Ann Arbor: a college town with class

Craft an accessible getaway combining sophisticated food and art scenes with easygoing outdoor offerings

BY MEL BORINS

Ann Arbor, located about an hour and a half from Windsor, Ont., has it all. With a population of 100,000 people—including some 18,000 undergraduate students from the University of Michigan—you get the impression of visiting a small town, but one with big-city sophistication. The few or so streets that make up the downtown area are lined with gourmet restaurants, sidewalk cafes, fancy boutiques, art galleries and antique stores. You can get all the perks of a large city but you don’t have to walk down a retail tunnel, get overwhelmed by shoppies or get knocked down by oblivious pedestrians.

Kayak through the city

Ann Arbor has a remarkable park system, providing a natural setting in an urban environment. The highlight was taking a kayak down the Huron River, the cleanest urban river in Michigan. The waterway has a real feel despite running through the city.

The City of Ann Arbor Parks and Recreation has two locations, one at Argo Park and the other at Gallup Park, providing some age boats. You can rent kayaks, canoes and rafts and paddle to your heart’s content. I rented a kayak for a full day visit. If you go kayaking on the Huron River, you will likely see an abundance of waterfowl. I even saw a trumpeter swan at one point along the river.

My next very casual dining experience was at Frita Batidos. The menu is seasonal, and most ingredients are locally sourced from small farms. The dishes were Cuban-inspired and served in a fun and friendly setting. I recommend the fixed plantains, which come seasoned with garlic, cinnamon and a spicy mayo sauce for dipping. It goes nicely with guacamole.

Mani Osteria and Bar served creative, delicious food featuring wood-fired pizza and freshly made pasta. To satisfy my lactose-intolerant palate, I had the most exquisite pita chips, onion and tomato pizza with no cheese. If you are a wine connoisseur then try Vinology, which specializes in fine wines from all over the world. Here the focus is on wine tasting, with food as background. Even my primitive wine-tasting abilities could appreciate some of the choices that were suggested with each course we ate.

Thad Gillies is co-owner and chef at the elegant Beiro Logan.

The food was carefully prepared and displayed, and well worth a visit. I especially appreciated the effort of duck leg. It came with fingerling potatoes, cipollini onions and mashed potatoes, and was garnished with a pickled black grape salad and savory duck reduction seasoned with whole-grain Dijon.

I had an unforgettable smoked meat sandwich topped with cole slaw, caramelized onions, Dijon mustard and pickeled beets at Performance Network Theatre and Restaurant, one of Ann Arbor’s well-known gourmet restaurants.

The deli began small, serving a few sandwiches, traditional Jewish dishes and a small selection of specialty foods. Today, the deli serves thousands of sandwiches and doubles as a specialty-foods store, selling a variety of cheeses, meats, olives, oils, vinegars, coffee, teas and much more. All of these items (except the sandwiches) are available by mail.

Concert series

I picked up my sandwich at Zingerman’s and walked over to the Liberty Plate, a local blues and jazz singer/guitarist Larry Al-Saadi was belting out tunes. He’s an inspirational talent and I listened to his whole show while sitting on a bench, along with hundreds of other tourists and locals. This event was part of Sonic Lunch, a free summer outdoor concert series held in the park every Thursday from June to the end of August. Each week Sonic Lunch features a live band and a different restaurant on-site selling a special Sonic Lunch for concert-goers. The other restaurants downtown offer special discount concert lunches to pick up and take home.

Live theatre

Ann Arbor is a good destination for live theatre, with the Performing Arts Network Theatre and Jeff Daniels’ Purple Rose Theatre Company offering performances throughout the year. Last year at the performing arts Network Theatre, you could see a unique performance of A Midsummer Night’s Dream in the Nichols Arboretum at the University of Michigan. There was no fixed stage and the play was performed in several locations

The college town of Ann Arbor, Mich., offers a range of outdoor activities, including paddling the lovely Huron River through the heart of the city (above) and a theatre company performing Shakespeare in a local park. The city is also a foodie’s delight, with fresh food at the local farmers’ market (below) and popular restaurants such as Zingerman’s Delicatessen.

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Mel Borins is a family physician in Toronto.