



Photos by Lauren Justice for The Washington Post

You're going where?

Madison, Wis.

The Badger State capital is the quintessential college town — packed with trendy restaurants, bars and shops — and is likely to satisfy all tastes.

By Kate Silver Jan. 22, 2020



Long before I visited Madison, Wis., I overheard a conversation among three women that went something like this: Woman No. 1: “I’m from the Madison area.” Woman No. 2: “Oh, I love Madison.” Woman No. 3: “Madison is like Sara Lee. Nobody doesn’t like Madison.”



I've since visited the city enough times to know that woman No. 3 might well be right. Madison is, in so many ways, the quintessential Midwestern city, from its inviting downtown, perched on an isthmus between [Lake Monona](#) and [Lake Mendota](#), to its character-filled neighborhoods, hiking and biking trails (200-plus miles of them) and ever-present green space, including 260 parks and beaches.

Madison is both the Wisconsin state capital, with about 250,000 residents, and a spirited college town, home to the [University of Wisconsin at Madison](#), with about 40,000 students. You can't miss either aspect. The carefully planned area around the Capitol building, called [Capitol Square](#), is packed with trendy restaurants, bars, shops and music venues that appeal to residents as well as visitors. And the campus? It's a straight shot down State Street, past about a mile of beer and coffee bars, restaurants, boutiques, ice cream shops, a modern art museum and performing arts center.

It's a place where you can get your fill of traditional Wisconsin indulgences, like Friday night fish fries and old-fashionedes made with brandy, while finding a healthy balance, as the locals do, in countless outdoor activities — water sports, cycling and running in warmer months; cross-country skiing, snow shoeing and ice fishing during the long winter. If you're coming from a larger city, Madison is an easygoing break from the chaos. If you're coming from a smaller town, it's a culture-filled adventure.

Is it true that nobody doesn't like this town? You'll have to see for yourself.



Local faves

The bundled-up winter personality of Madison is quite different from its carefree summer self. Thankfully, one beloved mainstay is available throughout all seasons: the **Dane County Farmers' Market**. It stakes its claim as the largest producer-only farmers market in the United States (meaning the people you buy from are the people who produced the products — no reselling is allowed), and, while its late-winter version (Saturdays through April 4) is more staid than the downtown summer incarnations (surrounding the Capitol building Saturdays and Wednesdays in the 200 block of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, April-November) there's something especially gratifying about perusing hardy produce and products — greens, apples, honey, potatoes, mushrooms, cheese curds, pastries and more — when it's frigid outside. This year, the winter market is in a new location inside the historical [Garver Feed Mill](#), a stately brick building recently renovated and reopened as a hub for small, locally owned businesses (a spa, a yoga studio, kombucha) and restaurants.

For a midsize town, Madison draws some impressive talent from around the world to its many storied venues. A few years ago, I saw Josh Ritter at the **Majestic Theatre**, an intimate space that dates back to the early 1900s. On this recent trip, we were more spontaneous and bought last-minute tickets to see a standup comedy show at, again, the Majestic. Had we not lucked out with that performance — conveniently located a few minutes' walk from our downtown hotel — we might have checked out someplace like the [Sylvee](#), which recently drew the likes of Lizzo, Lana Del Rey and Vampire Weekend; [High Noon Saloon](#), which brings in national and local acts and hosts the storytelling event, [the Moth](#); the [Barrymore Theatre](#), where you might find Mat Kearny performing one day and a fly-fishing film fest the next; or one of the many other entertainment options, from hole-in-the-wall to stadium-sized.



Garver Feed Mill is home to the winter farmers market and is also a hub for small, locally owned businesses.



Left: Barbara Frye gives a tour of the Wisconsin State Capitol building, which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2017. **Right:** The Barrymore Theatre is one of the many storied venues in Madison that draws impressive talent from around the world.

