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TRAVEL

Ghost hunting in New York State



The Rolling Hills Asylum in rural East Bethany is straight out of central casting.

AMITY PHOTO

JENNIFER BAIN
TRAVEL EDITOR

ACROSS NEW YORK STATE—Casper Cop chucks coins across the darkened Treasureland arcade at the Sylvan Beach Amusement Park and lets them ricochet on the ancient wooden floor.

"It's James. I've got a friend here who'd like to meet you. I've got recorders going. You gonna do something for us? We'd really love to meet you."

Casper Cop is private investigator James Pendell by profession and ghost hunter by passion. He has a seasonal gig leading the Park After Dark Ghost Tours.

"I've got a penny," Pendell says cajolingly to the darkness. "Will you throw it back to me? Where's my little girl?"

A prankster spirit child sometimes tosses the coins back or jingles them. She's one of the many ghosts said to roam this paranormal paradise in a vintage amusement park.

Pendell's tours start just as the park is closing and continue when he has the place to himself for several spooky hours, making for a "high freakout factor."

He has earned one of 65 spots on the Haunted History Trail of New York State, which launched three years ago and keeps adding places such as creepy inns, parks, theatres, museums, restaurants and cemeteries, offering ghost stories, tours and hunts.

Ghost hunters use Maglites (a type of flashlight), cameras, dowsing rods, video recorders, audio records, electronic voice phenomena recorders and other tools to communicate with the spirit world.

GHOST HUNTING continued on T2



JENNIFER BAIN PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

Left: The Iron Island Museum, a former church and funeral home, was declared haunted in a 2008 episode of *Ghost Hunters*. Everyone gathers in the chapel at the start of an overnight investigation led by museum president Linda Hastreiter. Right: At the Palmyra Museum, executive director Bonnie Hays uses dowsing rods to reach spirits.

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>> TRAVEL

The art of phantom chasing requires patience

GHOST HUNTING from T1

You don't have to be a true believer to be captivated by the haunted trail. Fans of shows like *Ghost Hunters*, *Ghost Adventures*, *Haunted Collector* and *Scariest Places on Earth* are drawn to it. So are the merely "paranormal curious."

"Could you do something for us today?" Pendell pleads with his prankster spirit.

Not tonight. We hunt in other dark, empty buildings, inviting the spirits to play knocking games, mess with salt and pepper shakers, and manipulate flashlights, but nobody wants to play.

Getting shunned by spirits is just like getting snubbed by babies and dogs, but Pendell makes things fun. He sure picked a fitting nickname. Casper Cop pays homage to the famous friendly ghost and conveys his mantra that "the unknown isn't evil, just misunderstood."

"People say when I die I'm going to haunt this place, and I say I just might — the legend of Casper Cop."

Ghost hunting is often likened to fishing. Sometimes the fish bite like mad and sometimes they don't, but fishing is so pleasurable it hardly matters.

I spent three days driving New York's haunted trail, visited 12 spots, met countless characters, such as Pendell, and embarked on five ghost hunts.

Did I see, hear, feel or photograph a ghost? Not definitively.

At the Historic Palmyra Wm. Phelps General Store/Palmyra Museum, executive director Bonnie Hays tries to communicate with a girl named Holly who died in a fire with her mom and five siblings.

We sit in the parlour where Holly likes to hide under a table with a basket of toys, but she pretty much ignores our overtures. Eventually someone else seems to reach out via the Maglite we set out.

With these small flashlights, you rotate the heads until they illuminate, twist them back to the barely off position and put them on a flat surface. Ask yes or no questions and the spirits just might answer by flashing the lights.

At the Naples Hotel in the Finger Lakes, innkeeper Dominick Gallo also favours the Maglite approach.

"I know you're here. Could you please give us a sign? Turn on one of the flashlights. Please don't skunk me tonight." (Getting skunked is a fishing term for when you don't catch anything.)

Gallo instructs us to take pictures, especially in the corners of haunted guest rooms, and look at them later to see if we caught any orbs, figures or faces. We didn't. But the spirits do finally respond when we settle in Gallo's office.

"If you're a male spirit, can you please turn the flashlight on for me?" Gallo pleads.

Nothing.

"If you're a female spirit, please turn the flashlight on for me?"

Nothing.

"If this is the kids, can you please turn the flashlight on? Touch somebody? Give another sign you're here."

Nothing.

"Are you bothered? If we're bothering you, please turn the flashlight on."

The light flashes.

He interprets the subsequent erratic series of flashlight bursts as meaning two spirits, one strong and one weak, are taking turns communicating.

