



Story and photos by JIM WAKE

# BRIGHT LIGHTS ABOVE THE FALLS

**A**LL DAY LONG, Niagara Falls, Ontario's Clifton Hill is crowded with moms and dads and sons and daughters and grandmothers and grandfathers — and yes, a good number of starry-eyed newlyweds from New York and New Mexico and New Delhi as well as Des Moines and Toronto and Tokyo and Munich.

The road slopes up and away from Victoria Park and the falls for two blocks of museums, souvenir shops, motels, restaurants and bars, beginning with "Louis Tussaud's Wax Museum and World-Famous Chamber of Horrors" and ending with "Jungle-Land Golf — All Day \$1.00."

In between, interspersed among open-air stands, computer horoscopes are churned out of a mysterious machine, personalized newspaper headlines make every tourist a hero, and Mom and the kids can pose in a barrel perched precariously above a papier-mache cataract (and conveniently before a Polaroid camera). There is ample room to choose — the Biblical Wax Museum, Dracula's Castle, the Guinness Museum of World Records, the House of Frankenstein Museum. And that's only one side of the street.

Strung out along the other side are Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum, the Movieland Wax Museum and Circus World. Perhaps there are a few more, but why quibble? The idea is the same. And the fact that these monuments to tackiness rise above the great falls of Niagara has seemed to many a tourist to be a completely illogical juxtaposition of elements. And yet, year after year, the hill remains lively and crowded and noisy — and, one must assume, profitable.

Daytime is one thing, but after dark, when the neon begins to glow and the children have been tucked away and families are watching their motel-room television sets, the hill becomes the domain of a more restless breed — wanderers and cross-country adventurers, overweight middle-aged couples trying to rediscover romance, sophisticated foreigners trying to remain aloof over

beers served on the patio of the Rathskeller (Friday and Saturday with the Katzenjammer Kids). And there are the townies, too — skinny nymphets with cigarettes dangling from their painted lips and the straps of their sleeveless knit shirts sliding off their shoulders, and groups of high-school boys patrolling the street in pursuit. And there is a seemingly endless procession of well-waxed Sting Rays, chopped Harleys, over-chromed pickup trucks, and Camaros and Trans-Ams with nervous engines and shiny mag wheels, driven by local hustlers cruising the hill. The same cars pass by half a dozen times a night, leaving patches of rubber along the strip.

And in the background, the world's second largest Ferris wheel spins on and on, while the three clown faces on the Circus World storefront sparkle and wink in synchronized rhythm, the neon signs flash on and off, and the penny arcade resounds with the clicks of pinballs and the beeps of electronic table tennis and Space Invaders.

But above all, up and down the street there is another sound, the melody of the old-fashioned ringing cash registers and the quieter harmony of digitally calibrated whirs and buzzes made by more recent models.

All are stuffed full of dollars emptied from the pockets of tourists now departing with postcards and plates and T-shirts and straw hats and "genuine, hand-carved" pieces of molded plastic. The souvenirs will adorn mantels or lounge in the bottoms of dresser drawers or hide in the back recesses of cupboards and cabinets. And now and again, in Northern New England and Southern California and Kansas and Alabama, people will remember Clifton Hill.

**JIM WAKE**, who now lives in California, grew up in Niagara Falls, New York, and frequently comes back to visit Clifton Hill.