Guidebook musts

Downtown, all roads pretty much lead to the **Wisconsin State Capitol building**. And yet, we didn't originally plan to go inside, until, on a lazy Saturday morning, my husband points toward the dome and proclaims, "There are people up there!" With that, we had a new mission: Become the people up there. Exploring the building, which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2017, turns out to be one of the more memorable endeavors of the trip. We pass by elaborate statues, shuffle by hand-carved furniture, admire the many different types of marble and stone (43 types, to be exact), and stifle giggles at a carved badger head (this is the Badger State, after all). On the sixth floor, a docent points us up a tight, winding staircase that leads to the outdoor observation deck, where we take in views all across the isthmus. Back inside on the sixth floor, we walk through a small museum documenting the architecture and history of the building. There, the same docent points to a mural above us, explaining that the women in the painting are holding objects related to Wisconsin. We squint to see. "They're not cheese curds or beer, believe it or not," he chuckles.

Indoor activities are a must for blustery Wisconsin winter days (are you noticing a theme here?), and **Madison Museum of Contemporary Art** (MMoCA) is a small but mighty diversion — bonus that it's free and not far from the Capitol. The building itself is a sight to behold. Designed by architect César Pelli, the dramatic walls of glass look like a translucent ship slicing into the intersection of State and Henry streets. On display through Feb. 16 is "Wisconsin Triennial," showcasing paintings, drawings, sculptures and more from artists around the state. Beyond the galleries, a rooftop sculpture garden lures visitors up three stories of glass stairs to the tippy top (in my case, past a newlywed couple patiently pausing between photos to allow visitors to pass). On inclement days, the sculptures are best viewed from Fresco, the adjoining bar/restaurant.



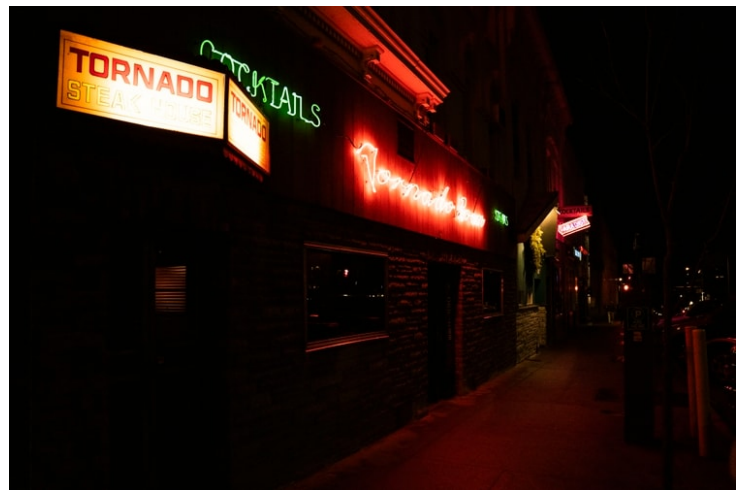
Local faves

It's a good thing we meet up with friends — who also happen to be regulars — at **Mint Mark**, a shareable, small-plates restaurant in the Schenk-Atwood neighborhood, because it allows us to try more than half of the 14 items on the ever-changing menu. A hearty cheese plate, mussels and frites, a divine biscuit, duck terrine, kale salad, cauliflower, salt cod fritters, a skillet cookie — we eat with abandon, while sipping first on artful craft cocktails and then switching to \$6 brandy old-fashioned on tap. Because we scored seats at the “chefs table” (i.e. a four-seat bar peering into the kitchen), we're able to chat with the outgoing kitchen team and watch our meal come together, piece by delectable piece.

If you ask around for the best brunch in Madison, you'll get a lot of hemming and hawing, and out of that hemming and hawing, at least one answer will probably be **Sardine**. The French bistro serves dinner throughout the week, too, but the daytime hours are ideal, at least in winter, for taking in the floor-to-ceiling views of Lake Monona, upon which the restaurant gazes. The pastries are a beautiful start to the meal (we had a photogenic blueberry Danish), and entrees are creative, ranging from crab, bacon lardon and shrimp cakes to baked creamed eggs with prosciutto, spinach and Gruyere cheese. The omelets, like the one I had with fine herbs and Gruyere, double as an excuse to eat frites before noon.



The Old Fashioned bar and restaurant specializes in all things Wisconsin, including a Friday night fish fry.



