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Why Is Milwaukee Becoming a Mecca for Visitors?

Our city gains national attention for food, culture and hospitality

BY ERIN BERGE

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Consistent through many nationally published articles on Milwaukee are the city's restaurants, Downtown activities and arts scene, along with its Midwestern hospitality. This year, Milwaukee will have a chance to showcase what it has to offer in front of the eyes of the world. "2020 really is the year of Milwaukee," says Kristin Settle, director of communications at VISIT Milwaukee, the city's visitors and convention bureau. Publications like *Forbes*, *The New York Times* and *Travel Leisure* have all featured Milwaukee in their top 2020 destinations, mentioning many of the city's restaurants, breweries and activities.

The DNC will bring around 50,000 people to the city from July 13-16. According to Settle, VISIT Milwaukee is not frightened by this number. Festivals like Summerfest bring in 800,000 people annually, and VISIT Milwaukee is prepared. According to her, tourism supports more than 52,000 full-time jobs in Milwaukee, and Settle is hoping the DNC will showcase what Milwaukee has to offer to increase tourism in the future. "[Many of] those 50,000 people have never been to Milwaukee, so we are defining ourselves as a city to a whole new group of people," she says.

Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett spoke about the DNC during his State of the City address, mentioning the values that unite Milwaukee with the convention. "Now obviously, Wisconsin is a swing state, but there is another reason they are coming here. There is something special going on in Milwaukee, and we have the opportunity to tell the world our story," the mayor said. "The people of Milwaukee will be great convention ambassadors. I know that." According to the DNC website, the convention chose Milwaukee because of its "hard-working people, vibrant

Visitors for the DNC will experience Fiserv Forum, which opened in 2018 and remains the “largest development project ever undertaken in Downtown Milwaukee,” according to the venue’s website. The sleek curve of the building houses 200 events a year, including the Milwaukee Bucks’ home games. Just outside Fiserv Forum, visitors can experience a small taste of Wisconsin beer and the love of sports and games in the “Deer District.” Bars in the Milwaukee area could remain open as late as 4 a.m. during the convention *if* a bill recently sent by the Wisconsin Assembly to the state Senate becomes law.



PHOTO CREDIT: FISERV FORUM

“The convention gives us a chance to tell our story, and we’re eager to do so. It’s a story of hard-working, resilient people, innovative companies, great natural beauty and cultural and entertainment assets galore,” Barrett said in his address.

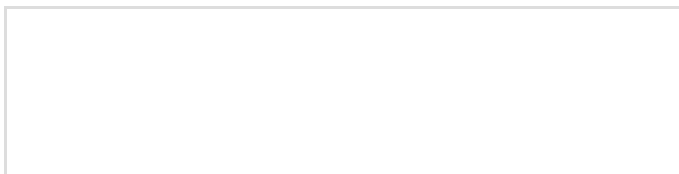
Milwaukee Gains International Attention with Viking Cruises

Viking Cruises has taken thousands of passengers on voyages to places such as Antarctica, Europe, Russia and Egypt. In 2022, they will bring tours throughout the Great Lakes region. According to Adam Schlicht, director of the Port of Milwaukee, Viking Cruises was impressed by Milwaukee’s ability to take care of their passengers upon arrival and make them feel welcome. Some ports don’t have access to the heart of their city, but Milwaukee is five minutes from the port to Downtown. Passengers will have easy access to restaurants, events and local shops.

Great Lakes ports in the U.S. and Canada. “The new tourism is great, but there’s another part of Viking’s announcement that also brings a big benefit to Milwaukee,” he said. “This company invests a lot in advertising and marketing with beautiful presentations and always feature Viking destinations. That means, throughout the United States and around the world, more people will see a glimpse of Milwaukee that’s sure to elevate positive perceptions about our city. Needless to say, I’m thrilled to welcome Viking Expeditions to America’s Fresh Coast.”

The Port of Milwaukee has hosted cruise lines before the arrival of Viking and has recently seen growth in that sector. In 2018, 1,000 passengers came through the port. Schlicht predicts the number will rise to 12,000 passengers by 2022 when Viking Cruises arrive. “Increase in cruise activity is ongoing, and we are enthusiastic about it,” he adds.

When Schlicht joined the Port of Milwaukee, his department created the Milwaukee Cruise Collaborative to work with local businesses, hotels and tour companies in an effort to bring more cruise business to our city. The cruises that stop at the port are typically smaller, luxurious vessels that can hold up to 400 passengers, according to Schlicht. Smaller cruises can provide sophistication for passengers who want to experience the Great Lakes region. “The arrival of Viking Cruises in 2022 will provide a window into our fabulous community,” he continues.



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Revenue generated by the Port of Milwaukee—City of Milwaukee department—is returned to the taxpayers. The port covers 470 acres, stretching from Bay View on the South Side to the Milwaukee Art Museum on the northern shore. The museum has hosted cruise passengers in the past, even accommodating their schedules by opening the gift shop outside of the museum's open hours. "It's fantastic to have these Viking Cruises not only for us, but all museums around here. It benefits everyone. It's an extra boost for Downtown Milwaukee," says Josh Depenbrok, the museum's public relations manager. To prepare for the cruises, the Port of Milwaukee is working with the U.S. Coast Guard to figure out logistics and security. "We are looking to have a robust red carpet roll out," says Schlicht.

