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TRAVEL

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PHOTOS BY JENN ACKERMAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Forget “ Fargo.”

Don’t get me wrong — I loved the Coen brothers’ dark crime comedy. But 22 years later, if you’re still thinking only about the movie when you hear that word, it’s time to rewire your brain. I’m here to tell you that this North Dakota city is not a godforsaken frozen wasteland of woodchippers. Fargo’s a slice of Oz on the eastern edge of the Great Plains — quirky, colorful and full of surprises: a Scandinavian-Jewish lunch counter; a gay men’s chorus; a thriving immigrant community; a winter “Froestival” with a mobile sauna; an artsy boutique hotel; Microsoft’s third-largest campus; and a championship football team.

More than that, it’s the people of Fargo and Moorhead, Minn., its sister city across the river, who have drawn me back multiple times. They all seem to share a remarkable can-do attitude and collaborative energy. Locals are

YOU’RE GOING WHERE?

Fargo

A Scandinavian sense ties together a North Dakota community and a city with a lot more to see than snow — and that woodchipper

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN
Special to The Washington Post

quick to credit their forebears — the Scandinavian settlers who depended on each other to raise barns, harvest crops and recover from floods. That same work ethic, dynamism and community support help a new generation of makers, entrepreneurs and artists who dream big and often succeed. The long, frigid winters seem to only bolster Fargoans’ industriousness and sense of humor.

When I showed up in June, I ran into a friend before we’d even had a chance to make plans — downtown’s that small. That afternoon, I heard that drivers get a friendly written warning before their first parking ticket — locals are that nice. When you go, chat them up. See the woodchipper at the visitors center if you must. Then, get to know the real Fargo.

FARGO CONTINUED ON F3

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A sunflower field in Mapleton, just west of Fargo, N.D.; the Iceland bagel plate at BernBaum’s in downtown Fargo; sales associate Kara Lee and customer Sean Dolan at Others; illustrative street art on a train car.

Fargo: Quirky, colorful, dynamic

FARGO FROM F1

Go

Local faves

On autumn Saturdays, take your team spirit to the **Fargodome**, which houses the home football field of the North Dakota State Bison. The Thundering Herd, as the team is known, has won the NCAA Division I Football Championship tournament — a different animal than the bowl system — six of the past seven seasons. Fargoans bleed yellow and green year-round. (Insider tip: You'll hear chatter about Carson — that's Herd alumnus and hometown hero Carson Wentz, now in the NFL as a quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles.) Tailgating is a sight to behold: It begins at 4 a.m., and you'll find custom-wrapped buses and motor homes, propane-heated tents and vans donning bison horns. The dome seats 19,000 for games and 25,000 for concerts such as the recent Def Leppard and Journey shows. Across from the dome: the Fargo Air Museum.

I love stepping into places where you momentarily forget what state — or country — you're in. For utterly surreal, try **Sons of Norway Kringen Lodge No. 25**, where I felt certain about only one thing when I arrived at 1:28 p.m.: Pie Thursday would be over in two minutes. The lodge is among the largest in this Nordic heritage fraternal organization, and the building, an old Buick dealership with red carpet and walls, is decorated with Norwegian folk art, Viking carvings and rosemaling. (The last is a traditional painting style made up of scrolls and flowers; even the dumpster is rosemaled.) As I ate cherry pie in the dining room, a regular group played bridge and two volunteers chatted about lutefisk. On my way out with a pack of homemade lefse, a potato flatbread, I picked up a newsletter and glanced at "klub" activities open to the public: Norwegian lunches, walleye dinners, folk dancing, rosemaling practice and weekly live music in the Troll Lounge, which has a 96-foot mural and 22 hand-carved trolls.

