

THE CITY YOU'RE MISSING

# Jacksonville

In this diverse corner of Florida, you'll find urban bustle, small-town charm, and outdoor adventure.

BY MILES HOWARD



Downtown  
Jacksonville

**A** monster steel-gray Toyota Tacoma is catching up to me fast. It's a broiling Sunday morning, and I'm driving along the interstate just outside of Jacksonville. I had been admiring the tall slash pine trees that flank the highway just before the truck roared up from behind. I quickly move over to let it pass. And that's when I notice the flags flapping in the breeze.

The truck is festooned with miniature teal banners bearing the unmistakable insignia of the Jacksonville Jaguars, the city's NFL team. And as the truck passes, the windows roll down and a grinning middle-aged man with wraparound shades and festively spiked hair leans out and offers me a brief brotherly fist pump before shouting

"Duval!" at the top of his lungs. It's a battle cry. It's game day, and fans are preparing to cheer on their beloved Jags. (Jacksonville is located in Duval County, so this exclamation is also a point of orientation for visitors.) There's something disarmingly sweet about the way the guy in the truck greeted me, and the presumption that I, too, must be heading to the game.

He's right. My first stop on a three-day trip to Jacksonville is to see the Jaguars play on their home field. I already knew that football was something people enjoyed here. But as more cars and trucks



The home of  
the Jaguars



adorned with Jaguars flags pass me, horns honking ecstatically, I realize what an understatement that is. I feel like I'm in *Star Wars*, joining a fleet of Rebel X-wing fighters as they prepare to blast into light speed and head for the Death Star. Except that instead of whizzing by stars and planets, we're cruising through palm trees, along the curves of the St. Johns River, and finally, over a bridge toward the high-rises of downtown Jacksonville.

I'm about to learn that Jacksonville isn't just a city. It's a galaxy of its own, and it didn't happen by accident.

## Before Hollywood

On a bone-dry day in 1901, an inferno consumed Jacksonville. The city, which served as an outpost for shipping hogs and cattle during the Civil War but had since become known as a growing resort haven for the well-heeled, was in the middle of a drought. In less than 24 hours, the fire incinerated hundreds of wooden houses, destroying more than 140 city blocks and leaving thousands homeless. It was the end of the world.

So the people of Jacksonville built themselves a new one. Architects from New York and Chicago came to help design the new city. Suburbs grew. Modern buildings with electric elevators sprang up downtown. During the city's rapid reincarnation, a new industry took root—moviemaking. Before Hollywood was Hollywood, directors needed a warm climate to shoot pictures. That's

how Jacksonville became “The Winter Film Capital of the World.” It was world-building at its finest, and when the film industry eventually headed west to Southern California, the city of Jacksonville reinvented itself once again. Offering affordable real estate, a unique coastal environment, and a friendly small-town vibe, Jacksonville courted new residents and businesses whose arrival in the city would catalyze the birth of the worlds that make up today's Jacksonville. So I kick off my journey with a foray into the most well-known of these: the world of football.

## Go Jags

Professional football is a young religion in Jacksonville. Since the city won its NFL franchise in 1993, the Jaguars have transformed Jacksonville into a house of raucous worship on Sundays.

As I drive across the bridge into downtown, I see TIAA Bank Field, a gargantuan white mountain on the riverbank, dwarfing the surrounding buildings. Helicopters orbit the stadium. I drop my car at the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront,

slather on some sunscreen, and wander through downtown toward the stadium, which is an easy 15-minute walk from the core of the city. Before long, I've entered a steady procession of Jaguars fans. We're passing by parking lots filled with multigenerational tailgaters laughing and crushing brews. (Tailgating is its own sport here. During the annual Florida–Georgia showdown, tailgaters step up their game and throw a huge outdoor soiree known as “The World’s Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party.”) Fans are decked out in jaguar-print tops, jerseys, and those polo shirts that the NFL hawks, and everyone is really friendly to each other.

This is a revelation to me. I'm from Boston, where sports fans are known to throw entire pizzas at each other. (Seriously.) But in Jacksonville—or “Jax,” as it's called by locals—you can arrive in town as a stranger to Jaguars culture and be adopted by the fans. That's what happens to me. At a crosswalk, an elderly fellow introduces himself as Ken and gives me a recap of the Jaguars' history. As Ken goes on, eyebrows bouncing, an SUV actually slows down to let us cross. Across the street, two young men are holding open the doors of a bustling craft brewery called Intuition Ale Works, practically ordering us to come inside. I do, of course, savoring the air conditioning and an ice-cold red IPA. But I can't stay long. I have a game to catch.

The stadium is across the street from Intuition. As I enter the belly of the beast with thousands of Jaguars fans, I'm surprised by how welcome I feel here, even as my



The Southbank Riverwalk

fair skin crackles in the Florida sun while I track down my seat.

It's hot, and by the time the first quarter is over, I'm ready for another beer, so I start to head downstairs to the shaded lounge deck. But en route, I catch sight of something. Up on the rim of the stadium, there are glass-walled swimming pools in which fans are cooling off and watching the game. The pools were installed along with cabana lounges and even a dog park, making TIAA Bank Field the only NFL venue where you can bring your swimsuit and your schnauzer. All of which reminds you that in Jacksonville, football is more than a Sunday pastime.

