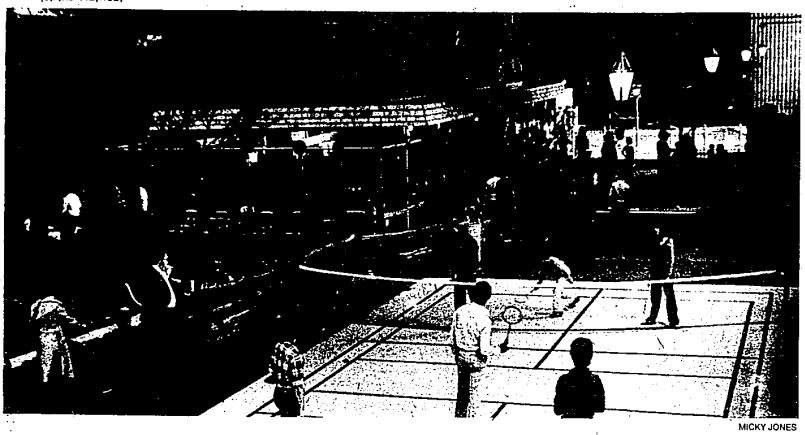

The atrium of the Wheels Inn is like the outdoors put under a roof.

MICKY JONES

A 7-acre hotel for kids

Wheels Inn in Chatham even has something for parents to do

By Iris Sanderson Jones
special writer

Kids are streaming down the halls in bathing suits and tennis shorts, sometimes carrying ice skates or tennis rackets. There isn't a shirt-and-tie in sight until after the sun goes down.

AN OPEN letter to Sharon, Shelly, Mike and all the other kids out there in travel country:

Yes, kids, there really is a Wheels Inn, where you can keep mom and dad busy while you get down to some serious play. The first thing your parents will ask you is "How far away is it and how much does it cost?" Especially, "how much does it cost?"

You are in luck with this one. It's only 40 miles away in Chatham, Ontario. And it doesn't cost much.

To give you an overall picture, you will have to imagine that you are standing on a little red bridge in the center of this crazy-looking hotel. What you are standing in is a huge atrium, an open space about the size of a hockey rink.

The little kids are playing miniature golf beside the bridge. The bigger kids are playing badminton, shooting pool, swimming and otherwise having fun around the Ranch House, an open-sided restaurant that serves hamburgers, hot dogs, Coke and even beer.

(You're not old enough for beer yet, so keep your hands off that.)

Behind you is a doorway to a building full of restaurants and nightclubs. Ahead of you are two doorways: one goes to the fitness club, where you play tennis and squash, go bowling and skating.

The second door goes past the pinball room to the high-rise hotel. There's a disco just outside a third door if you like music that breaks your eardrums.

The bedrooms look just like bedrooms in any other hotel, a couple of big beds and a bathroom, but you know you are not in any ordinary hotel as soon as you get close to the elevators.

Kids are streaming down the halls in bathing suits and tennis shorts, sometimes carrying ice skates or tennis rackets. There isn't a shirt-and-tie in sight until after the sun goes down.

From your room, you can see the building spreading across seven acres. It was once a factory that made wheel molds, which is why they call it Wheels Inn.

Sit still for three paragraphs and I'll give you a little history:

The Bradley family owned farms all along the river here in Chatham, and some of them still farm that land. The Bradleys owned the Holiday Inn, but it was the only big hotel in town, so one day John Bradley bought this old factory building and turned it into a second hotel.

There wasn't much for people to do in Chatham, so for a few years he brought in great old bands with names like Guy Lombardo and Count Basie (your parents have heard of them).

That was OK for a while, but people got tired of that and didn't come any more, so John decided to build this big crazy atrium full of games for kids. They call it the Golden Mile because it cost him a million dollars to build it.

They needed something for the adults to do while kids were having fun, so they built a fitness club and sold memberships to the local people. Hotel guests get in free but they must pay for the tennis, bowling and other sports.

Eventually they had more kids and parents than they had bedrooms, so they built this big high-rise hotel to go with it. That keeps the place full on weekends, which is when families like to go, but the hotel wasn't full during the week so they built a convention center across the street.

The place is so big now that you need a map to get around. It's a great place for kids, but if you are going to bring your parents with you there are some things you should know.

The miniature golf, ping pong, badminton, swimming and all that good stuff is free. You need quarters to play the pinball machines and the pool tables.

