

# TRAVEL

## REGIONAL TRAVEL

### Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake faces uncertain future



Bicycles are complimentary for guests at the Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake. Photos by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

*The lodge is special, and the state needs to make sure that it stays that way.*

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GENEVA-ON-THE-LAKE — I left my office at 3, took a bike ride at 4, was floating in the pool at 5.

And by 6, I was sipping wine at an outdoor table overlooking Lake Erie.

There is no easier or more inviting overnight option so close to Cleveland than the Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake in far Northeast Ohio.

I've been here numerous times in the 17 years since it first opened, but a quick trip in mid-September served as a timely reminder. This place is special, and the state needs to make sure that it stays that way.

A last-minute addition to the state budget this summer included a provision that transfers the lodge's ownership from Ashtabula County to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources in 2022.

Currently, the Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake, which sits inside 698-acre Geneva State Park, is the only one of nine state park lodges in Ohio that isn't owned by the state.

Built in 2004 by Ashtabula County, the lodge was promoted as the key to growing the region's nascent tourism industry.

Although controversial at the time, the lodge has largely lived up to its billing. It is unquestionably the nicest state park lodge in the system, with well-tended facilities, a terrific restaurant and lots of activities on or near the property.

It draws the highest occupancy figures of any of the park lodges in Ohio and the most expensive rates, well above \$200 per night on weekends.

Will all of that change when the state takes over ownership of the facility next



A sign in Geneva-on-the-Lake reads, "Don't Give Away the Lodge."



Kayaking on Cowles Creek at the Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake in Ashtabula County.



Sunset over Lake Erie at the Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake.

year? Probably not, at least not immediately. But local tourism officials are right to stay engaged as the transfer of the property is negotiated.

#### STATE TAKEOVER COMING

Several Ashtabula County elected officials were supportive of the transfer, eager to save local taxpayers as much as \$14 million in remaining construction debt that the state will now absorb. The county never should have been in the lodging business in the first place, they argue.

Many local tourism and government

officials, however, are concerned that state ownership will eventually result in a property that isn't quite as nice and is not as tuned in to the local market.

"The lodge has driven much of the economic development that has taken place here," said Donniella Winchell, executive director of the Ohio Wine Producers Association, which is headquartered in nearby Geneva. "They are driving all of us to be better."

Winchell is part of a local group that has been meeting in recent months to come up with recommendations related to the

lodge's transfer. Among the group's priorities: Keep Delaware North as the operator of the lodge.

Winchell credits Delaware North, which also operates properties at Yellowstone and Yosemite national parks and numerous others, with helping to develop the property into the resort that it is — creating partnerships with local wineries and other businesses, funding improvements when the state or county couldn't afford them, adding amenities to keep guests entertained.

The Buffalo, New York, based company has managed the resort since 2004 and its contract runs through 2026, with two five-year options to renew. Another company, South Dakota-based U.S. Hotel & Resort Management, operates the other eight lodges in the state, and will run Hocking Hills State Park Lodge when it opens in 2022.

Ashtabula County Commissioner J.P. Ducro said he's optimistic that the state and county can come up with an agreement that works for all.

Among his priorities: Ensure that the property is able reinvest income from county bed tax revenue and the lodge's \$13 per-night resort fee so that it's not dispersed throughout the state.

"We want to make sure those funds are used for this property, to keep it in the exceptional condition that it's known for," he said.

Sarah Wickham, a spokeswoman for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, said it's too early to comment on any outcomes of the Geneva property transfer.

"We are still gathering information on all of the various contracts and obligations involved in the transaction," she said. "The General Assembly has directed us to move forward with a purchase, and we will do our best to meet the statutory timelines."

#### REDISCOVERING THE RESORT

Many of the people I chatted with during my recent stay weren't aware of the ongoing ownership controversy. Several were making their first visit to the property. Many had never been to any other state park lodge in Ohio.

I have stayed at almost all the others, including several in the past year. I'm a big fan of our state park lodges — they feature impressive architecture in beautiful settings, with pools and restaurants and other amenities.

Though popular in the summer and on fall weekends, the lodges are underappreciated by most Ohioans and under-marketed by the state.