Gallo didn't always believe in the spirit world but since buying the Naples Hotel, he's "very interested in it at the hotel, but not very interested in it anywhere else."

Acknowledging the hotel is haunted and joining the Haunted History Trail is what Gallo calls "a really tricky game that we play." It scares some people away, so they're not sure if it ultimately helps or hurts the business.

About an hour outside of Buffalo, the isolated Rolling Hills Asylum is



AMITY PHOTOS

The Rolling Hills Asylum, about an hour outside of Buffalo, opened in 1827 as a "poor house."



JENNIFER BAIN

James Pendell leads the Park After Dark Tours at Sylvan Beach Amusement Park.



JENNIFER BAIN

Naples Hotel owner Dominick Gallo uses a Maglite to reach spirits in one of the guest rooms.

what inspired Genesee County Chamber of Commerce tourism marketing director Kelly Rapone to create the haunted tourist trail.

"There are a million statewide trails," points out trail publicist Doug Sitler, "but this one is certainly unique."

The Rolling Hills Asylum opened in 1827 as a "poor house" for the mentally and physically challenged, widows, war veterans and other outcasts. It later became an infirmary and nursing home, sat empty and bounced among private owners.

Sharon Coyle took charge in 2010 and has been "resuscitating" the 100-plus rooms ever since. She oversees private and public ghost hunts and guided and self-guided tours — strictly by reservation — and hosts horror movie nights, special events and paranormal celebrity events.

> WHEN YOU GO

Take the trail: The Haunted History Trail of New York State (hauntedhistorytrail.com) currently boasts 65 stops across 13 counties in New York. I went to spots between Alexandria Bay and Buffalo, with a focus on the 1000 Islands-Seaway, Central New York, Finger Lakes and Greater Niagara regions. The trail is open year-round, although some spots may be seasonal.

Get there: This is a road trip so you'll need a car.

Stay: Sunset Cottages in Sylvan Beach (sylvanbeach.com/sunset), the Naples Hotel in Naples (napleshotelny.com) and the Mansion on Delaware Avenue in Buffalo (mansionondelaware.com).

Eat: Riley's by the River in Al-



Cam Hoffberg leads the Thousand Islands Ghost Tours.

exandria Bay (rileysbytheriver.com), Eddie's Restaurant (eddie1934.com) and the Pancake House in Sylvan Beach, Aster Pantry & Parlour in Syracuse (asterpantry.com), Kismet Bistro (kismetnewamericanbistro.com) and the Grainery in Naples, the Big Tree Inn in Genesee (bigtreeinn.com) and Marble & Rye in Buffalo (marbleandrye.net).

We explore numerous frozen-in-time rooms, like the one that once housed tuberculosis patients. In the windowless basement morgue, you see how spirits use a suit suspended from the ceiling as a pendulum to communicate.

I lay on a gurney and play sick, Coyle calls for help, and the suit starts swinging around.

"Ghost hunting is called hunting for a reason," she says. "It's like hunting for deer or fish or watching paint dry." Patience is essential and the spirits apparently "may not think you're interesting enough to communicate with."

Hmph. Luckily, 14 of us take part in a final ghost hunt at the Iron Island Museum in Buffalo — and the spirits sure liked somebody. The Lovejoy neighbourhood museum has become a magnet for paranormal tourists since starring in the 2008 season opener of *Ghost Hunters*.

Museum president Linda Hastreiter feed us Lovejoy Pizza and briefs us on the building's storied past as a church and then funeral home.

What stands out is the true story of the abandoned boxes of cremated remains found in the basement. The spirits gave staff the name Edgar and the staff then identified the war vet's remains and tracked down his family.

Hastreiter regales us with tales of orbs, voices, shadow men, full-body apparitions, moving objects and even a ghost cat before taking us to the chapel to watch the *Ghost Hunters* episode that confirmed spirit activity.

She and her volunteer ghost hunters — Tom MacDonald, Lorraine Woicak, Gina Keller and Patrick Burke — set up all kinds of equipment in the chapel and the adjoining room, where we climb a ladder and peer into the fairly terrifying attic featured in the TV show.

We turn off the lights. Thumps, bangs, flashes, alarms, excitement, terror and confusion ensue.

What it all amounts to, I don't know, but Burke nails it when he says, "ghost hunting is 99 per cent boredom, 1 per cent freakout."

Jennifer Bain was hosted by the Haunted History Trail of New York state and its partners, none of which reviewed or approved this story.

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