Guidebook musts

Outside Fargo, it's nearly impossible to mention the city without people commenting on the movie, so hats off to the **Fargo-Moorhead Convention and Visitors Bureau** for treating visitors to a little "Fargo." The CVB displays the screenplay and a promotional ice scraper, but the main attraction is the original woodchipper with a leg poking out. A friendly woman rushed over from behind her desk, holding a flannel hat with ear flaps. "Would you like me to take your picture in the hat? You can pretend to push the foot in." I handed her my camera and posed awkwardly. "Now," she said, "with a horrified look!" While I was there, a mother and daughter from Northern Virginia arrived and announced that North Dakota was their 50th state. The woman excitedly gave them "Best for Last Club" T-shirts and certificates, and the Virginians told us about their travels. I left the center and spent 36 hours in Fargo without hearing another peep about "Fargo."

Known for its American modernism and regional art, the **Plains Art Museum** was an early investor in the downtown's renaissance and has become a gathering place for the community. Located in a gorgeous turn-of-the-century warehouse that once stored farm machinery, the museum has about 4,000 works in its permanent collection. There's a print studio, performance area, pollinator garden and space for workshops; one on Native American poetry and art will be held on Aug. 23. When I visited, I enjoyed a large audio installation, a William Wegman pup, a Warhol screen print of first lady Jacqueline Kennedy and David Bradley's Mona Lisa-esque 1990 painting "Pow-Wow Princess in the Process of Acculturation." The museum is free, thanks to members and donors. Some of its other funding comes from what's called charitable gaming, a widely accepted practice in North Dakota that generates millions of dollars in taxes (from blackjack and bingo, for example) for a state that offers meager funding to nonprofit organizations.

Eat

Local faves

In their dining-out days, my grandmothers would have loved **BernBaum's**. One collected mid-century modern furniture; the other whipped up Jewish meals and desserts like nobody's business. So



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: In Fargo, N.D., Chris Hemmah and Darcy Simonson browse at Dakota Fine Art, which is owned by nine prominent Fargo-area artists. The real woodchipper (with fake leg) used in the movie "Fargo" is on display at the Fargo-Moorhead Convention and Visitors Bureau. At Others, boutique founder Laura Morris donates all store profits to education, social health and job creation. A sunflower field in Mapleton, N.D. First-daters Preston Hogason, left, and Berlyn Salwey kick back in a parking lot.

For an interactive map with addresses and contact information, visit wapo.st/fargo

I had to smile when I walked into Brett Bernath's Madhaus, which has largely been taken over by the fabulous lunch counter run by his wife, Andrea Baumgardner. She started making bagels in a corner of the furniture shop in 2016, and soon, BernBaum's eclipsed the Madhaus; much of Bernath's furniture (such as the pink fiberglass, boomerang-shaped, bowling-alley bench from the 1950s) has become restaurant seating. The Scandinavian-German and Jewish fare, reflecting the proprietors' heritages, includes potato latkes, knishes with mustard crème fraîche, cheese blintzes with lingonberry sauce, chicken matzo ball soup and brisket with ramps schmear and pickled rhubarb. You'll probably see Baumgardner, who trained at Chez Panisse, cooking on her 1948 four-burner stove below the "Shalom" sign. Don't miss her occasional themed dinners, which sell out quickly.

The owners of **Wild Terra Cider and Brewing** acknowledge the complete lack of commercial apple orchards in North Dakota. But that didn't stop them from opening Fargo's first cidery in December, and I'm thankful for that. Most of Wild Terra's dozen offerings, which change daily, are from the Pacific Northwest or Michigan. But it does craft some of its own ciders — including the blueberry and banana Stargazer, with apples from small local growers. The cidery is in a beautifully restored, century-old horse stable. The menu, all vegetarian, includes treats such as a Buddha bowl with microgreens and Brussels sprouts with "bacon" from the Herbivorous Butcher in Minneapolis. Locals gather for '80s movies upstairs on old-school sofas; a mustard-colored velvet one has national parks patches. The new co-op is next door.

Guidebook musts

At **Rustica Eatery & Tavern**, just across the Main Avenue bridge in Moorhead, dinner is comfortable and neighborhood. The more casual, seat-yourself tavern has a wood-burning pizza oven and copper beer taps, and the eatery, where I found a spot at the bar, has exposed brick walls, indistinct jazz playing in the background and a relaxed, classy vibe. Not surprising for this part of the country, the menu is meat-heavy, with rack of lamb and cornmeal-dusted local walleye, but it also features homemade pasta and a board so full of roasted veggies, dips and towering baguette slices that I needed a doggie bag. That plus a salad was just \$9, thanks to a well-attended and hard-to-believe happy hour from 5 to 6 p.m. and 9 to 11 p.m.: You'll get half off all starters, soups, salads, pizzas, burgers, mac and cheese, and select beers and wines. No fine print.

