

Convene On Location

Infrastructure, innovation, and live blues in the Gateway City.

St. Louis

By Corin Hirsch

“So, what do you know about St. Louis?”

Brian Hall, chief marketing officer for Explore St. Louis, asked me this question beside a fire pit at Three Sixty STL, a rooftop restaurant at downtown’s Hilton St. Louis at the Ballpark hotel. The sun had just set, and while balancing a wine glass in one hand and a seared-tuna taco in the other, I thought about Mark Twain, Lewis and Clark, and the Gateway Arch. “Not a whole lot,” I admitted.

“Exactly,” Hall said.

By the time I left St. Louis two days later, after a visit sponsored by Explore St. Louis, I had learned that this seemingly under-the-radar city of 318,000 people — with 2.8 million in the greater metropolitan area — brims with history, innovation, food, music, and charm.

DAY 1: UNDER THE ARCH

Of course, a river runs through it, too. St. Louis spreads along the west bank of the Mississippi, and it wasn’t long after landing at Lambert–St. Louis International Airport — a 20-minute drive or train ride from downtown — that I was standing in the windows of the CityArchRiver Foundation building, looking out on Ol’ Man River and the iconic Gateway Arch.

In the 1960s, the park grounds that surround the Gateway Arch National Monument were cut off from downtown St. Louis by a highway. Fifty years later, the CityArchRiver Foundation is guiding a \$380-million renovation of the park, the Arch, and the Museum of Westward Expansion at its base. With \$221 million from private sources, the project is the largest-ever private investment in a U.S. National Park. “We’ve been talking about this for decades,” said Ryan McClure, the Foundation’s communications director. “The stars just sort of aligned.”

When the CityArchRiver project is complete in late 2017, not only will the 630-foot-high Arch have a facelift, the park’s public spaces, including an amphitheater and lawns, will be revitalized. The subterranean museum — which tells the story of westward expansion — will offer 50,000 square feet of modernized space for events for up to 4,000 people. Since the project will also raise the riverfront by five feet, the Mississippi’s periodic flooding will be less of a problem. “We’re going to get a lot of days back,” McClure said.

From the Arch, it was only a short stroll to Ballpark Village, a complex of bars and restaurants adjacent to Busch Stadium, home of the city’s beloved St. Louis Cardinals. The heart of Ballpark Village is a lofty central space topped by a retractable glass roof, and around its perimeter are bars, enormous flat screens, and eateries serving everything from sushi to Southern fare. We nursed pints from St. Louis’ hometown brewery, Anheuser-Busch, while



America's Center has 500,000 square feet of exhibition space.



The National Blues Museum opens on April 2, 2016.

wandering Ballpark Village’s 122,000 square feet of event space, including a breezy terrace bar, the Skybox, that overlooks the field. “[The Village] can be dressed up, or it can be dressed down,” Director of Sales Jill Metherd said during a tour, with spaces for events of anywhere from six to 6,000 people.

Back outside, St. Louis’ wide avenues buzzed with impeccably dressed people, including women in elaborate hats. More than 35,000 members of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) were in town for their annual Holy Convocation at the America’s Center Convention Complex. The country’s largest African-American Pentecostal denomination, COGIC has gathered in St. Louis every year since 2010, and last summer signed a three-year agreement to hold the Holy Convocation here — a sign of faith after recent violence in nearby Ferguson, Missouri. “St. Louis fits our needs and has proven to be a great match,” Keith Kershaw,

COGIC’s director of the office of convention planning, said at the time.

Indeed, downtown’s America’s Center, with 500,000 square feet of exhibit space, is an ideal match for such a large group. The venue’s airiness is the result of a \$50-million renovation in 2009. For COGIC, a red carpet stretched through the entire foyer, and a bazaar occupied one area of the 180,000-square-foot exhibit hall, which can be broken into five smaller spaces. Paige Millard, America’s Center’s vice president of event services, explained that the venue is so large that several conferences can go on concurrently without anyone stepping on each other’s toes. (Over one weekend this past January, 14 groups met there simultaneously.) And sure enough, despite the bustle of COGIC attendees on the ground floor, the halls on the second level were quiet — as was the intimate, 1,400-seat Ferrara Theater, which Keith Levey, Explore St. Louis’