## Water break

After the game, I'm feeling energized and ready for more. The day is young, so I take a water taxi ride across the St. Johns River, which cuts right through the center of Jacksonville. When I disembark at the Southbank Riverwalk—a waterside pathway decorated by ethereal blue lighting and sculptures—I notice that this enchanting urban trail is surprisingly serene. The only folks I see are a jogger and a young couple on an observation bench.

Geographically speaking, Jacksonville is the biggest city in the continental U.S., with borders that encompass more than 840 square miles of neighborhoods and wildlife areas. On a map, it makes New York look modest. Yet the growing population, with a median age of 36, is still only about 892,000 strong. This means that you can snag dinner reservations with ease, enjoy a romantic walk serenaded by the



Intuition Ale Works

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICE ROSS (BEER) AND RYAN KETTERMAN (RIVERWALK)



sound of birds and rippling water, or—if you're an entrepreneur—find affordable but expansive spaces for pursuing your ventures. With its low cost of living and business-friendly climate, Jacksonville has long proven an appealing place for big-name employers, from Baptist Health to Amazon, which operates several fulfillment centers in the area. In Jacksonville, smaller companies also have room to grow and thrive, especially as young people continue to move to the city and start their own businesses: A 2018 study by the personal finance website SmartAsset found that Jacksonville was the No. 5 destination in the country for millennials on the move.

One distinctly Jacksonville enterprise is Aardwolf Brewing Company, which I come upon after leaving the Riverwalk and trekking through the industrial north end of the San Marco neighborhood. Still coming down from the adrenaline of the Jaguars game, I order a taster and am struck by the San Marco Sour. The beer's



From a kayak, you can see Jax at its best.

## GET OUTSIDE

↑ **On the Water** / Rent a kayak from Adventure Kayak Florida and explore Jacksonville from one of its many waterways. The city is also covered in waterfront fishing spots. Try casting a line from the historic Huguenot Memorial Park.

**TPC Sawgrass** / Northern Florida is home to some of the best golf in the world. If you're willing to spend some serious money on a tee time, go for the iconic Players Championship course at TPC Sawgrass. (For a more approachable option, try the Bent Creek Golf Course.)

**Jacksonville-Baldwin Rail Trail** / Bike or jog on this paved 14-plus-mile trail, surrounded by woodlands and wildlife.

smokiness complements its tartier champagne notes in an unexpected way. I order one more without hesitation and, just like that, slip into another one of Jacksonville's worlds, the world of creative craftsmanship.

## Art walk

No place offers a better glimpse of Jacksonville's appreciation for creativity than Riverside. Once a sprawl of plantation land, this historic neighborhood is now replete with million-dollar waterfront houses and swanky apartment blocks. Fueled by a cafe au lait from Bold Bean Coffee Roasters, I roam the streets and admire the columned facades. Riverside is also home to the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens, which contains more than 5,000 objects spanning from 2100 B.C. through the 21st century. Plunked on the riverbank, the grounds include more than 2 acres of gardens and arborways, pairing native trees and flowers with fountains and marble statues.

I share these spaces with families with toddlers and a brawny dude in a WWE shirt. All of them study the art in contemplative silence. In the museum's Italian Garden, I wander around a reflecting pool with teenagers who are Snapchatting the scenery. Art seems to be a shared language in Jacksonville.

I head over to the Five Points district and duck into the colorful 5 Points Vintage to hunt for souvenirs. The owner, Cindy Barfield, greets me at the counter and explains how the store's inventory has transitioned from antiques to kitschier retro swag from more recent decades.

"It's millennials," Barfield explains with a smile. "Our younger residents shape the inventory. Pyrex is very in right now, and turn-of-the-century mixing bowls are out of vogue. The kids also seem to like the industrial steam-punk look."

As I contemplate buying a pair of leather chaps, my messenger bag nudges a shelf and a small china poodle shatters on the ground. I wince and head straight to the register. But when I try to pay for the damage, Barfield refuses my money. "This little guy will go right on the wall," she says, taking the pieces and nodding her head toward the entrance. I step outside and see that the entire front of the store is a mosaic of broken antique pieces. There are shards of Christmas ornaments and action figures. The work of art has been years in the making, and Barfield says it'll only get bigger.

Down the street, I find another site of constant creativity: Black Sheep, an award-winning restaurant specializing in globally influenced (and locally sourced) comfort food. Inside, the owner, a gentle giant named Jonathan Insetta, is conferring with the kitchen crew over menu changes. Insetta is something of a culinary wizard in town. He also founded the buzzy French bistro Restaurant Orsay and the newer Southern chow emporium Bellwether. In person, Insetta is gregarious, self-deprecating, and kind enough to sit down for coffee and share his story. "When I was growing up here in the '80s, we had

Murals adorn the Jacksonville Public Library.



illegal chickens in our backyard, and my mom grew lots of vegetables,” Insetta tells me. “Back then, ‘farm-to-table’ wasn’t even a thing, and none of my friends were doing anything like this. I didn’t embrace it at the time—it just meant more chores for me to do—but it really influenced my food philosophy.”

Black Sheep’s chef and Insetta’s former high school classmate, Waylon Rivers, joins us. “Sports was our gateway into the culinary world,” Rivers says. “I played baseball and football, Jon played basketball, and in the kitchen, you’ve got a similar team mentality where you’re working toward a common goal that’s bigger than you.”