Left: Mint Mark, a shareable, small-plates restaurant, features an ever-changing menu and \$6 brandy old-fashioned on tap. **Right:** The basement of the Tornado Club Steak House is a perfect place to cap off an evening, with late-night cocktails and a satisfying beef tenderloin sandwich.

Guidebook musts

At 5 p.m. on a Friday night in late December, when surrounding high-end restaurants are eerily quiet, **the Old Fashioned** has a line out the door. What's the fuss? All things Wisconsin, served steps from the Capitol building. This bustling bar and restaurant pays homage to classic American Dairyland favorites, such as supper clubs, cheese, beer, sausages, pickled eggs and, tonight, the Friday night fish fry. The crisp perch and walleye are standouts (we also tried the cod), and salty meals pair perfectly with a sweet, namesake old-fashioned. Although the menu offers nine old-fashioned options, made with bourbon, whiskey, rye and even rum, we both opt for versions made with brandy — known to some as the unofficial state cocktail — and drink as the locals do.

Upstairs, it's retro classy with its white linen tablecloths, wood-paneled walls, 28-ounce rib-eye and oysters Rockefeller. But when the clock strikes 10 p.m., the basement of **Tornado Club Steak House** grows progressively louder and, shall we say, less inhibited as it bursts with people who are well into their evening cocktails and looking for a satisfying \$10 beef tenderloin sandwich, a side of onion rings — or perhaps escargots — and an unforgettable pineapple upside down cake. The late-night lounge scene, which burns brightly until 1 a.m., is the maraschino cherry on a brandy old-fashioned-filled night.



Local faves

Change is the kind of boutique where, if you select a necklace or dress to try on, the staff knows the backstory of the product (for me, it was a necklace made by a local jewelry maker). Much time and thought is put into selecting each eco-friendly item at this shop, whether it's a scarf woven in Vietnam or a sweater knitted in Peru. You can feel good about shopping here, knowing that the artisans who made the products were paid a fair

wage. It's fitting that the shop, which is owned by a local mom, is located on Williamson Street — a.k.a. Willy Street — in an area made famous by its progressive roots.

Hazel General Store is that gift shop that all cities of all sizes should have. Maybe you know what I'm talking about: the kind of place that carries socks illustrated with flying tacos, jewelry made by local artists, American-made T-shirts referencing beer and cats, and do-it-yourself catapult kits. All of the shelves and walls here are adorned with items you never knew existed but suddenly must have. Come to browse, leave toting a woodcut sloth magnet.



Hazel General Store on Willy Street carries items such as socks with flying tacos to do-it-yourself catapult kits.



Left: Sam Parker is co-owner of Context, a menswear store where artisans craft leather belts and wallets on site. **Right:** Change is an eco-friendly boutique where shoppers might find a scarf woven in Vietnam or a sweater knitted in Peru.

Guidebook musts

You have to love that there's an artisanal cheese shop in the shadow of the Capitol building. The cheesemongers at **Fromagination** are happy to chat about — and share samples of — all things fromage, whether it's made locally or imported from afar. The shop is also chockablock with souvenirs, such as locally made beer (the farmhouse ale, Spotted Cow, from [New Glarus Brewing](#), is a cult classic, although I prefer the brewery's pale ale, Moon Man), made-in-Madison cookies and chocolates, olive oil, cheese boards, and so much more. For a truly Wisconsin experience, check out their list of classes on all things cheese held Thursday nights. Recent examples include courses on cheese and beer, cheese and chocolate, and how to build a cheeseboard.

If luck is on your side at **Context**, a rugged yet artisanal menswear store in Capitol Square, you can actually see the artisan at work, crafting leather belts and wallets on site or in a workshop in the adjacent arcade (the leatherwork is sold under the [First Settlement Goods](#) brand). The small shop is also stocked with American-made boots, denim, flannel and wool work shirts, bags and accessories, displayed tastefully amid circus posters and vintage art, with the occasional punctuation of a mounted dead animal.



