

Milwaukee:

Out of the Ordinary

By Mary Welch



When we told associates we were going to Milwaukee for a vacation, the response was quicker than a two-step polka: “WHY?” Well, the official answer doesn’t matter. What does matter is that Milwaukee is a great place for a getaway whether the purpose is business or, in our case, pleasure.

Milwaukee has been called the farthest Eastern city in the West. By that it means that one will find in Milwaukee what makes the cities of the East so magnificent – lots of neighborhoods with ethnic flavors, fabulous museums and a walking city full of culture, sights, sounds, smells and activity.

We based our adventure at the historic Pfister Hotel, which was proudly penned the “Grand Hotel of the West” when it opened in 1893. Built by Guido Pfister and his son, Charles, the hotel cost \$1 million to build – a price tag almost unheard of in its day – and featured such groundbreaking features as fireproofing, electricity and thermostat controls in every room.

The Pfister has since added a 23-story guest room tower (complete with a heated pool on the top floor) and features the largest Victorian art collection by any hotel in the world. The Pfister truly executes such superb

service that it’s no wonder that most of our Presidents stay there – as well a number of Atlanta’s professional sports teams.

In addition to its meeting rooms and great restaurants (the recently opened Mason Street Grill even had the cab drivers talking), the Pfister offers visitors unparalleled concierge service staffed by professionals who can score last minute game tickets as well as plot an itinerary that showcases the city at its best and precisely to each person’s tastes.

We had a few items on our agenda.

We wanted to see Milwaukee’s most famous export – beer – being made. We wanted to visit a cheese factory and Milwaukee’s art museum, which was designed by Santiago Caltrava. We wanted to experience a real German restaurant and another local culinary favorite – a fish fry.

And what better to do after some sausage and local homemade beer – go bowling!

If Laverne and Shirley could do it, well, so could we – at the 80-year old Landmark Lanes where little has changed over the years. Scores, for example, are still kept with a proper pencil and paper!

Sandwiched in between Lake Michigan and the Milwaukee River, the city was founded in 1818 by a French-Canadian fur trader named Solomon Juneau. It is a city of immigrants who adapted to the New World but didn’t entirely leave the old.

There are wonderful Irish pubs, Italian delis and pizza parlors, and fish fry restaurants, as well as a myriad other ethnic restaurants mixed with the leftovers of the hippie influx with vintage re-sale shops, and tattoo parlors as well as art deco movie theaters. Whether you’ve wondered into the Historic Third Ward, Brady Street, North Avenue, East Town or Downer Avenue – you will find something to intrigue you, look through, eat or drink.

The city is also quite intent on – as someone said to me – keeping its young people from going to Atlanta. The downtown area is experiencing a revival as new sushi bars and sleek restaurants are popping up throughout the area alongside new lofts.

Several restaurants stand out. There are two well-known German places: Karl Ratzsch’s, which was opened in 1904 as Hermann’s Café and Mader’s. At Karl Ratzsch’s, we opted for the breaded veal cutlet layered with smoked port, Ementhauler cheese, spinach served over spatzle. Another culinary home run was the Usinger’s European sampler, which included knackwurst, Hungarian sausage and bratwurst with sauerkraut. Usinger’s, by the way, is a few blocks away and makes its own sausages both for retail and shipping.

Mader’s is another famous local eatery that was founded by Charles Mader in 1902 and served “Cream City” beer for three cents. His was the first restaurant to offer a legal stein of beer following Prohibition.

The Pfister’s Mason Street Grill which offers wood-fired pizzas and steaks, is an intriguing restaurant, especially for women. While a lot of steak places overwhelm with oversized portions, this restaurant doesn’t. Not that the ribeye we ordered was small – but it was a perfectly sized cut of meat. The accompanying Caesar salad was also appropriate. Another feature is that the restaurant has a long dining bar overlooking the kitchen, which was a perfect choice for several men and women dining alone who preferred a seat at the counter to being alone in a booth. A nice option, especially for a business traveler.

Another culinary home run is Mimma’s Café, run by Mimma, a Sicilian immigrant and her family. Whether it’s pasta or the homemade gelato, Mimma’s food is worthy of a visit.

There are several nearby side trips worth seeing. Of course, the national breweries such as Pabst and Miller offer tours, but we opted to go a few miles outside the city to visit Sprecher’s Brewery, a family-owned brewery that makes 12 beers and seven sodas.

While the actual brewery isn’t working during the tours, the inventive and amusing



tour guide gave his impersonation of what the bottles would look and sound like coming down the assembly line by clanking them together on the conveyor belt. While you may miss out on a little authenticity, what makes Sprecher’s special is that it also makes soda, thus allowing children to partake in the best part of the visit – the after-tour drinking. Yes, it was adults to the left for beer and kids and nondrinkers to the right for root beer, ginger ale, ravin’ red and orange cream.

Around the corner from Sprecher’s are two other local institutions, Solly’s Grille and Kopps Frozen Custard. Solly’s, according to *USA Today*, serves one of the top 10 hamburgers joints in the country. We can’t verify that because the service was so rude, we walked out. Frankly our lunch was just as satisfying at Cousin’s subs and we had some hospitality – if not exactly Southern.

In Memphis, you’ll find people walking down Beale Street debating the merits of various bar-b-que joints; in Milwaukee, it’s frozen custards. One seems to be either a Kopps fan or Leon’s. We didn’t try Leon’s but we’ll put our vote of confidence on Kopps. It was delightfully rich, bursting with flavor and features and a great 50’s diner experience.

We also ventured to about 20 miles outside the city to Theresa, home of Widmer’s Cheese Cellars, which has been making cheese since 1922. Interestingly, the current

master cheese maker Joe Widmer says the business may be passed down to his daughter rather than his son because she, even at age 11, is showing a passion for cheese making. A real treat is hot cheese curds fresh out of the basin, which melt in your mouth. Note of caution... if you eat a cold cheese curd, it squeaks when you chew it.

Who knew?

Our final destination was to the city’s art museum, made even more famous for being the first completed building by Santiago Caltrava in this country. Admittedly, we failed to get the excitement when the Atlanta Symphony announced that Caltrava would design its \$300 million symphony hall. But, if Caltrava achieves anything close in Atlanta as to what he did in Milwaukee, it’s a bargain. His museum is visually striking, enhances the waterfront in almost inconceivable ways and was incredibly functional.

Why go to Milwaukee? Several reasons that might not come to you quickly. First, it’s actually a relatively short flight (1 hour 40 minutes) from Atlanta so it’s perfect for a quick getaway. But once you’re there, visitors have a menu of sporting, cultural, and culinary selections.

You’ll be pleasantly surprised. Like biting into a hot dog and instead of discovering a packaged generic hot dog, you’ll get a garlic cheese bratwurst that was probably made that day instead. ♀