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# A weekend with Lucy and Ricky

By Hal Smith  
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JAMESTOWN, N.Y. -- On the weekend before Memorial Day, this will be ground zero for Lucy madness.

Lucille Ball was the first woman to head a major Hollywood studio (Desilu), but it's the bird-brained redhead she played on TV in the '50s that made her famous.

Her sitcom, "I Love Lucy," in which she starred with husband Desi Arnaz, has been continuously broadcast all over the world for 56 years. Today, Arab, Turkish and Chinese couch potatoes -- and viewers who speak one of 18 other languages -- watch dubbed reruns of the show. More people have seen her face than any other person who ever lived, according to TV Guide, which did its part by putting Lucy on its cover more than 45 times, a record never likely to be equaled.

That explains, in part, why hordes of her fans will descend on Jamestown, N.Y., her proud hometown, for the annual Lucy-Desi Days festival on May 25-27.

Some will be die-hard pilgrims from one of more than 75 countries that air "I Love Lucy." Others, weekenders simply out for some fun, remember how as youngsters they howled with delight as Lucy stuffed herself sick with chocolates as candy streamed by relentlessly on a conveyor belt.

Whoever they may be, visitors will not want for diversion. A nine-page printout of the festival's events includes screenings, memorabilia shows and auctions, tours of the city (including Ball's 1911 birthplace, childhood home and gravesite), a boat cruise (related to a sitcom episode), "laughter yoga" workshops, musical revue, reunion picnic, comedy improv troupe, masquerade party, contests, photo ops with impersonators and a concert by Ball's daughter, Lucie Arnaz, a performer in her own right.

Downtown Jamestown includes three facilities operated by the Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Center; if you can't make it for the festival or Lucy's birthday celebration in early August (see If You Go), don't worry -- they're open year-round.

-The Lucy-Desi Museum is a pleasant storefront building that opened in 1996 and covers the personal lives of the comedy couple, including her youth in Jamestown and their 20 years of marriage in Hollywood (they divorced in 1960). Lucy, who died in 1986, was very loyal to her hometown and insisted that the world premiere of one of the couple's feature films take place here. Jamestown references frequently appeared in "I Love Lucy," and she decorated her Beverly Hills home and TV set with furniture manufactured in the area, once renowned for the work of its Swedish-American craftsmen.

Changing exhibits may include wardrobes, costumes, props, awards (she won four Emmys), family photos,

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etc. Much of this is provided by the couple's two children, Lucie and Desi Jr., leading members of the Lucy-Desi Center's board.

-The Desilu Playhouse is primarily devoted to the "I Love Lucy" show. It displays memorabilia, virtually all donated by fans, and exact replicas of studio sets, including the fictional Lucy and Ricky Ricardo apartment in New York City, and the Hollywood hotel suite where she pantomimed with Harpo Marx and set her nose on fire while trying to deceive William Holden.

Opened in 2005 in a former department store, the playhouse was established by major donors William Rapaport, a computer science professor at the University of Buffalo, and his wife, Mary, a cancer survivor who believes that Lucy-brand laughter was among the best medicine in her recovery. In fact, the Lucy-Desi center's mission is, in part, to "enrich the world through the healing powers of love and laughter."

-The Lucy-Desi Center Gift Shop offers about 800 items and tries, apparently with much success, to carry every Lucy-Desi bauble, blanket, book, board game and tchotchke available. If, for example, you are in the market for a set of Lucy-Desi wine glasses from which to quaff an insolent cabernet, this is your kind of place. How about a bottle of Vitameatavegamin, the fictional alcohol-based elixir that got the best of Lucy during multiple takes when filming the product's commercial? Merchandise revenue, together with admission sales, enables the celebrity center to remain in the black without government support.