Local fave

Paint cans, paint rollers, paint murals, paint drops — the lobby, hallways, restaurant and splashy guest rooms at **Hotel Indigo Madison Downtown** are covered in the paint theme, and for good reason. The hotel, which opened last spring, pays homage in the most colorful way to the building's history as the Mautz Paint Company, which operated here for about 60 years. The staff is chatty and eager to make recommendations on what to see and do during your stay. And the location, a bit east of the heart of downtown, is a good launching point for exploring nearby neighborhoods. Capitol Square is about a 15-minute walk, and the restaurants, bakeries and shops of Willy Street, known for its hippie heritage, are a five-minute walk (there's also a complimentary hotel shuttle that will drop you off and pick you up around town on request).



The Edgewater is the area's only four-diamond hotel and features a skating rink during the winter months.



Left: Hotel Indigo Madison Downtown pays homage to the building's history as the Mautz Paint Company, with colorfully themed designs throughout. **Right:** A large paint can greets guests at Hotel Indigo, which opened last spring and is perfectly located to explore surrounding neighborhoods.

Guidebook must

Elvis Presley, Bob Hope, Bob Marley, Elton John and the Dalai Lama have all graced the hallowed hallways here at **the Edgewater**, which dates back to 1948 and is the area's only four-diamond hotel. The Art Moderne-style hotel, which was majorly overhauled in 2014, has the undeniably posh air of a resort, with its Lake Mendota views, spiral staircase, bustling ballrooms, multiple restaurants, spa and, in the winter, an ice-skating rink by the lake. I was pleasantly surprised to have a room — and large bathroom — that look out on the lake, even though I didn't opt to pay extra for lake views when I made my reservation. Geographically speaking, the Edgewater is a 10-minute walk to the restaurants, bars and entertainment of Capitol Square, yet still feels a serene distance from the fray.



Explore

Local fave

Having spent time in a fair number of hippie havens (I briefly lived in both Oberlin, Ohio, and Boulder, Colo.), I associate them all with a particular shared smell: garlic, with an underscore of crisp toast. That's exactly what wafts beneath my nose on Willy Street in the Williamson-Marquette neighborhood — outside of the **Willy Street Co-op**, located about a mile and a half east of the Capitol. I'd already passed by a mural at the [Social Justice Center](#) detailing the 1970s vision of the area, when artists, musicians, poets and activists created their own countercultural enclave here, and the scent reinforces that the hippie vibe is still alive and well, if tempered by time, gentrification and a couple of CBD stores. A stroll along Willy Street, with its mix of comic books, vegan food, old and new bakeries, thrift shopping, cold-pressed juices and a float therapy center, reveals a side of Madison well worth exploring. It has the feel — and smell — I've come to expect from a liberal college town.



John Herbst, a volunteer at Olbrich Botanical Gardens, checks out the fish swimming in a stream below.



Left: One Barrel is one of the craft breweries located in the trendy Schenk-Atwood neighborhood. **Right:** Murals alongside the Social Justice Center detail the 1970s vision of the area.

Guidebook must

Trendy restaurants. Craft breweries. Lakeside parks. You could easily spend a day exploring **Schenk-Atwood** (also known as Atwood or Schenk-Atwood-Starkweather-Yahara), east of Williamson-Marquette. It's a little bit artsy and a little bit funky, with a welcoming neighborhood feel. Start the day at the tropical [Olbrich Botanical Gardens](#), where \$2 gets you entry into the warm, lush, glass pyramid known as the Bolz Conservatory. Birds chirp, streams trickle, skin hydrates and memories of warmer times surface (in nicer weather, you'll also want to wander the 16 acres of outdoor gardens, as well as the neighboring [Olbrich Park](#), on the shore of Lake Monona). For lunch, visit Garver Feed Mill for a slice of [Ian's Pizza](#) (I recommend the mac and cheese, odd as it may sound) and a scoop of [Calliope](#) ice cream, which comes in funky flavors such as brandy old-fashioned and jalapeño cornbread. Then, grab a beer or two at one of the neighborhood breweries — [One Barrel](#) is a great place to start — and peruse what's happening at the historical Barrymore Theatre, known to some as “the cultural heart” of Madison's east side.

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About this story

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