SEE GENEVA-ON-THE-LAKE, K2

GENEVA-ON-THE-LAKE

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The Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake has indoor and outdoor pools, bocce courts, shuffleboard and more. Photos by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

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In some cases, they have not received the upkeep that they deserve.

The Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake, with 109 rooms and 25 cottages, has been the most successful in part because of its less-isolated location, within walking distance of the summer tourist town of Geneva-on-the-Lake and in the heart of the state's most prolific and well-known wine region. But it's also been successful because of the involvement of the local community and the stewardship of Delaware North, which has invested money into this property and markets it extensively.

Geneva has the best restaurant, by far, of any of the other lodges I've been to recently. And it has the most on-site amenities, including a zip line tour, kayaks to rent, complimentary bicycles, bocce, shuffleboard, pools, winter sports equipment and wine shuttles that run almost continuously on the weekends.

**A WEEKEND AT THE LODGE**

On my recent trip to Geneva, I took advantage of much that the property has to offer.

Upon arrival — a beautiful Friday afternoon in September — I grabbed a complimentary bicycle and pedaled the 2 miles west to the edge of Geneva State Park, stopping briefly to walk on Breakwater Beach and stick my feet in Lake Erie for perhaps the last time this year.

After my bike ride, I put on my bathing suit and headed for the outdoor pool, where I had the water all to myself until I was joined by a couple from Mansfield, celebrating their 20th anniversary.

I was out of the water in time to meet my husband, who was driving up from Akron. We sat outside at Horizons restaurant, where we watched a wedding rehearsal at the nearby gazebo while enjoying a glass of Ferrante Riesling and a plateful of chicken marsala.

Later in the evening, we joined the wedding group around a communal fire pit and toasted (complimentary) marshmallows. It was the evening's only disappointment. Marshmallows toasted over a gas fire don't get nearly gooey enough.

In the morning, we grabbed bikes again and headed into Geneva-on-the-Lake for breakfast, at the Sunrise Café, where "most meals come with a complimentary side of sarcasm and an occasional heaping of abuse" (and where the corned beef hash comes highly recommended). We grabbed a couple of doughnuts to go from Madson's before pedaling back to the lodge. I noticed a homemade "Don't Give Away the Lodge" sign on a front-yard fence in town as I biked by.

Before departing, we rented a tandem kayak (\$35 per hour) for a very relaxing paddle on Cowles Creek, a sleepy tributary that flows north into Lake Erie. The most exciting parts: negotiating under a couple of fallen trees, getting rocked by waves rolling off the



Bike path through the woods at Geneva State Park in Ashtabula County.



Outdoor dining at Horizons restaurant at the Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake.



The Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake in Ashtabula County.

lake (we were advised to stay off the lake), and watching the zip liners scream above us.

After checking out of our room, we drove south past Geneva, stopping at two historic covered bridges in the area: Harpersfield, built in 1868, and Mechanicsville Road, a year older, both straddling the scenic Grand River.

Then we headed west along the river to

do a bit of wine tasting, stopping first at Laurello Vineyards and then at Hundley Cellars, where I purchased my only souvenirs from this trip — bottles of sauvignon blanc and rose from Hundley.

I headed home approximately 24 hours after I arrived, at the end of an effortless, highly enjoyable day away. Here's hoping it stays that way.

**State park lodges**

The Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake in Ashtabula County is the most popular resort in the state park system and the most expensive. The lodge, with 109 rooms, had an average occupancy of 63.8% in 2019, the highest among nine state park lodges. Its average daily rate for 2019 was \$169.67, also considerably higher than the other lodges in Ohio. Here are occupancy and overnight rates for Ohio's eight other lodges, ranked by occupancy rates:

➤ Hueston Woods	54.1%	\$125.64
➤ Maumee Bay	51.3%	\$126.54
➤ Mohican	47.65%	\$119.08
➤ Burr Oak	47.4%	\$107.66
➤ Shawnee	46.2%	\$99.83
➤ Punderson	43.23%	\$125.53
➤ Deer Creek	38.8%	\$119.63
➤ Salt Fork	37.53%	\$120.74

*Note: The overnight rates provided for all but the Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake and Mohican incorporate the rates for park cabins, which may inflate the numbers.*

*Source: Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake*