

SundayTravel

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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ROBERT OAKES

With its history of wretched working conditions and horrible deaths, the Hoosac Tunnel is one of the region's most haunted spots, says author Robert Oakes. This place disturbed him more than any other site he visited.

THE BERKSHIRES ARE HAUNTED

We have the ghost stories to prove it

BY DIANE BAIR AND PAMELA WRIGHT | GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

Ah, the Berkshires. Land of rolling hills, lovely hikes, great food, cozy inns ... and ghosts. You'll never look at the region the same way after chatting with Robert Oakes, author of the 2020 book, "Ghosts of the Berkshires."

While he believes that ghosts can be everywhere, there's something about the Berkshires that seems to invoke the world of the spirit, Oakes says. "The Berkshires [area] has that deeper resonance, an electricity in the air, and a strong feeling of presence." Gilded Age mansions like The Mount (where Oakes leads ghost tours) have long histories, often marked by tragedy — the perfect setting for souls to be "stuck between worlds," as psychic Oda Mae Brown (played by Whoopi Goldberg) described it in the movie, "Ghost." Even after all these years at The Mount, "I'll go up to Edith Wharton's bedroom to put out the candles and get the feeling that I'm not alone. I'll get that chill," Oakes says. Stories of haunted tunnels, mummy's curses, even body-snatchers are part of

You'll never look at the region the same way again after reading about the tunnel from hell, toe-tugging spirits, and the curse of the mummy.



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the local lore — and are based on actual events.

Hoosac Tunnel: Tunnel from Hell

Of all the haunted hotspots Oakes visited while researching his book, one place got under his skin: Hoosac Tunnel. The 5-mile-long, pitch-black tunnel runs between North Adams and the town of Florida. It was carved into the Hoosac Mountains in the late 1800s, to enable freight trains to get to New York State. So many men died during the 20-year construction of the tunnel, it came to be known as the "Bloody Pit," and the "Tunnel from Hell," Oakes writes. A sense of gloom still lingers — along with accounts of ghostly goings-on.

According to historical records, three explosive experts set a charge in the tunnel during construction in 1865. One of the men, Ringo Kelley, ignited the charge prematurely, burying the two others beneath a ton of fallen rock. A year later, Kelley was found strangled to death at the spot of the explosion. "People believed that Kelley was killed by the angry spirits of the men who died, Ned Brinkman

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GUDEN GIGLI

Top haunts in the Berkshires

► HAUNTED

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and Billy Nash," Oakes recounts. Some reported hearing disembodied voices and cries of agony coming from inside the rock.

Two years later, 13 miners were buried alive in the central shaft of the tunnel when a candle ignited naphtha fumes, setting off an explosion and filling the shaft with water. All were thought to be dead, but it was later discovered that some men had survived and tried to get out. Workers and local residents reported seeing apparitions of lost miners moving through the mist and trees. "The belief grew that these men's spirits were haunting the place — restless, until all the bodies were recovered," Oakes says. Ultimately, nearly 200 of the project's 800 or so workers died; to this day, people report seeing odd lights, orbs, and phantom figures. A local hunter claimed to be battered and beaten by mysterious entities who lured him into the tunnel.

If you dare: Today, families come to the town of Florida to watch the trains go by. (Walking through the Hoosac Tunnel is illegal, and dangerous, so please don't go inside.) If you want to get a peek into the tunnel (safely), head to Witcomb Hill Road and River Road in Florida. "It's like staring into a black hole," Oakes notes. "It left me with a heaviness that was hard to shake."



Bash Bish Falls: Legend of the water witch

Visitors come to Bash Bish Falls State Park, in the southwestern corner of the Berkshires, to admire the highest waterfall (an 80-foot drop) in Massachusetts. Yes, the deep gorge and rushing water is lovely, but many believe that the place is alive with strange spirits and the echo of ancient voices in woods and water — and a water witch.

According to local lore, the Mohican tribes who once lived here believed the falls were

haunted by the spirit of Bash Bish. As the story goes, Bash Bish was sentenced to death by drowning, after being falsely accused of adultery. "She was brought to the top of the falls, but suddenly enveloped in white light and a cloud of butterflies, never to be seen again," Oakes explains.

