

BED CHECK

At hotel in Fargo, N.D., art is just another amenity

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Some people say Fargo is in the middle of nowhere. Like that's a bad thing.

The city, which sits on North Dakota's eastern border, shone like a beacon on my GPS device this past summer as I drove west from the East Coast. Fargo may be out of the way, but I'd argue that remoteness is one of its charms. You don't end up here by accident, and you don't necessarily stay here for convenience.

When I arrived, my needs were modest: a place to lay my weary head, stretch my legs and sate my appetite. But as soon as I pulled up to the Hotel Donaldson — a treat to myself for powering through two grueling days of driving — I understood that the city is far more than a way station off Interstate 94. I was delighted to discover not only staples but also luxury.

Of course, it's hard to consider Fargo without thinking of the Coen brothers' 1996 dark comedy of the same name. Most Americans haven't been there, yet thanks to the film, they think they know what they'd find. Its opening shots are convincing: a frozen wasteland, roads hard-packed with snow as far as the eye can see.

Granted, I was there in August — and enjoyed myself enough to return in September — so the threat of tundra-like conditions was nil. But I'll betcha the friendly, hip and quirky side of Fargo that I encountered doesn't go into hibernation for the winter. Incidentally, one local was telling me about his winter projects, and he had me at "giant, mobile sauna."

The Hotel Donaldson, known as HoDo, is a 17-room boutique hotel on the corner of Broadway and First Avenue, across the street from a restaurant called Vinyl Taco. A pioneer in the downtown

resurgence over the past decade, the hotel is also home to a fine-dining restaurant, a lounge, a basement venue with a wine cellar, and a rooftop bar and hot tub space called Sky Prairie.

On the ground level, I passed a giant mirror leaning against an exposed-brick wall. The cozy reception area one level up was decorated with sleek furniture the color of eggplants and snow peas, and art at every turn. Photographer John Borge's familiar collection — black-and-white city shots of Moscow, London, Paris and Fargo — was stacked vertically by the elevator.

Each room at the HoDo features a local or regional artist, and some spaces look more like galleries than sleeping quarters. My spacious room featured Leo Kim, a Shanghai-born photographer who now lives in the region. Other rooms feature landscape paintings, charcoal drawings, pottery and blown glass. While I appreciated the art, after a long drive fueled by dreadful road food, I was content with the rainfall shower and heavenly mattress in my room and complimentary cheese and fresh-baked bread in the lobby.

Before dinner, I walked around downtown and found a mix of old and new: A uniform retailer, VFW, fancy oil shop and yoga studio all shared a block near the restored art deco Fargo Theatre. If independent coffee shops are a key indicator of downtown vibrancy, Fargo gets the nod, with Red Raven Espresso Parlor, Twenty Below Coffee Co., Stumbeano's Coffee Roasters and Atomic Coffee.

In a relatively short period of time, downtown restaurants have expanded from a few to several dozen. The Renaissance Zone program, which began in 1999 and exempts new developers from property and income taxes for five



DANITA DELIMONT/ALAMY

Dusk in downtown Fargo. The North Dakota city has experienced a downtown resurgence over the past decade, thanks in part to the Renaissance Zone program, which started in 1999 and exempts new developers from property and income taxes for five years. It has spurred more than 180 projects.

years, has spurred more than 180 projects. Fargo is also home to an emerging tech sector, and North Dakota State University brings a young energy to the downtown district.

I walked a few blocks to the Red River, then easily crossed a bridge that took me to sister city Moorhead, Minn. The river runs north through the Red River Valley and into Canada, and I strolled along the water for a bit. A couple of elderly men had biked there with fishing gear and stood on the bank, casting. I saw a teenage couple dressed in black, both with pierced eyebrows.

Upon check-in, I'd received two \$5 vouchers to use at the hotel restaurants, which I gladly spent on a summer salad with salmon and local produce. The server, a young woman with dreadlocks, packed up my dinner, and I took it to the bustling rooftop, where I looked out to the city and watched the prairie grass sway in the breeze.

In my room that night, I found

house-made chocolate truffles, and the next morning, room service brought a complimentary artisan pastry basket with a popover and a couple of muffins. Also delivered: a little card with a Shakespeare quote ("Brevity is the soul of wit.") and the day's forecast: a sun half-covered by a cloud, high of 80, with 10-mph winds from the northeast.

When I returned a month later, I met up with the hotel's owner, Karen Stoker. Fargoians are too humble to call any of their own folk celebrities, but suffice it to say, you only have to say Stoker's first name in town and people understand who you're talking about. But more important is the fact that her passion for art and hospitality led to the creation of the HoDo, which brought a level of service and warmth to town that perhaps even locals didn't know was possible in Fargo.

The hotel was built in 1893 and owned by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. In the '60s and '70s, Fargo businesses abandoned

If you go

WHERE TO STAY Hotel Donaldson

101 N. Broadway
701-478-1000

hoteldonaldson.com

Standard room is a king bed suite, starting at \$209; rates for residents of North Dakota and western Minnesota begin at \$195. Includes free WiFi, wine-and-cheese happy hour, morning pastry basket, truffles at turndown, and an exercise room with a punching bag.

— M.K.

More suggestions online

For more information on hotels, restaurants and activities in Fargo, visit washingtonpost.com/travel.

downtown for the suburbs, leaving the area desolate. When Stoker bought the property in 2000, it was in disrepair, serving as a laborers' hotel with weekly rates.

Stoker, whose parents kept bees and ground their own flour for bread, calls the hotel project her "midlife awakening." She told me that she wanted it to be a place that would create memorable experiences by celebrating arts; she wanted to create a lighting rod for downtown.

Along the way, she had her fair share of doubters — she calls it geographic bigotry, a phrase I heard more than once from locals. People questioned whether she could find enough regional artists, hang a wall of raw steel in the lobby (an ode to the region's agricultural machinery) and fill the rooms with guests. She never lost faith in Fargo and defends it fervently.

"People say the grass is greener on the other side," she said. "I like to fertilize the side I'm on."

Her biggest worry was that the hotel would become a national splash and local crash. "You need to do what resonates with the neighbors," she said. The restaurants were crowded enough during my visits that it's clear she has local support.

Today, the HoDo hosts musicians, authors and poets, and it's often the place where locals convene for impromptu meetings. Walking around the hotel, I felt as though I could have been in any cosmopolitan American city. I was reminded of the movie only when people brought it up in conversation.

Unlike some residents, Stoker doesn't consider "Fargo" a curse. She understands that the film put the city on the radar — no matter what folks say about Fargo, at least they know it exists, which you certainly can't say about every dot on the map in the Dakotas.

"I'm just thrilled," Stoker exclaimed, "that the Coen brothers didn't name the movie 'Brainerd.'"

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