

# Out & About

MORE GREAT TRAVEL IDEAS IN THE MIDWEST



## ROCKFORD RISING

Budget-  
friendly  
trip

Illinois' third-largest city spent years watching travelers whiz by on Interstate-90 on their way east to Chicago. Now, thanks to a **revitalized downtown, an emerging foodie scene**, new cultural attractions and beautiful public gardens, word is getting out: You'd be crazy not to stop.

WRITER *Kit Bernardi* PHOTOGRAPHER *Bob Stefko*

### SERENE SPACE

You'll find 12 acres of tranquility (and a ceremonial tea house) at Anderson Japanese Garden.

Conversation at Social Urban Bar and Restaurant in Rockford, Illinois, flows like the river of stained glass set into the concrete bar. Chef-owner Paul Sletten's kitchen staff breezes past, serving seasonal dishes to patrons seated around communal tables made of recycled barn wood. They chat about the pork chop's apple-cider brine and the heirloom tomatoes in the pasta sauce.

"People say to me all the time, 'I can't believe something like this is in Rockford,'" Paul says as he carries a local farmer's eggs into the kitchen. *Like this* means local, hip and foodie-friendly.

Ask people what they know about Rockford, and you'll likely hear about the Swedish pancakes served at The Stockholm Inn, a tribute to the mid-1800s, when Scandinavian settlers arrived. You'll also hear about the Sock Monkey, first crafted more than 100 years ago from red-heeled socks made at Rockford's Nelson Knitting Mills. (The city celebrates the icon every spring with a Sock Monkey Madness Festival, held at Midway Village, a living-history collection of 26 buildings.)

What most people don't realize is that Rockford also developed noteworthy art, museums and parks with free or reasonably priced admission (and free parking—a welcome change to the sticker shock 90 miles east in Chicago). Plans call for even more affordable attractions, including a year-round indoor farmers market (with room for food carts) and a downtown sports complex.

In summer, the parks top to-do lists. Groves of towering pine trees and European larches beckon at Klehm Arboretum and Botanic Garden; evening concerts around the pavilion invite music-lovers to spread blankets under the stars. The sculpted beauty of Anderson Japanese Gardens reveals a 16th-century-style teahouse, cascading waterfalls, arched bridges and swirling-patterned rock gardens. The 10-mile



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**SOPHISTICATED STOPS**

- 1 New tenants brighten old storefronts downtown.
- 2 Chef Paul Sletten at Social Urban Bar and Restaurant.
- 3 Summertime yields house-made pasta with heirloom tomatoes, basil and Parmesan at Social.
- 4 Anderson Japanese Gardens.
- 5 Rockford, a city of 152,800, stands along the Rock River.



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COURTESY OF MIKE GRAHAM/ROCKFORD AREA CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU



**GREAT BEER**  
**1** The 12 on-tap beers at Carlyle Brewing Company change with the seasons. **2** Can't decide? Try a six-beer sampler. (Ours included vanilla cream ale, caramel-chocolate stout and dark Weizenbock).

Rock River Recreation Path weaves past sculptures and reveals shoreline mansions; you can learn about them on seasonal *Forest City Queen* riverboat tours. Nicholas Conservatory and Gardens opened in late 2011 within century-old Sinnissippi Park. Whimsical, hand-blown glass totem poles peek out from tropical greenery near a giant floral clock, sunken rose garden and newly restored lagoon.

Upscale restaurants, boutiques and art galleries are moving in around the restored 1927 Coronado Performing Arts Center, which is on the National Register of Historic Places. Sparkling Czech crystal chandeliers and antique furniture from French châteaux fill its glittering lobby. Local lore says Frank Sinatra crooned his first solo performance with Tommy Dorsey's band on this stage. These days, the Rockford Symphony Orchestra and traveling Broadway shows hold court flanked by massive, writhing dragons masking the original Barton organ's pipes.

Come dinnertime, Carlyle Brewing Company packs people six deep at the bar for brews made on-site. Couples share silky truffles at Chocolat by



Daniel. Foodies feast on seafood and prime aged steak at chic Josef-Barbados Restaurant and Oyster Bar. And friends sip cloudy green absinthe at Social Urban Bar and Restaurant.

