt. Greylock. But there is something about them that goes beyond fall foliage and hiking trails, that speaks of a younger, fresher North American continent. Maybe it's because they were the first range of peaks encountered by pioneers heading west, before anyone knew about the Grand Canyon or the Yosemite Valley.

Or maybe it's the way they catch and hold the dying light of a summer day, like gold coins in a green pocket.

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