Insetta has been nodding vigorously. “That basically describes this moment in the Jacksonville food scene,” he adds. “People are now starting to recognize this city as a food town. And for us, that’s huge.”

It’s Black Sheep’s off day, so I decide to have lunch at Bellwether, which is back downtown. The cilantro and scallion-garnished chile pepper boiled peanuts are amazing, savory, and infernally spicy, but juicy enough to dissolve in your mouth. The main course remixes shrimp and grits by swapping out the grits for johnnycakes, dressed in a garlic cream and topped with bread-and-butter jalapeños, house bacon, hot sauce, and roasted corn.

Another excellent place to witness more of Jacksonville’s creative side is the public library, which I visit after lunch. The stairways are decorated with enormous murals depicting a thriving community of readers. I take the free



Jax monorail on a scenic trip back over the river to San Marco to visit another untraditional art venue: Baptist MD Anderson Cancer Center. The new 330,000-square-foot treatment center contains more than 700 works of art.

“One of the things we strive for here is curating a patient environment that facilitates healing,” oncology administrator LeeAnn Mengel tells me as I admire some stained-glass butterflies near an elevator. “There’s been so much research done on the effect of placing artwork in treatment centers. It can add color and soften the light in a room.”

By now, I can’t help but ponder what feeds this local proclivity for the arts. Plenty of cities lack the color, craftsmanship, and quirks of Jacksonville. What makes this place so expressive? I contemplate this while ambling over to Treaty Oak Park, which contains one of the oldest live oak trees in Jacksonville. It reminds me of an octopus, with thick branches so long and tentacle-esque that they touch the ground. Walking beneath the mammoth tree, watching my step as some tiny orange lizards scurry across the sidewalk, I wonder what it is that fuels Jacksonville’s creativity, without realizing that the likely answer is staring me in the face.

That evening I’m sitting by the edge of the rooftop lounge at River & Post, a chic seafood restaurant back in Riverside, and I’m finishing my glass of Graffigna malbec when several birds soar overhead. They’re

flying east along the St. Johns, beyond downtown, toward the sunset. And I know what awaits out there. It's the wildest and most ancient of Jacksonville's unique worlds—the great outdoors.

## Ready for the country

Jacksonville has the largest urban park network in America. We're talking 80,000 acres of vivid green forests, mangroves, riverways, and, most famously, beaches. You don't have to go far to step into any of these environments. I've barely driven 20 minutes from downtown when I stumble upon Castaway Island Preserve, where I stroll along a boardwalk past an estuary that is literally buzzing with life. I push on to Big Talbot Island State Park.

A hike through the verdant forests delivers me to a secluded beach covered with twisted trees. Birds sing overhead. Talk to locals and you'll hear tales of kayak fishing off the coast, cycling along the beaches, paddleboarding on the rivers, and more. But the outdoor activity on my mind today is surfing. The waves are intense, creating "tubes" that crash and spray water everywhere. As I drive south along the coastline, passing bungalows, I can spot daredevils surfing the break on their boards without a care in the world. It looks scary, but also kind of fun.

I end up in nearby Atlantic Beach. After checking into the Hotel Palms, a former motel refashioned as a gorgeous boutique inn, I borrow a complimentary beach cruiser to pedal down to the water. As the sky darkens and the lights of Atlantic Beach come on, the world transitions from golden to deep blue. I venture into town and score a last-minute table at Restaurant Doro, where I enjoy crispy short ribs in an intimate space.

When I step outside after dark, I spot surfers lugging their boards to the beach. I watch them disappear into the moonlight, listening to the gentle roar of the waves.

## Well, that was easy

The sun is rising as I drive through the thick, chirping woods of Kathryn Abbey Hanna Park at the north end of Atlantic Beach. I get out of my car, move through the trees, and emerge at a long stretch of beach where Kristen Huth, a surfing instructor with Jacksonville Surf and Paddle, is waiting for me with two colorful boards. She hands me one, and the water is warm as we walk into the ocean. I'm really doing this.

"You should have seen how choppy it was last week," Huth tells me before an oncoming wave cuts the memory short. We both take a deep breath and are submerged as the wave passes over us. After popping back up, we continue into chest-deep water, where Huth helps me point my board toward the beach.

I try to mount the thing and slide right back into the sea, a process I repeat at least 15 times before managing to plant both knees on the board and stay balanced. "OK, here we go," Huth says as another wave surges behind us.



## THERE GO THE NEIGHBORHOODS

**↑ Downtown /** Visit the beautiful Florida Theatre, take in some culture at the Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville, or try one of more than 90 restaurants in the city's core.

**Northside /** Offering easy access to Jacksonville's ample great outdoors, the Northside is also home to the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens and the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, which covers thousands of acres of nature along with historic sites of interest.

**Springfield /** This historic neighborhood features some of Jacksonville's most remarkable architecture and is enjoying an influx of new business, including the Strings Sports Brewery.

"Try to keep centered." I barely hear her as the wave picks up my board and hurls it toward the beach. I get up on both feet and enjoy a millisecond of surfing before flying straight into the drink. The wave crashes, and I resurface.

Time seems to stop as I tread water. What am I doing? How did I get here? What's happening to me? In the past 72 hours, I've transformed into a Jaguars fan, a sour beer drinker, and a really bad surfer. I've become a bit player in an ongoing, decades-old story about a city that built worlds within a world—because that's what Jax does. You enter this city a tourist and leave a different person. Joining the characters here and becoming part of their shared narrative is easy.

