

So near and yet so far?

by BROCK WEIR

I was pleased to have the opportunity to attend the Ontario Community Newspapers Association's Publisher's Retreat over the weekend with our teams from Aurora, Caledon and Orangeville.

Held in the always picturesque Niagara-on-the-Lake, it was an opportunity for both learning and celebration as the OCNA recognized the winners of their annual Better Newspapers Competition and their Hall of Fame's Class of 2025.

The celebratory part of the weekend took place on Friday night over a lovely dinner where connections were made and renewed and, for our outgoing Caledon reporter, Zachary Roman, celebrate his success as he took home top honours in the Best News Series category exploring the challenges of Strong Mayor Powers in smaller and mid-sized Ontario communities.

Professionally, it was a very happy occasion but I have to admit that when we checked into our hotel, I did feel a bit of a melancholic pang.

In any given year, we usually get out to Niagara-on-the-Lake at least twice; once to explore the beautiful community itself and revisit some favourite haunts, and usually on the way back from our annual trip to Western New York to the Lucille Ball Comedy Festival ? as it's held in August, it's a great chance to replenish Ontario-grown stone fruit on the way back!

As we opened the door to the room, we were thrilled that it had a great view of the lake, but I have to admit, the pang came from seeing what was just beyond the lake ? a reasonably short distance away but a jaunt that seemed further away than ever before.

We are among the many, many Canadians who are now second-guessing any travel plans to the United States. It's a country where many of my closest friends call home, a place where some of my happiest memories were formed, and a place where, until very recently, I've always felt at home.

Admittedly, on that last front, it's been something of a slow decline as politics descended into a divisive delirium. In the last few years, while experiences with individuals remained pleasant by and large, some of the hateful rhetoric was silent but evident; signs with slurs against political candidates, for instance, and placards denouncing entire groups of people ? naturally created a feeling of discomfort. Yet, with each passing year, it was a discomfort that sadly felt like another ?new normal? to get used to.

A place as familiar as Western New York ? or, at least my memories of it ? never seemed further out of reach, and given Niagara-on-the-Lake's proximity to so many key sites related to the War of 1812 I couldn't help but look out that window to across the way wondering how many long-gone residents stood near that very site, looking in the same direction, wondering just what the heck was going on across the water.

A recent report from the U.S. Travel Association (via the Washington Post) has estimated that 20 million Canadians visit the United States each year, generating \$20 billion in spending, but this year, given the tensions between the two countries, the travel industry is noting a steep drop-off in cross-border trips.

?McKenzie McMillan, a Vancouver-based adviser with the Travel Group, said his company would typically be busy this time of year arranging last-minute spring break and summer trips for Canadians to such favourite spots as San Diego, Palm Springs, Phoenix, Las Vegas and Florida,? shared the Washington Post. ?Instead, he said, ?it's zero.' The steep drop-off started gradually, with some clients in January saying they were thinking they might avoid the U.S. this year. ?Since February, it's been a complete collapse.'

?McMillan said about 20 to 30 percent of trips that were already booked got cancelled. Since then, he said the company has seen

about a 90 per cent drop in new bookings for U.S. vacations compared with the previous year, as clients opt for other destinations.?

One Canadian woman interviewed for the piece said not going to the United States at this time was a 'moral choice' and one of the ways 'Canadian citizens can stand against this.?'

But it might also be a practical choice as well. As of this past Friday, all Canadians over the age of 14 who are visiting the U.S. for 30 days or more will have to register with the Washington's Citizen and Immigration Services. This was coupled with a warning from the Canadian Government that not only will this rule be strictly enforced, it opens up the door to further surveillance.

'Expect scrutiny at points of entry, including electronic devices. Comply and be forthcoming in all interactions with border authorities. If you are denied entry, you could be detained while awaiting deportation.?'

In the wake of this, a British Columbia-based immigration lawyer told CTV News 'border agents aren't just looking for evidence of a crime, but whether the traveller aligns with the U.S. administration and its policies.?'

'The issue is that border officers have full discretion in order to grant somebody admission, and they can deny somebody admission for any reason,' Cindy Switzer said, 'per the CTV report. 'The lawyer's comments come in the wake of a French scientist being denied entry to the U.S. after border agents read the contents of his cellphone. The scientist was deported after border officials accused him of having 'hateful' messages against U.S. policy.?'

One has to wonder whether the same evaluation would extend to anyone who has, at any time, texted a friend, family member or colleague expressing frustration at tariffs or any of the other myriad issues plaguing our neighbours and our relationship with them.

So, is it worth it?

Morally? That is, of course, up to you.

Economically? Well, it doesn't hurt to let our wallets send a clear message.

Practically? Personally, the idea of being detained and deported because I didn't take my passport with me to breakfast at the nearest Bob Evans doesn't really appeal to me. Nor does running the risk of being denied entry because I'm not a cheerleader for our neighbours tanking our economy in an effort for annexation.

The good news is we're not exactly starved for vacation options.

This is a prime opportunity to discover and re-discover Canada and all we have to offer here at home, not to mention supporting homegrown communities that are rowing in the same direction as the rest of us.

So, this week, I'd like to ask all of you for your suggestions on Ontario and Canadian destinations that might be flying under the radar and are well worth a visit. Where in Canada have you formed unexpected favourite memories? What are some local, provincial and national destinations that are due for a renaissance?

Send your thoughts, suggestions and insights to brock@lpcmedia.ca.