The first thing I noticed about the cinnamon toast at **Young Blood Coffee**: It was as thick as a two-by-four. Then I saw the tiny lakes of butter pooling in the fresh sourdough, and I knew that if my childhood toast had looked like this, I would've never left home. Young Blood makes its own sourdough (a bargain at \$5 per loaf, the same price as avocado toast) and roasts its own coffee beans. As I savored my slice of heaven, Rush played on vinyl atop the morning chatter. Nearby, I noticed a lovely green matcha latte with an Instagram-perfect design in the foamed milk. This new location is around the corner from hip Roberts Alley, which has an indoor bike parking lot like nothing I've ever seen: bike tools, a pump and gym-style lockers and benches.

Shop

Local faves

If Etsy metamorphosed into a bricks-and-mortar shop, it would look like **Unglued**. Featuring more than 300 local and regional makers, mostly women, the shop is often bustling. Under twinkly lights and hundreds of origami cranes swooping down from the ceiling, you'll find a jigsaw puzzle of the famed Fargo Theatre; a one-size adorned with a loon, the Minnesota state bird; jewelry made from repurposed dishware; zipper pouches featuring hockey skates; and hair pomade from Dakotah Beard Oils. Yeobo Sweet Shop is in the back. How can you not love the bulk offerings when they're green apple Army guys, black currant gummy mustaches and giant sour spiders? If you'd rather DIY than buy, check out Unglued's classes in leatherworking, ceramics, embroidery and macramé.

For a uniquely Midwestern experience, head to **Scheels**, a nearly 200,000-square-foot mash-up of REI, Dick's Sporting Goods and Cabela's, with a 12-car Ferris wheel and enough taxidermied animals for a natural-history museum. Upon arriving, the world's friendliest cashier greeted me, and cheery welcomes continued as I ambled through the store. (I stopped counting at eight.) I passed all the expected sportswear and gear, as well as skateboards, pogo sticks, cornhole sets and Bison ties with green and

FARGO CONTINUED ON F4

PHOTOS BY JENN ACKERMAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

North Dakota town with a movie-famous name puts the spotlight on its people

FARGO FROM F3

yellow checks. An entire section features merch for lake life (locals' ubiquitous weekend activity), with packs of water balloons, kites and a gun that kills insects with a spray of table salt — all things you could buy cheaper online, but then you'd miss the archery shooting range, golf simulator and collection of life-size presidents around the store. And then there's the gun department upstairs (supposedly the largest in the state), where I snapped a picture of the "Youth Shotguns" section in case I later thought I'd imagined it.



Guidebook musts

When I visited in June, **Dakota Fine Art** was still glowing from its lively grand opening. The nine prominent local and regional artists who own and run the gallery had reason to celebrate: The space is filled with stunning pieces that reflect Great Plains landscape and culture. Steve Revland, a furniture maker and one of the founding artists, had brought in his \$3,750 chamcha root coffee table that morning. "It weighs 500 pounds," he told me, "and I got it here myself." Among the lighter-weight pieces is a playful series by photographer Meg Spielman Peldo featuring Corso, the rehabilitated bison who has become the NDSU mascot. "Water Buffalo" shows him at a swimming pool and "Bison Elevator" captures Corso in front of a grain elevator. By the way, Nichole's Fine Pastry, next door, has dreamy traditional desserts and Scandinavian treats such as krumkake and kransakake.