You should try it sometime.

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FRESH FLOWERS

THE CITY YOU'RE MISSING

# St. Louis

Powered by a pioneer spirit, the Gateway City abounds with culture, diverse attractions, and change-makers.

BY MILES HOWARD







**PORTAL TO FUN**

Clockwise from top: Cardinals faithful at Ballpark Village, a latte at Catalyst Coffee Bar, showtime at the Muny, a touch of Italy at Sardella, and shopping at Civil Alchemy





The iconic Arch is now complemented by a revitalized downtown.



**I**n the belly of St. Louis' Gateway Arch, rosy-cheeked tourists are lining up before a series of little steel doors that appear to have been designed for Hobbits. I hear the thumping of heavy machinery on the other side of the wall. We've all got tickets to the top of the Arch. But how do we get there?

The little doors slide open and five of us—me and a chatty family—squeeze into a tiny, brightly lit tram that looks like an escape pod you might find aboard the *Starship Enterprise*. I'm practically sitting in the grandfather's lap, which he takes as a window to say, "Hi, I'm Phillip!" Before the doors close, I've learned that my podmates traveled here from Illinois for a Kenny Chesney show, a brewery crawl, and—just for good measure, I guess—a wedding.

With a lurch, we ascend through the north end of the Arch. A window on the side of our pod offers glimpses of the columns, cables, and staircases that make up the Arch's "guts." The pod ascends along a sloped track, climbing 630 vertical feet through this constellation of metal. I've barely been in town for two hours, and yet here I am, compressed into a clown car with four fellow out-of-towners as we journey to the top of the most iconic St. Louis landmark, the tallest man-made monument in America.

This is the port of entry through which millions of tourists pass each year: a big silvery tribute to a bygone chapter of American exploration. But St. Louis never got the memo about the "bygone" part.

Here, in this city, the journey continues.

## The Gateway City

Like many millennials, I first experienced St. Louis while spending countless hours of my youth glued to a computer screen playing *The Oregon Trail*. Wagon parties would take a boat ride on the Mississippi from St. Louis to Independence Landing—the official starting point of America's most famous dirt highway. If you stood on the banks of the river during the mid-19th century, you could watch steamboats full of greenhorns and livestock chugging toward the sunset in pursuit of a better life on the frontier. This is why St. Louis was dubbed "Gateway to the West."

But what does a moniker like that mean to someone today? The West, as a dream, used to be the bee's knees. As a kid who



grew up in the Boston suburbs, I used to dream of going out there, and eventually, as a USC student, I did. But now much of the West is crowded and expensive, while St. Louis—a city founded by French fur trappers who became overshadowed by the allure of the frontier—remains an enigma for many. Everyone knows about the Arch, of course. Those of us who enjoy baseball are familiar with the zeal of Cardinals fans. And if you take your games with American lager, you're probably aware the original Anheuser-Busch plant is here.

And yet, before this past summer, if you had asked me to characterize St. Louis as a major city—to personify its civic essence—I couldn't have offered a convincing answer. Because how exactly does one characterize a city best known as a portal to dreams that happen somewhere else? How do you reconcile this history with the fact that St. Louis is known for a handful of tourism landmarks and commercial brands but remains a mystery city to many would-be visitors?

I wrestled with that question as my flight for St. Louis took off into a muggy sky. I still couldn't put my finger on "what" or "who" St. Louis is today. So that's where I was going—downtown, straight through the Arch, in a sense, and into the heartland of the Midwestern metropolis.

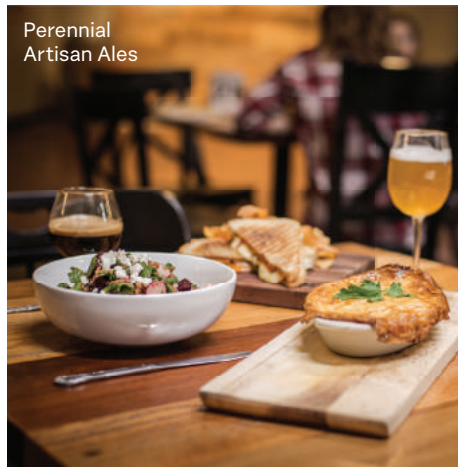
## A decadent welcome

When you're approaching St. Louis from the sky, the high-rises seem to reach up from the agrarian flatlands to greet you. Once we land and deplane, I follow signs for the MetroLink. Within 15 minutes, I'm comfortably seated aboard an exceedingly clean light rail train that's shooting toward the city. At this rate, I'll be there in time for a coffee refuel and my climb up the Arch. Not a bad start.

I drop my bags and change my duds at the downtown Hyatt Regency St. Louis at the Arch. Not only does my room have a killer view of the monument and riverfront, but the hotel staff has also kindly sent up a welcoming treat: four slices of St. Louis gooey butter cake that's sugary enough to make your eyes roll into the back of your head. (That's my reaction, at least.) One bite makes shortbread feel like an exercise in Puritanism. I commit to eating gooey butter cake each day that I'm here.

The historic St. Louis riverfront—once crowded with steamboats—is right across the street from the hotel. I stretch my legs and spend the next hour happily putting around the renovated Gateway Arch Park, trying to imagine legions of fur trappers chewing their tobacco and slinging pelts on the banks of the river. In the shadow of the Arch itself, which looms over the park, I overhear some tourists having an urgent conversation about food. A few words leap out: "slow-cooked beef," in particular.