It costs money to play in the fitness club — $4 an hour per alley, no matter how many games you plan; $8 an hour in peak times and $6 in not-so-busy times for the tennis and squash and handball. No charge for the jogging track and exercise room or the sauna.

Special summer package rates are less than $80 Canadian per couple per day including room, breakfast and dinner. Kids under 12 sleep in the room free and pay their own meals.

You can also get a golf package and special rates in the middle of the week. Tell your folks to reserve their tennis and bowling time when they make the reservation or they'll never get on the courts.

If you kids eat in the Ranch House and the coffee shop, which are inexpensive, your folks can eat for about $7 each under the huge tree that grows in the middle of the dining room, and they can go to the nightclubs that have country music and other entertainment at night.

If you are still worried about the money, remind them that an American dollar is worth 20 percent more than a Canadian dollar, so $1 Canadian is only 80 cents American.

There's really only one thing wrong with the Wheels Inn. You are likely to break your neck falling over a kid when you get out of the elevator.

But if they don't like kids, you're in trouble anyway. Aren't you, Sharon, Shelly and Mike? If you want more information to plot a trip for your family, write to the Wheels Inn, 615 Richmond St., Chatham, Ontario N7M1R2 or ask your dad to telephone (519) 351-1100.

The Wheels Inn includes tennis courts and a complete fitness club — all indoors.

travel log
Iris Jones
contributing travel editor

Don't forget close-to-home travel spots

I spend a lot of time exploring other cities, but sometimes I forget how much there is to do in Detroit. I have been a tour guide in Detroit this week because I have been showing the city to a German tourist, Andy Bender.

Andy's family lived here when he was 3 years old, so he decided to come back for another look this spring. He is 20 years old now, and ready to spend a whole month in Detroit. He is staying with four different families, so he is seeing things from several different points of view.

Most people don't know how to be tourists in their own home town, so before you read further, take this little test. What would you show an overseas tourist in the Detroit area? Have you done those things yourself lately?

Andy spent the first 10 days of his visit with Art and Pat Clark of Dearborn, who showed him Greenfield Village, Henry Ford Museum, the Fairlane Center, Ann Arbor, the Renaissance Center and several other interesting places.

When he came to me for his second 10 days, I assumed that there was nothing much else for him to do. I was wrong. We spent one day driving around the lake country and residential areas of Oakland County and visiting Cranbrook.

I discovered Tally Hall, the new shopping center full of international eating booths at Orchard Lake Road and 14 Mile. I visited museums at Cranbrook that I hand't seen for 10 years.

The next day we explored the Cultural Center in Detroit — library, art museum, historical society; we walked Hart Plaza and took pictures from the top of the Ren Cen. Quite a view.

One day we hit the zoo. The last time I was there, it cost about a dollar to park and nothing to get in. Shows you how long it is since I've been there! Now it costs $2 to park and $3.50 to get in. Frankly, for anyone spoiled by the splendors of a European zoo, it isn't worth it.

The Michigan Space Center in Jackson is another story. It is definitely worth the drive and the $2 it costs to get in.

We haven't finished yet. Andy plans a two-day trip to Toronto, which his European friends told him not to miss. He is particularly anxious to go up in the CN Tower.

We're planning a day at the Detroit Science Center, which I haven't visited yet. We're going to do some weekend things, the kind you find in the events calendar: art shows, fairs, even garage sales.

When he leaves our house, he will visit Roxanne and Zaven Dolik in Birmingham, who will certainly have a lot more to show him in the metropolitan Detroit area.

If you haven't taken a visitor on a tour of southeast Michigan lately, do it for yourself. You can go to Frankenmuth, Historic Crossroads Village and Huckleberry Railroad near Flint, drive up Lake St. Clair, explore southern Ontario and do a lot of tourist things that you haven't done for years.

A visitor like Andy is exactly what you need to remind you of an old truth: The grass is not always greener on the other side of the state line.

Newspaper sponsors N.Y. trip

Observer & Eccentric Newspapers is sponsoring a New York Theater Weekend, July 17-19.

The package will include three days and two nights in New York City and twin/double accommodations at the Summit Hotel. The group will depart Friday morning and return Sunday evening.

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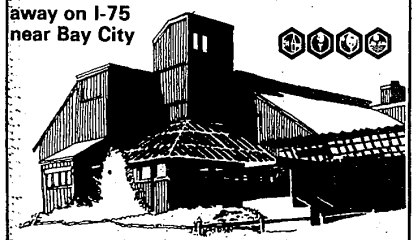

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