

CLEVELAND ROCKS AS A VACATION SPOT

Forget what you think you know about the city

By Patti Nickell

Contributing [Travel](#) Writer

How many of you, when planning a weekend getaway or family [vacation](#), think of [Cleveland](#)? That's what I thought. Until recently, I wouldn't have either.

I knew that the city had had its glory years — John D. Rockefeller founded Standard Oil here in 1870, and Shaker Heights, with its palace-size mansions, is one of the country's poshest 'burbs — but I had mainly considered [Cleveland](#) just another Rust Belt metropolis struggling to shed its less-than-stellar image.

Then my friend and fellow [travel](#) writer, Kristan, suggested I pay a visit to her hometown and see what it had to offer. I figured that Kristan, who had lived in London and New York before returning to [Cleveland](#) a few years ago, knew a thing or two about what makes a city great, so I agreed.

Then something unexpected happened. I had planned to have a brief romance with a city I had never been to, but I wound up falling in love.

[Cleveland](#) has leafy green spaces, cultural gems, stunning Art Deco architecture, eclectic neighborhoods, great restaurants and warm-hearted residents. Allow me to take you along on four perfect days in [Cleveland](#).

Day 1

Plan to arrive in mid-afternoon to check into your accommodations, which really should be the Glidden House, in a quiet neighborhood next to Case Western Reserve University's campus. Now a 60-room boutique hotel, the 1910 mansion was built by a son of the founder of Glidden Paint. A stay at the Glidden House is much like staying in the home of a cultured, tasteful friend. (1901 Ford Drive, University Circle. [Gliddenhouse.com](#). Room rates begin at \$99.)

7 p.m., dinner at Greenhouse Tavern. Fourth Street in the revitalized downtown boasts a number of popular restaurants, including Lola, the flagship restaurant of *Iron Chef America* winner and [Cleveland](#) icon Michael Symon.

On your first night, however, opt for a leisurely meal at Greenhouse Tavern, where chef Jonathan Sawyer is a passionate disciple of the farm-to-plate movement. My omelet with local egg, garlic mustard, local goat cheese and springtime herbs melted in my mouth, and the cucumber sorbet with lemon cake, frozen blueberries and poppyseed syrup was perfect for a sultry summer evening. (2038 East Fourth Street, [Thegreenhousetavern.com](#).)

10 p.m., cocktails at the Velvet Tango Room. This

place is difficult for an out-of-towner to find (isn't that the way it should be with speakeasies?), but ask for directions to the Velvet Tango Room, rated by USA Today as one of the nation's top 10 places to experience the art of a well-mixed cocktail.

Don't be put off by the ordinary-looking front bar; as with all good speakeasies, it's what's behind the door that counts. Back there is a gilded 1920s-era lounge overlooking a pretty garden. The savvy bartender, Nicole, can whip up 50 handcrafted cocktails and knows that Jack Daniels isn't bourbon. (2095 Columbus Road in the [Tremont](#) area, [Velvettangoroom.com](#). The back room is open Fridays and Saturdays only and requires reservations.)

Day 2

11 a.m., brunch at fire. The name of this hip eatery on pedestrian-friendly Shaker Square is lowercase, but there's nothing lowercase about chef Douglas Katz's menu. Not being delicate eaters, Kristan and I shared the lemon soufflé pancakes with blueberry compote, the fire Benedic, and barbecued beef crepes with black bean stew. All we needed were a couple of mimosas, and our Sunday morning was complete. (13220 Shaker Square, [Firefoodanddrink.com](#).)

1 p.m., [Cleveland Museum](#)

of Art. Considered one of the top five art museums in the country, this prestigious institution has a permanent collection that includes Monet, Renoir and Dali, plus Fabergé, Tiffany and Chippendale. Galleries are filled with the world's greatest art: ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, and 19th-century British and American painters.

If you go before Sept. 16, you can see one of the best art exhibitions I've seen in ages: *Youth and Beauty*. Rather than focusing on a single artist or movement, it looks at a period, the 1920s Jazz Age, through painting, sculpture and photography. (1150 East Boulevard, [University Circle](#), [Clevelandart.org](#). Admission to the permanent collection is free.)

5 p.m., dinner at Sergio's Sarava. This Brazilian steakhouse also offers that country's other traditional dishes, including *xim-xim*, a slow-braised stew, and *feijoada*. On Sundays, there's Brazilian music and samba on the swanky Shaker Square



patio. (13225 Shaker Square, Sergioscleveland.com.)

7 p.m., jazz at Nighttown.

The unimpressive façade of this Cleveland Heights institution is deceptive. Inside are three bars overlooking a patio with a huge waterfall. Take the tour before being ushered into the showroom. Food is served until midnight, but the music is the thing here: hot, smoky and soulful. (12387 Cedar Road, Nighttowncleveland.com.)

Day 3

9 a.m., breakfast at Lucky's Café. Located in the artsy, blue-collar neighborhood of Tremont, Lucky's draws a local crowd, sprinkled with a few visitors who have found their way here. If you're hungry (very hungry), order the Shipwreck — a blend of hash browns, eggs, veggies, bacon and cheddar cheese — but don't say you weren't warned. (777 Starkweather Avenue, Luckyscafe.com.)

Afterward, explore the 150 stalls of nearby West Side Market, where Cleveland's immigrant population introduced their native foods and spices to the city. The market celebrates its centennial this year. (1979 West 25th Street, Westsidemarket.com.)