I follow the tourists leaving the park and head back into the swelter of downtown. I'm soon standing in an absurdly long line of office workers shuffling into Sugar-fire Smokehouse, which looks like a cafeteria designed by



Perennial  
Artisan Ales

### Grab a Microbrew

**Perennial Artisan Ales** / Leave the familiar behind and step into experimental territory at this brewery, where the ales and lagers are brewed with ingredients like ancho chiles and aged in wine and whiskey barrels.

**Schlafly Beer** / Start your suds sampling at the brewery where the St. Louis craft beer scene began. Schlafly's flagship beer is its classic pale ale, and the pine- and citrus-blasted "Hop Trial" IPAs will keep your palate happy.

**Urban Chestnut Brewing Company** / Cool off from the heat with a tall glass of golden Kölsch ale or nut-brown Dorfbier, and toast the afternoon away at this craft brewery's German-style bierhall or their outdoor beer garden.

**2nd Shift Brewing** / Saisons infused with wild yeast and jet-black imperial stouts are among the bold, aggressive offerings brewed here—and with names like "Cat Spit Stout" and "Conjunctivitis Pink IPA," the cans themselves are worth saving.

a rockabilly band. Atomic red walls, old guitars, and a bull statue made of welded sheet metal greet us as the line inches closer to the counter. I order a heap of beef brisket, fiery jambalaya, grilled seasonal greens, and a smoked chocolate-chip cookie. The brisket is a heavenly mix of juicy meat, smoke-infused fat, and peppery bark.

## Downtown buzz

After taking in so much meat, a digestive walk around downtown is in order. The first thing I notice about the neighborhood



after leaving Sugarfire is the symphony of sounds that ricochets off the historic buildings. Downtown is alive with people talking on cellphones, cars humming, and jackhammers rumbling. This is a leap from the days when downtown St. Louis was a hollowed-out district that employers (and tourists) left in favor of the suburbs. Today, the city's urban core is packed with restaurants, parks, startups, bars, galleries, and long-established businesses. PGAV Destinations—the firm that designed attractions at the Busch Gardens amusement parks in Virginia and Florida—is headquartered here. It's working on St. Louis's first aquarium (more on that later).

I've arrived just in time to reap the rewards of what St. Louisans have been calling an urban renaissance. Led by city officials and business leaders, this renewal effort is part of a grand plan to make St. Louis one of the most pleurably recreational and "livable" cities in America. This means helping small businesses establish themselves in empty spaces, constructing a citywide greenway of walking and biking trails, and sprucing up existing attractions. The Arch, for instance, now has a gorgeous museum full of Oregon Trail artifacts that tell the story of the Manifest Destiny era, including the injustices done to Native American tribes by the U.S. government.

From the Arch, I stroll to another sacred venue: Busch Stadium. What greets me isn't just a baseball stadium. It's a towering colony of restaurants, pubs, offices, and even apartments. This is Ballpark Village—a city-within-a-city



for Cardinals fans. The team is playing in Chicago today, but the "streets" here are still teeming with folks in red jerseys and ball caps.

I duck into the Budweiser Brew House and find myself in a huge atrium where several hundred spectators are tossing back beers and watching the game on a jumbo screen. An elevator takes me to the roof deck. Moments later, I'm gazing at the bleacher seats and diamond of Busch Stadium while nursing a Bud as the sun casts the village in a hazy golden glow not unlike the beer itself.

A gladiatorial roar resounds from inside the Brew House. It startles me so much that I almost spill my beer onto the revelers in the streets below. I come from a town notorious for its sports fans, but the Cardinals crowd is famous for its fervor. Spend an hour with the masses at Ballpark Village and you'll feel like the next World Series trophy is right around the corner.

That's another neat thing about St. Louis. People here want to see each other win. But the game itself matters too—perhaps even more. Because there's a lot of fun to be had in proving yourself.

## Pitching in

I wake up early the next day and grab a cortado at Catalyst Coffee Bar—a gallery-cafe hybrid where you can walk in with a caffeine hankering and walk out with a



The barbecue at Sugarfire Smokehouse is worth the wait.





## Where the Art Is

**Catalyst Coffee Bar** / An extension of Art St. Louis—a nonprofit that supports local artists—this sleek coffeehouse doubles as an art gallery. Here, admiring patrons drift from one colorful canvas to another.

**Citygarden** / This sprawling (and free) urban sculpture park is one of the most enchanting places in Downtown St. Louis. Admire 24 original sculptures while wandering amid ginkgo biloba trees, rain gardens, and fountains.

**Grand Center Art District** / The city's creative epicenter, Grand Center is home to art galleries, theaters, and restaurants. Come here on the first Friday of each month for free admission to the museums and galleries.

chiaroscuro painting made by a local. Then I hike over to the T-Rex incubator, located on the upper floors of a high-rise that once housed a luxe furniture store.

At T-Rex, burgeoning entrepreneurs find mentors, workspace, and even funding. More than 200 businesses operate here, and as I walk the main floor, I can see commerce in action. Entering T-Rex is like stepping into a clubhouse full of people draped across couches with laptops and iced coffee. Except the vibe isn't clubby—it's crackling with collaborative activity. And strangely inviting. Within minutes, I'm ready to roll up my sleeves and create some spreadsheets.