Just as I've begun to tire of homogenous retail boutiques that have a little bit of everything (Anthropologie mini-me's, with well-made dresses, handcrafted home goods, tasseled pillows, sustainable soap), I came across **Others**. The shop may look like simi-

lar boutiques, with its beautiful products and minimalist decor, but founder Laura Morris has raised the bar by donating all store profits to education, social health and job creation. Morris, a pharmacist and Fargo native, opened the shop four years ago and has never taken an Others paycheck. With each purchase, shoppers support vulnerable populations around the globe: wooden spoons and bowls help fund employment programs for sex-trafficking survivors; hoop earrings made from recycled brass help jewelry-makers grow their businesses. Each set of sunglasses sold yields a free eye exam and glasses for someone in need; every Bogobrush sale means a toothbrush giveaway. This month, Others expects to reach the \$250,000 mark for donations. Now that's something to shop about.

Stay

Local fave

When I first stayed at the **Hotel Donaldson** in 2015, I was blown away by the 17 artist-inspired rooms, daily wine-and-cheese happy hour, rooftop bar, turn-down truffle and complimentary



PHOTOS BY JENN ACKERMAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Fresh apples for a batch at Wild Terra Cider and Brewing, the first cidery in Fargo, N.D. The offerings at a bike-sharing station are emblazoned with the North Dakota State Bison logo. Clayton Knutson, 2, digs into a Blizzard at the Dairy Queen in Moorhead, Minn., reportedly the birthplace of the ubiquitous Dilly Bar.

morning pastries delivered to my room. This is Fargo? Earlier this summer, when my beagle and I planned a rendezvous in town with my friend Margie, I knew exactly where we'd stay. The boutique hotel is conveniently located within walking distance of the river, shops and restaurants, al-

though you'd eat very well even if you never left the property. Too tired to venture out, Margie and I kicked back in our room and enjoyed a HoDo flatbread with garden-fresh tomatoes and basil, along with fare we'd picked up from Vinyl Taco across the street. One taco was particularly spicy,

and Margie, who grew up nearby, said "Uffda!" — a Norwegian exclamation of surprise that I'd seen on T-shirts and mugs. Rooms start at \$184 per night.

Guidebook must

Stepping into the **Element by Westin** in West Fargo feels a bit like checking into an eco-friendly spa, with its modern and minimalist decor, sunlit rooms and greenery at every turn. The pet-friendly hotel has priority parking for fuel-efficient vehicles, a Tesla charging station, free self-service laundry, a nice-size gym and pool, and complimentary shuttles to the airport and downtown. Most of the 130 rooms have a full kitchen. Borrow one of the Element's free bikes to pedal to dinner at the Blarney Stone Pub, or walk next door to Tru Blu Social Club. Studios start at \$129 per night, including breakfast.

Explore

Local fave

Here's a fun fact: **The Red River** flows north! This slow-moving waterway meanders 550 miles from Breckenridge, Minn., up to Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba, and most of those miles form the bor-

der between North Dakota and Minnesota. From downtown, walk across Veterans Memorial Bridge, where you'll find signage with more trivia: "The Red River Valley is one of the flattest landscapes on Earth." Stroll north along the tree-lined river to nearby Hjemkomst Center, home to a replica Viking ship. You can rent kayaks there or farther south at Lindenwood Park on the Fargo side — which also rents bikes and has a cool pedestrian bridge to Gooseberry Mound Park in Moorhead. (Check it out: The bridge lifts when the river levels rise.) To retire by the Red at day's end, head to Lindenwood Campground, where tent sites cost \$30 a day.

Guidebook must

Just across the Red River, **Moorhead** is often overlooked by visitors. Granted, the high school's mascot is the spud, and the only unanimous recommendation I received from locals was to visit their Dairy Queen, where the Dilly Bar was supposedly invented. But even though Moorhead is couple of decades behind Fargo in downtown development, there are an increasing number of reasons to visit this side of the Red. Don't miss Bluestem Center for the Arts, a fantastic amphitheater venue. (Joan Jett, Cheap Trick and the Avett Brothers are still on deck this season.) Get your Zen on during free yoga on the Comstock House lawn, and get your drinks at Junkyard Brewing, which feels like a college party with nightly live music (I caught the Cropdusters), free popcorn, a taco truck and unexpected, always changing libations such as stout with peanuts and an experimental strawberry sour.

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