Independent Restaurants Help Milwaukee Thrive

According to *Travel and Leisure*, Milwaukee has a "dynamic restaurant landscape." A recent study by [City Observatory](#) confirms that Milwaukee is known for its independent restaurants. Nationwide, Yelp has registered

why, the study suggests “it could be that food-oriented metro areas have both more restaurants and, therefore, more opportunities for independent restaurants.” Milwaukee is nothing if not a food-oriented city.

Settle says that the growing number of conventions held in Milwaukee are responsible for an important slice of revenue generated by local restaurants. “Milwaukee would not have a thriving restaurant scene if not for the tourists and conventions every year,” she explains.

Milwaukee restaurants and bars have become known for their warmth and hospitality. According to *The New York Times*, the “unpretentious taverns that wouldn’t feel out of place on a rural crossroads and traditional meat-and-potato eateries are as patronized as the latest farm-to-table restaurant.”

Milwaukee also follows trends identified by the National Restaurant Association, with many restaurants sourcing locally grown food. A Milwaukee ordinance has even banned plastic straws unless specifically requested by patrons, encouraging mindfulness of the environment. With the DNC approaching, the Wisconsin Restaurant Association is advising restaurants to adjust their hours, since delegates will be returning to their hotels after hours looking for food and drink.

Pairing well with hearty meals and the city’s strong German roots, Milwaukee’s beer industry continues to expand and is home to 32 local breweries. Brewery tours allow visitors to learn about Milwaukee’s brewing heritage while experiencing what is happening today. The city also has several craft cocktail lounges dating from the middle of

Touring Milwaukee's Landscapes and Waterfronts

Forbes recommends waterfront activities, such as Downtown river kayaking and the city's beautiful lakefront, as reasons to visit Milwaukee in 2020. The Milwaukee County Park System manages nine beaches and 9,000 acres of land, giving visitors and locals an emerald and blue necklace of landscapes and waterfronts to enjoy. As one example, Bradford Beach offers volleyball tournaments, swimming, quality food and beverages. There are also 50 miles of soft trails for hiking within Milwaukee County. During winter months, the Urban Ecology Center hosts candlelit hikes on the soft trails.

Connecting the environment with tourism, the Milwaukee Kayak Company and Brew City Kayak provide tours as well as the equipment needed to paddle the river in Downtown Milwaukee during the summer months. According to the Milwaukee Kayak Company's website, their mission is "to provide a healthy, unique, safe and fun outdoor paddling experience for residents of Milwaukee, our surrounding communities and tourists, while promoting our city, a healthy lifestyle and recreation on our rivers."

The future could bring even more outdoor recreational spaces. Milwaukee County Parks is partnering with the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District to restore the Kinnickinnic River, adding 100 trees when the project is completed, creating an even greater environment for visitors to explore.

In 2018, tourism brought \$21.6 billion into Wisconsin's economy, according to the state's Department of Tourism. Milwaukee was responsible for 20% of that number, according to Settle. With its mission to bring conventions and meetings to Milwaukee, VISIT Milwaukee promotes the city at trade shows and conventions, along with hosting meeting planners and giving them tours of the city. "It's our job to sell Milwaukee to the world as a destination for meetings and sporting events," she says. "We want to showcase Milwaukee as a top destination."

Settle recalls a great example of Milwaukee's spirit of warmth and welcome that occurred during a tour she led in 2018 with a stop at Lake Park Bistro. The restaurant's late owner, Joe Bartolotta, noticed Milwaukee Police Department motorcycle officers waiting outside, providing security for the tour. He insisted they were fed along with the visitors and provided them with free steaks as appreciation for their work. "That dinner will always stand out, because it shows Milwaukee hospitality," says Settle.

MAM Architecture Hooks Visitors

On a normal year, the Milwaukee Art Museum (MAM) draws 40,000 visitors for its collection of 30,000 artworks. Of those 30,000 works, the public sees only 3,000 at a time, allowing curators to circulate artwork, keeping exhibits new and interesting. Depenbrock says most visitors coming to MAM

Milwaukee Art Museum

“If they are from out of town, they are usually familiar with the Santiago Calatrava expansion. They are looking up in awe, and I even still do that now, because it is still awe-inspiring to work at a place like this today,” he says. “People are usually surprised by how large the collection is, and I think it exceeds their expectations. Usually, patrons come away inspired,” says Depenbrok. “We are excited to see what 2020 brings.”

American’s Black Holocaust Museum Reopens This Summer

Unique to Milwaukee, America’s Black Holocaust Museum will reopen this summer in a new home. The museum closed in 2008 shortly after the death of its founder, James Cameron, a lynching survivor. The museum continued online. In 2018, a new brick-and-mortar site became part of a redevelopment project for West North Avenue. The Black Holocaust Museum’s mission is to inform the public of the “harmful legacies of slavery in America and promote racial repair, reconciliation and healing.”

The museum’s head griot, Reggie Jackson, says the reopening this summer will be the result of a huge amount of effort by a lot of people. “I am very excited to see the museum come back into its physical form, to raise awareness of this history and to have young people learn history that is not taught in schools,” he says. “We think it’ll be a place where the community can gather, have conversations and learn from each other—a welcoming environment to have difficult conversations.”

of captured Africans and their descendants and wanted to name the Milwaukee museum America's Black Holocaust Museum to value that history. The museum will feature exhibits on the history of the ancestors of African Americans before they were enslaved, the history of life under enslavement, the business side of slavery, struggles of emancipation and violence against the black community through the present day with Black Lives Matter and the struggles of incarceration, according to Jackson.

During the DNC, Jackson says he expects large groups from the convention to visit the Black Holocaust Museum.

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