Bash Bish left behind a daughter, White Swan, who eventually grew despondent and went to the falls herself. The spirit of her mother called to her, and White Swan threw herself over the falls. Her body was nev-

Top: Some visitors hear voices in the water at Bash Bish Falls State Park. **Above:** The ruined mansion at Ashuntully Gardens in Tyringham.

er recovered. "For years, people claimed to see the spirit of Bash Bish and White Swan, happily reunited," Oakes notes. Some saw a ghostly smiling face in the moonlit water; others spotted the forms of the women in the falls, or heard spirit voices in the

water, repeating "Bash Bish, Bash Bish."

"It may be an invented story, a legend designed to romanticize the place and draw tourism," the writer notes. "But I will say this: When I went there to get the feel of the place — what really struck me was the presence of butterflies. So many butterflies! The place felt alive to me with some sense of spirit, taking the shape of these butterflies," Oakes recalls.

If you dare: Sit and listen to the rushing falls. "You may hear voices in the water, or feel the spirit of the Mohicans who lived here," Oakes says. Or simply enjoy the beauty of this spot. (Note: Entering the water is prohibited.) Falls Road, Mount Washington; www.mass.gov/locations/bash-bish-falls-state-park

Ashuntully Gardens: Mummy's curse

Among the ghost houses in the Berkshires, Oates deems Ashuntully the most mysterious. It was once a lavish estate with a 35-room Palladian mansion, known as Marble Palace. What remains are four cracked Doric columns rising from a charred and weedy stone foundation. In 1912, politician and Egyptologist Robb de Peyster Tytus built the stunning white stucco mansion in Tyringham as a wedding gift for his wife, Grace. The décor was a bit ... unusual. Tytus displayed artifacts he'd acquired from Egypt's Valley of the Kings in the home. Among the items showcased at Ashuntully was a wall frieze from the palace of Amenhotep II, King Tutankhamen's grandfather.

But it gets even stranger. "A newspaper article from 1911 described how a gardener went into a barn on the property, saw a dead body, and called the police," Oakes explains. "The police said, 'Yes, it's a body — but he's been dead for 3,000 years!' Tytus had planned to move the mummy into the home."

But Tytus had little time to enjoy this. He died of tuberculosis a few months later, at age 38, one in a series of tragedies here. "He died young, his wife died, his daughter died at 28, and eventually the house burned down [in 1952]," Oakes recounts. "People said it was the mummy's curse," that Tytus had incurred the wrath of Egypt's dead kings by disturbing their sleep, according to a news account.

And there was this: When Henry Adams, great-grandson of President John Adams, spent the night in Ashuntully, he was awakened by a voice in a painting, speaking his name, according to an article that appeared in the New York Times. Then the portrait started to glow, Adams

said. No one else experienced this strange phenomenon.

If you dare: This is a magical spot now. Contemporary classical composer John McLennan devoted 30 years to creating award-winning gardens; he owned the property from 1937 to 1996. Tour the gardens and hike a half-mile woodland trail to the mansion's ruins, open April to November. Ashuntully Gardens is maintained by the Trustees of Reservations. 27 Sodom Road, Tyringham; www.thetrustees.org.

Red Lion Inn: Stop tugging my toes

With a guest list that includes five US presidents, Carol Burnett, John Wayne, and Bob Dylan, there's been plenty of intrigue at the Red Lion Inn. This establishment has hosted travelers since 1773, when it opened as a tavern, including some who apparently refuse to leave. They're prankster ghosts, if you believe the stories. Room 301 seems to see a lot of ghostly action — "People report having their toes tugged, their heads rubbed, even having a ghost enter the room and climb into bed with them," Oakes says. Paranormal investigators at the Red Lion have captured hazy figures moving around the room.

Haunted happenings have been reported in room 424 as well. Some guests have seen a ghostly girl holding flowers, Oakes says. A former housekeeper noted that much of the cleaning staff believes that the entire fourth floor of the inn is haunted.

Who is the ghost, or ghosts? "We don't really know," Oakes says. "But I generally feel that there's something going on at the Red Lion. You can sense something in the air and your imagination fills in the blanks." Indeed.

If you dare: Even if you don't encounter a ghost, you'll appreciate this classic Stockbridge haunt. The innkeepers seem unperturbed — amused, even — by potential spirits in their midst. Let them know if you experience anything otherworldly. 30 Main St., Stockbridge; www.redlion-inn.com.

As for the body snatching? Historical records reveal that this grisly practice did indeed happen in Berkshire County. We're out of space here, but the author recounts instances of it in his book.

For more about Robert Oakes and "Ghosts of the Berkshires," visit www.robertoakes.net. Oakes is currently working on a new book, "Ghosts of North Jersey."

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