If any TV-based fan phenomenon were loosely comparable to "I Love Lucy," it would probably be the Trekkies' adoration of "Star Trek." Interestingly, it was Lucille Ball who green-lighted the science fiction show when she was president of Desilu, which became the largest film studio in the world. (It also created "Mission: Impossible," "The Untouchables," "The Andy Griffith Show," "The Dick Van Dyke Show" and many other classics gone to rerun heaven.)

It's long been fashionable to decry television's influence on American culture. But while TV is usually slavishly derivative, it also breaks ground.

"I Love Lucy" was, for example, the first show to feature a "mixed" marriage (for those who just emerged from a coma: Ricky Ricardo was Cuban); and Lucille Ball was the first pregnant actress playing a pregnant woman on TV when Little Ricky was born -- though censors still banned uttering the word "pregnant." (In 1953, an "expectant" woman was "in a family way.")

So, as much fun as it may be to "people watch" and surrender to all the silliness at Lucy Days, a visitor might learn about more than just TV history and pop culture through the life of the "queen of comedy" -- the redhead Newsweek called the top female entertainer of the 20th Century.

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## IF YOU GO

### GETTING THERE

Jamestown, N.Y., is in extreme southwestern New York state, about halfway between Buffalo and Cleveland. It is about an eight-hour drive from Chicago.

### LUCY CENTRAL

The Lucy-Desi Center consists of three facilities in downtown Jamestown within a few blocks of each other: The Lucy-Desi Museum (212 Pine St.), the Lucy-Desi Gift Shop (300 N. Main St.) and the Desilu Playhouse (2 W. 3rd St.). The three share the same hours: 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday and 1-5 p.m. Sunday. Closed on Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Day, New Year's Eve and Day. Admission to the museum is \$6 for adults, \$5 for seniors (60-plus) and \$4 for youths (6-18). Tickets for

the playhouse are \$10/\$9/\$7.

An impressively comprehensive Web site ( [www.lucy-desi.com](http://www.lucy-desi.com)) includes a map, driving directions, schedule of festival events, an episode guide, Desi discography, Lucy filmography, photo albums, vintage photo gallery, etc.

Call 877-582-9326 for directions, tickets or to place an order with the gift shop (or order at the Web site).

## LUCY FESTS

The 2007 dates for the two annual Lucy-Desi festivals: Lucy Days on the weekend preceding Memorial Day (May 25-27) and Lucille Ball's birthday (Aug. 3-5).

## LUCY'S HOMES

Two western New York residences are associated with Lucille Ball. She was born in 1911 at what was formerly her maternal grandparents' home at 69 Stewart Ave. in Jamestown. Her childhood home, which has been restored to its original appearance, is at 59 Lucy Lane (formerly 8th Street) in Celoron, a village about five minutes from Jamestown. Both are private homes and not open to the public -- though you can drive by.

To reach the homes from the museum, turn left on 3rd Street. For her birthplace, after crossing the 3rd Street bridge, go past the first traffic light and in about five blocks turn right on Stewart Avenue. To reach the home where she grew up, continue on Stewart Avenue, then turn left on Fairmount Avenue. Go to the third light and turn right onto Dunham Avenue. Just past the elementary school (on your left), turn left on Lucy Lane. Look for a gray house (the next to the last) in the second block on the left side of the street.

## LUCY'S GRAVE

Lucille Ball's ashes are interred in the same plot with her parents and other family members named Hunt (her mother's maiden name) at Lake View Cemetery, 907 Lakeview Ave. The cemetery is open to the public. To find the Hunt family plot, enter at the corner of Buffalo Street (off North Main) and Lakeview Avenue. Go straight through the main gate. Turn right at the small arrow on the ground. A second arrow points left to the back of Lucy's family plot, one of two different Hunt families in this area. Lucy's marker faces west, toward Main Street and Lake Chautauqua.

## AREA INFORMATION

For information on accommodations and other attractions in Jamestown or Chautauqua County, go to [www.tourchautauqua.com](http://www.tourchautauqua.com).

-- Hal Smith