T-Rex is one of three "innovation districts" in St. Louis where tech startups and companies are imagining (and patenting) the future of industries such as healthcare and agriculture. T-Rex just won a federal grant to establish an in-house geospatial technology hub. The incubator's recent "alumni" include Greetabl, which creates personalized gift cards and mystery gift boxes, and TopOpps, an AI development company that works with sales teams. On an emerald sofa by the T-Rex bar, I meet a young guy named Chisom Uche who's called St. Louis home since 2010. A former TopOpps marketing specialist, he now handles investor relations for the VC firm Cultivation Capital, which is located here in T-Rex.

"I moved to St. Louis to go to college, but as soon as sophomore year, this city had become so much more to

me," Uche says. "There's a real team-like outlook here. If you come with a dream, and if you put yourself out there, you'll find people who will listen to your idea and go, 'Sounds fun. Let's make it happen.'"

## Digging in

I take a ride over to St. Louis' Central West End to visit the Cortex Innovation Community, which has sleek, postmodern, box-like buildings that are home to corporations such as Centene, which designs and offers Medicaid products. But my destination in Cortex isn't a publicly traded company. It's Vicia, a "vegetable forward" restaurant that *USA Today* readers voted the No. 2 Best New Restaurant in America last year. After yesterday's barbecue blitz, I'm ready for a meal that allows roots and roughage to lead the way.

As I enter Vicia's cool interior, which has dark hardwood floors and decorative tree tendrils, I'm met by Tara Gallina. She launched Vicia with her husband, chef Michael Gallina, in 2017. Named after an herbaceous pea-family plant that restores

Northwest  
Berry Sorbet at  
Clementine's  
Naughty and  
Nice Creamery



nutrients to soil, Vicia began as a pop-up and evolved into a brick-and-mortar house of worship for regional foodies. Soon, writers from major publications took notice.

“Michael and I got to know each other around the kitchen and gardens of Blue Hill [at] Stone Barns,” Tara says, alluding to the New York restaurant where the two worked around 2004. “Back then, the

whole ‘farm-to-table’ concept was becoming a point of interest to diners.

And that’s where the ‘vegetable

forward’ idea sprang from. When you put vegetable proteins at the front of the menu, a local farmer’s harvest becomes an opportunity for creativity in the kitchen.”

As Tara takes a sip of nitro coffee, we’re joined by Michael, who’s dressed in his white chef’s coat and has just finished walking the floor staff through today’s menu. He suggests the chilled corn soup, which arrives moments later, sprinkled with buttery “popcorn powder,” a garnish

## After farm-to-table decadence, a taste of innovative ice cream.

that I will unsuccessfully attempt to replicate in my own kitchen after this trip. The accompanying cherry tomato salad is so sweet yet earthy that I can imagine Vicia’s cooks plucking the tomatoes from a raised garden in the back lot. Every bite keeps my palate in a state of excitement.

If dining at Vicia is an exercise in farm-to-table decadence, then going out for ice cream would be gourmand sacrilege, right? Wrong. That’s what I learn after saying bye to the Gallinas, venturing over to the leafier west side neighborhood of DeMun, and popping into a parlor with white brick walls and checkered floors. I’ve entered Clementine’s Naughty and Nice Creamery.

The owner, Tamara Keefe, walks me through a sampling of her wildly creative handmade flavors. These include Cup O Sunshine (with turmeric, ginger, and peppercorn) and a booze-infused B-52: ice cream with Kahlua, Irish cream, and Grand Marnier. The B-52 is one of Tamara’s “naughty” flavors for customers 21 and older. Her alcohol infusion process is patented.

“I partnered with a local food scientist to figure out how to freeze the alcohol,” Keefe says as I take a bite of her gooey butter cake ice cream (diversifying my gooey butter cake tour). “It took us about six months. Now some of the boozy flavors we offer can have up to 18 percent ABV.”



Usually, I'm happy to organize my trips around food, but I've eaten so much St. Louis fare I'm afraid I'll soon need someone to show up with a stretcher and carry me to the hotel. It's time to burn some calories. Lucky for everyone, St. Louis offers some of the greatest recreational destinations in America, and most of them are free.

## Playtime

No visit to St. Louis is complete without spending an afternoon roaming the groves, glades, and hills of Forest Park.



## Treasure Hunting

**Civil Alchemy** / A bright take on the general store, this chic boutique is one of the only places where you can pick up a bottle of lavender maple syrup or house-crafted gin and then assemble a bouquet of blossoms at a self-serve flower bar.

**STL-Style** / A huge kaleidoscopic mural is the first thing that greets you when you approach the entrance of this apparel shop. The artisan T-shirts and couture you'll find inside are visual tributes to the city's diversity and eccentricity.

**Plowsharing Crafts** / Artisan earrings, scarves, and even masks are among the eclectic treasures you'll encounter in this fair-trade store that helps makers from around the world find a market for their creations.

**The Green Shag Market** / No visit to a city as proudly zany as St. Louis is complete without some thrifting. This antique market is a labyrinth of relics, and you're as likely to find a bearskin rug as a series of postmodern clown paintings.

West of downtown, this resplendent 1,300-acre green space outdoes New York's Central Park in sheer size. It also features a generous menu of free outdoor activities. My first stop is the most famous and timeless: the St. Louis Zoo.