11 a.m., Greater Cleveland Aquarium. It is not the size of Chicago's Shedd or the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, but this

70,000-square-foot aquarium is a great place for a family outing. I loved the "sea tube," a clear, 150-foot walk-through tunnel where the denizens of the deep floated around and above me. An added attraction is the building itself, a former power station. (2000 Sycamore Street, Greaterclevelandaquarium.com.)

1 p.m., lunch at Lola.

Thanks to his abundance of TV appearances, chef Michael Symon has become as famous across the country as he is in Cleveland. Book a table for lunch at Lola's, where it all started (although the restaurant has been moved from its original spot to downtown's Fourth Street.)

Lola is as sophisticated as any Manhattan restaurant, both in décor and cuisine, which uses locally sourced products. (2058 East Fourth Street, Lolabistro.com.)

2:30 p.m., Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Don't make the mistake I did and budget too little time here. I spent 2½ hours and never got off the first floor (there are six, although the first floor has most of the action). See Joan Jett's Jaguar, Jimi Hendrix's guitar and Mick Jagger's jumpsuit (could anyone's hips possibly be that narrow?). Watch Elvis, Michael Jackson and the Stones in concert; listen to Aretha Franklin and

Johnny Cash talk about who influenced their music, and see how certain cities — Memphis, Detroit, San Francisco, Liverpool and Seattle — influenced musical genres. (1100 Rock and Roll Boulevard, Rockhall.org.)

8 p.m., dinner at Club Isabella.

This trendy bistro in the Little Italy neighborhood has a sleek décor as sophisticated as its ever-changing menu. I had the skate wing with brown butter sauce and capers, accompanied by an excellent Sancerre. Most diners also will appreciate that the background music is adjusted low enough to allow for conversation. (2175 Cornell Road, Clubisabella.com.)

Day 4

10:30 a.m., Severance Hall tour. Even if you're not here during the Cleveland Orchestra's season, book a tour of its magnificent home. A gorgeous building in the University Circle area, the design elements — Egyptian-inspired and Art Deco — are spectacular, and you have to see the main concert hall (preferably when the orchestra is playing) to believe it. (11001 Euclid Avenue, in University Circle; Clevelandorchestra.com. Tours are free, but contact them for available dates.)

Noon, Cleveland Botanical Gardens. Within walking

distance of Severance Hall, the art museum and Glidden House, the gardens have 15 areas as varied as the tranquil Urban Retreat Garden and the delightfully bustling Hershey Children's Garden.

Don't miss the permanent exhibit, which contrasts the flora of two vastly different countries: Costa Rica, with its humid rainforest, and Madagascar, with its semi-arid climate. (11030 East Boulevard, CBgarden.org.)

1:30 p.m., lunch at

L'Albatros. This is another of Cleveland's stylish bistros, with its plush white interior and flower-filled courtyard. The cuisine is French-influenced, from traditional dishes such as cassoulet to more modern offerings including grilled tiger shrimp with Brussels sprouts, noodles and Pernod cream. (11401 Bellflower Court, Albatrosbrasserie.com.)

I had barely finished my espresso when it was time to leave for the airport. My four days had gone by quickly, and I hadn't even made it to the Polka Hall of Fame, the Cleveland Police Museum (housing items from legendary crime fighter Eliot Ness) or the Big Fun Toy Store (which sounds big and fun).

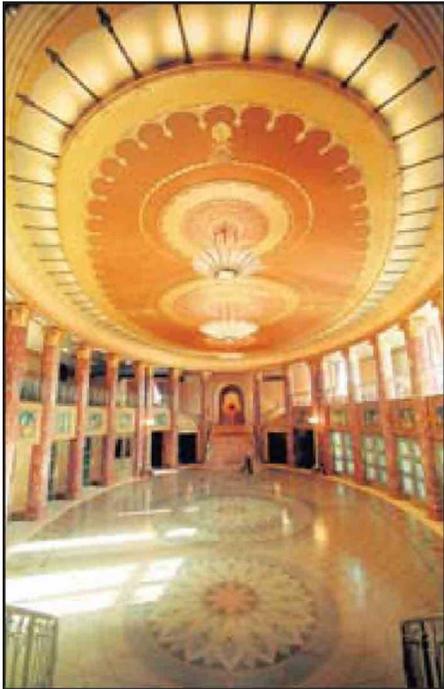
Cleveland, I'll be back.

Patti Nickell is a Lexington-based travel writer. Reach her at pnickell13@bellsouth.net.



TONY DEJAK | ASSOCIATED PRESS

Roslyn Boden, 3, watched two bonnethead sharks at the Greater [Cleveland Aquarium](#) earlier this year. One of its attractions is a "sea tube," a clear, 150-foot walk-through tunnel.



2000 ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

This is the Grand Foyer at Severance Hall, the ornate home of the [Cleveland](#) Symphony Orchestra. Tours are free, but call ahead.



AMY SANCETTA | ASSOCIATED PRESS

From left, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, the Great Lakes Science Center and Cleveland Browns Stadium



PHOTOS BY AMY SANCETTA | ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum has six floors of exhibits, so give yourself plenty of time to see things. The complex, on the shore of Lake Erie, has been a leader in the redevelopment of downtown Cleveland.



The Cleveland Museum of Art is considered one of the best in the country. The current exhibit is *Youth and Beauty*, a collection of Jazz Age art. *Rembrandt in America* closed in May.



A Bananaquit worked on a flower in the Costa Rica section of the Glass House at Cleveland Botanical Gardens. There are 15 distinct areas representing various regions of the world.