To be sure, Rockford has a gritty side leftover from its manufacturing heyday. The best place to stay actually is 10 miles north in Rockton, where the Copperstone Inn blends a limestone facade and plush amenities on a rolling farm. But add all that's new to Rockford's proven, long-standing attractions—including the Burpee Museum of Natural History and the Rockford Art Museum—and you'll wonder how one weekend could be enough to see it all.

**For trip guide, see page Out & About 6.**

## TRIP GUIDE

### What to do

**Anderson Japanese Gardens**

Open seasonally (815/229-9390; andersongardens.org).

**Coronado Performing Arts Center**

(815/968-0595; coronadopac.org).

**Erlander Home Museum**

The restored 1871 Italianate home preserves Rockford's Swedish immigration history through original furniture and decor (815/963-5559; swedishhistorical.org).

**Klehm Arboretum and Botanic Garden**

A glass visitors center is the gateway to 155 acres of gardens, a labyrinth, a butterfly garden and mature woodlands laced with walking paths (815/965-8146; klehm.org).

**Midway Village** The 143-acre campus includes the Museum Center and gardens representing a rural Rockford community between 1890-1910 (815/397-9112; midwayvillage.com).

**Nicholas Conservatory and Gardens** Sinnissippi Park's crown jewel; a mural in the lobby depicts how the landscape of the Rock River Valley has changed (815/987-8858; rockfordparkdistrict.org/ncg).

**Riverfront Museum Park** At the Burpee Museum of Natural History, you can view a *T. rex* skeleton and Native American exhibits (815/965-3433; burpee.org). Hands-on science exhibits, tornado demos and an outdoor maze keep kids engaged at Discovery Center Museum (815/963-6769; discoverycentermuseum.org). An exhibit at the Rockford Art Museum highlights the destination's 100th anniversary (815/968-2787; rockfordartmuseum.org).

**Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum** A time capsule of Rockford history, the 1865 Swiss chalet-style home preserves furnishings, diaries and collections (815/964-2424; tinkercottage.org).

### Where to eat

**Carlyle Brewing Company** You'll enjoy the brews and tasty pub grub downtown (815/963-2739; carlylebrewing.com).

**Chocolat by Daniel** A European-style chocolatier handcrafts 12 flavors of truffles, makes gourmet chocolates and on cold days brews silky hot chocolate served in fine estate-sale china (815/969-7990; chocolatbydaniel.com).

**Cliffbreakers Riverside Resort Restaurant**

This Continental fine-dining restaurant serves pasta, steaks and seafood in a dining room decked with museum-quality art and architectural remnants (815/282-3033; cliffbreakers.com).

**Josef-Barbados Restaurant and Oyster Bar**

An all-white dining room showcases an international art collection, including a piece by Salvador Dali (815/282-3400; josefbarbados.com).

**Mary's Market** Made-with-care goodness shines in every cookie, pie and bread loaf at this favorite for hearty sandwiches, soups and sweets in Edgebrook (815/394-0765; marysmarket.com).

**Octane InterLounge** The owners' album collection gives this funky downtown hot spot a cool vibe; try the homemade soups and vegetarian fare (815/965-4012; octane.net).

**Social Urban Bar and Restaurant**

The food is locally sourced, but the 50 cocktails go global (815/708-0877; social509.com).

**Stockholm Inn** A longtime favorite, the busy Swedish restaurant dishes authentic *kroppkakor* (filled dumplings) and Swedish pancakes (you can buy ready-to-pour batter), plus Friday fish fries (815/397-3534; stockholminn.com).

### Where to shop

**Finials** A Scandinavian shop in a 13-room home carries imported goods (815/398-4428; ifinials.com).

**J.R. Kortman Center for Design and Gallery** Global design touches tabletop accessories, art glass, toys, jewelry and greeting cards (815/968-0123; jrkortman.com).

**Edgebrook Shops** at the outdoor mall include B Jones for fun fashion; Annie's for girly gifts; Infinitely Sweet for designer duds for kids; and Wonderland Books and Toys (815/226-0212; edgebrookshops.com).

### Where to stay

**Copperstone Inn** A gracious 1858 mansion awaits in nearby Rockton. Guests enjoy luxe rooms and hiking trails. From \$199 (815/629-9999; copperstoneinn.com). **ML**

**For more information or to plan your trip,** contact the Rockford Area Convention and Visitors Bureau (800/521-0849; gorockford.com).