It features more than 16,000 animals, which means I have to orient myself by hopping on the Zooline Railroad and taking a ride through each wildlife area. After zipping out of a tunnel, the train rushes through a bamboo forest just in time for us to spot an elephant lumbering around the undergrowth. I disembark at Grizzly Ridge, where the resident bears are sunning themselves on rocks and gifting onlookers with priceless Instagram material. It's near 90 degrees today, so I cool down by heading into Penguin & Puffin Coast—which was one of the world's first zoo exhibits to eschew glass barriers. The interior is chilly enough to vaporize your breath, a reprieve from the inferno outside. The penguins are strutting around their rocky enclave, honking and splashing water on overjoyed visitors. The puffins, by contrast, are an unflappable crew, watching the world go by.

After spending two hours with Mother Nature's creations, I'm ready for something more meditative. So I take a long, bumbling walk along the Forest Park Trail network as the wind rustles the shagbark hickory leaves overhead. A staircase-shaped waterfall on a hillside is surrounded by picnicking families. Bicyclists ring their bells as they pass. Some tanned joggers and I exchange friendly nods. Later, I happen upon a cerulean pond full of people in paddleboats. I'm tempted to scrap my plans for the evening, rent a boat for an hour, and join them. But another St. Louis landmark is beckoning, just a few steps away.

The Muny is the oldest and largest outdoor musical theater in America. It's located in the heart of Forest Park. Families are already lining up for tonight's show, *Annie*. Some of them are here for the free seats that are given out on a first-come, first-served basis. Other ticket holders are stocking up on popcorn and candy before the "lights" go down. Hidden in the snack crowd is Mike Isaacson, a Broadway veteran who's now the Muny's artistic director. He's dressed in shorts and a polo shirt, eating an ice cream sandwich, when I meet up with him.

"The audience at the Muny is a theater crowd with a sports team mentality," Isaacson says as we walk around the 11,000-seat amphitheater, which is bathed in purple evening light. "One night, we did a production of *My Fair Lady* that kept getting interrupted by thunderstorms. But most people stayed in their seats! The show didn't finish until 1 a.m., and they all stuck it out. They wanted to beat the elements. They wanted to win."

An hour later, every seat in the Muny is occupied. I'm in the center with an ace view of the stage. *Annie* has just flown the coop at Miss Hannigan's orphanage. Daddy Warbucks is back from his business trip and looking haggard. Ominous clouds are amassing overhead. Nobody notices or cares. The show will go on.



Under the stars, the Muny shines.

## The unfinished chapter

The next day, I'm sitting in the shade near west Forest Park, sipping espresso and talking with Vin Ko. Born to Chinese parents and raised in St. Louis, Ko is a senior program manager at the St. Louis Mosaic Project—a regional initiative among companies and civic leaders to create and support business opportunities for immigrants and attract international talent to the city. St. Louis has welcomed thousands from Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Southeast Asia. The city has the largest Bosnian population outside of Europe.

“Our goal at Mosaic Project is to make St. Louis the fastest-growing city for immigrants in America by 2020,” Ko says. “Immigration is part of our history, going all the way back to the era when St. Louis was founded. It’s a huge chapter of our story that’s still happening.”

I met with Ko not only to learn about the immigrant experience in St. Louis, but also the millennial experience. Young people have been flocking here too, enticed by the affordable housing, free cultural offerings, and the welcoming nature of the entrepreneurial scene. So Ko, who’s 30, has gamely recruited friends and planned a tour of Tower Grove South, one of the city’s youngest and most socioeconomically diverse neighborhoods.

At Brasilia, a sunlit Brazilian restaurant on South Grand Boulevard in Tower Grove South, I meet with Ko



Julio Zegarra-Ballon, founder of Zee Bee Market

and his friends over tostada de camarao (shrimp toast) and vegetarian paella. Ko’s partner, Sarah Arnosky, regales us with gritty, kneecap-busting stories of her local roller derby team, the Arch Rival All-Stars. They’re about to fly to Spain for an international competition. A teammate of Sarah’s, Amy Bellm, is sitting across from me. A grad student at the University of Missouri–St. Louis, she’s usually found instructing social work majors and fulfilling her research duties on campus. But the food at Brasilia—and the company—has proven a welcome diversion.

Bellies full, we stroll up South Grand and breeze through Zee Bee Market, a fair-trade store loaded with colorful fabrics, earrings, and tchotchkes—and check out a swanky comic book bar and lounge called Apotheosis Comics. As we continue our sunset pilgrimage down the street, another member of our crew, Shayn Prapaisilp, ushers us into Jay International Food Co., a global provisions market that his parents founded after moving to St. Louis from Thailand. It’s the first marketplace I’ve been to in America where I’ve encountered uncut jackfruit—a gargantuan green orb that looks like a dragon egg and is often used as a meat substitute.

We trek southeast through a sleepy neighborhood of brick houses that are redder than Mars dust. (The bricks are made from local clay, which is prized for its rich hue.) Ko takes a right turn onto Cherokee





## Nighborhoods to Explore

**Tower Grove South** / Built around a sprawling park, Tower Grove South is one of the area's most vibrant hoods. Home to many artists and immigrants, this is where the pulse of young St. Louis is as loud as a drumbeat.

**Soulard** / The oldest neighborhood in St. Louis is a tribute to the city's French immigrant founders. Whether you're seeking live music of the sultriest order, a hearty dinner, or perhaps a Budweiser draft from the brewery, you'll find it in Soulard.

**University City** / The neighborhood (especially the Delmar Loop section) near Washington University is a decadent and lively corridor of international restaurants, boutiques, and clubs. Among the latter is Blueberry Hill, where Chuck Berry once shredded.

**Central West End** / The tree-lined streets, galleries, and cafes that fill this romantic neighborhood bring to mind an afternoon in Berlin. (Fun fact: Tennessee Williams grew up here.) You'll also find lots of public art. The Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis alone contains one of the world's largest mosaic collections.

Street and we enter Gravois Park, a neighborhood crowded with pedestrians. We hit up a neon-colored snack bar called The Taco & Ice Cream Joint, where we treat ourselves to the creamiest paletas I've had in years.

We're joined here by three more of Ko's friends. There's Diana Zeng, a local painter; Bomi Park, assistant project manager at the World Trade Center St. Louis; and Keisha Mabry, an author and speaker who travels the world to teach people about cultivating friendships organically. Her book, *Hey Friend: 100 Ways to Connect With 100 People in 100 Days*, is drawn from

her experience as a St. Louis transplant. "Whatever you're here to do, somebody knows somebody," Mabry says. "Getting out there as much as possible and putting yourself in that one person's path is the key to making your thing happen."

It's getting dark now—the perfect hour for craft beer. Ko guides us over to Earthbound Beer, where co-founder Stuart Keating is holding court at the bar. Keating is an environmental lawyer who still finds time to practice law while dry-hopping IPAs and foraging the nearby woods for oak leaves that will go into Earthbound's jet-black Dead Druid King beer.

With an aggressively hoppy ale in hand, I follow Keating down into Earthbound's catacomb-like cellars, where the kegs are stored. Along for the tour is Carlos Restrepo, a native Colombian who came to St. Louis to be a journalist and is now part of the city's Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

"The old America that people dream about is here in Cherokee," Restrepo says as we pass pallets of cans that will soon be filled with beer. "This is a city where you can still get [things] done."

Did he expect St. Louis to be that way when he arrived? "Not at all." Restrepo shakes his head. "When you're an immigrant, you have to make it wherever you end up. There's no Plan B."

## Can-do spirit

I'm supposed to go home now. But I don't want to. St. Louis has cast a spell on me. Leaving now would feel like walking out on a big project that your friends are really excited about. That's what St. Louis feels like: a workshop of wonders and creators that's inexplicably flying under the radar.

I decide to reschedule my flight and savor the "let's do this!" spirit of St. Louis for a little while longer. In the morning, I take a ride to the suburb of Clayton for coffee with Andy Taylor, the CEO of Enterprise Rent-A-Car. The Taylor family has invested millions here in the Arch, parks, and museums. Andy himself co-led the recent renovation of the Arch grounds.

"I've never been more optimistic about St. Louis than I am now," Taylor says. "We're an affordable town, we're a charitable town, and there's so much interesting stuff going on here. That's a lure, and people are biting."

Brunch is next. The joint is Sardella, an Italian-influenced restaurant in Clayton that was founded by Gerard Craft, whose gourmet restaurants have put St. Louis in the foodie atlas. Craft—bearded, tattooed, and soft-spoken—swings by my table to say hello as I wolf down ricotta-stuffed ravioli with brown butter hollandaise sauce and a side of zucchini. He sends me on the road with a sugar-raised doughnut the size of a Roomba.

I spend the afternoon on the west side of downtown, climbing through wire tunnels and caves at the City

Next year, Union Station will feature an aquarium.



Museum—which is what would happen if you challenged local artists to design the world’s largest jungle gym. That’s how this place came into being, and I’m awestruck. One climbing route takes me to a school bus that’s securely balanced on the roof of the building. Another passage leads to a 10-story slide that spirals down through a factory-like atrium. By the time I reach the rooftop Ferris wheel, my T-shirt is almost translucent with sweat.

I return to Cherokee Street for a last supper of Southeast Asian diner-style food at Vista, which just debuted a new menu. As I tuck into my cheeseburger with fish sauce pickles, I notice two people waving at me from across the room. It’s the Gallinas. They’ve managed to escape Vicia for a quick bite. But as I head over to their table to say hi, something else distracts me. Outside, legions of naked bicyclists are pedaling along Cherokee. This is the St. Louis World Naked Bike Ride, an annual ritual that I would have never known about had I taken my original flight home.

Every time you think you’re ready to go, this city finds a new way to pull you back in.

## All aboard

I wrap things up at Union Station. Not long ago, the place was a post-apocalyptic wreck of crumbling bricks and decades of dust buildup. But today, the station has been polished and transformed into a boutique hotel and mall. The once-dilapidated hotel hall now features mosaic artwork, landscape murals, and a great, gleaming Roaring ’20s-style bar. The sprawling glass train shed is rented out for conventions. But now plans are underway for this part of



Union Station to get a new addition—St. Louis’ first aquarium.

I wander around the train shed, imagining where the shark tank and the “touch pool” will be placed. Somebody cooked up the idea of putting sea creatures in a train station, and the city is running with it. And if everything I’ve seen and heard in St. Louis is any measure, the aquarium will be a big winner.

The grand opening is expected to take place next year.

I’ll be there.

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