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Visiting Cleveland, on Purpose



Photo by Dean Kaufman

Cleveland

In a 2008 episode of '30 Rock,' Liz Lemon (played by Tina Fey) faced a big decision at an airport security check: Keep a still-hot sandwich or dump it fly to Cleveland for love. Lemon's choice is obvious. Poor Cleveland didn't stand a chance.

Spread out on the south shore of Lake Erie, "The Forest City" - called the "mistake by the lake" by the sort of people who talk like that - is a pleasant surprise for visitors who actually make the trip. Just the names of the neighborhoods, including Slavic Village, Little Italy, and Asiatown, are a tribute to the city's melting-pot roots, which manifest in great fusion cuisine. But this is a blue-collar city so don't expect a formal setting. With the [Rock and Roll Hall of Fame](#) and the ['A Christmas Story' House Museum](#), Cleveland defaults to kitsch over class. That's part of the city's charm.

There is perhaps no better manifestation of the city's ability to mock itself than the Gordon Square District's [Happy Dog](#). West of downtown, this hot dog bar draws local hipsters who pick from half-a-hundred toppings (think ginger-sesame coleslaw) in a time-warp 1940s pub that features an eclectic mix of musical acts every night. Co-owner Sean Watterson, a Cleveland native returned from a stint

on Wall Street sums up what brought him back: "In cities like New York or LA, you have to focus on a specific audience. Here you can have indie rock one night, members of the [Cleveland Orchestra](#) the next." (If you're a fan of classical music, the Cleveland Orchestra, one of the original U.S. "[Big Five](#)" and a permanent fixture on many [best orchestras of the world](#) lists, is not to be missed, especially considering home venue [Severance Hall](#)'s excellent acoustics.)

Relics of Cleveland's past mix with the present across town. Up the hill from the Russian Orthodox church seen in 'The Deer Hunter,' Tremont now booms with 20-somethings and lively spots like the [Prosperity Social Club](#), with its live polka on Wednesdays and a retro "bar bowling" machine in back. Across town, North Collingwood's half-century old trophy shops are now full of vinyl; here too is the beloved [Beachland](#), one of the great small-scale music venues in the U.S. It still has the Croatian murals from its social hall days.

One of the best ways to experience Cleveland's past and present is by paddling up the Cuyahoga. This once oil-slicked river caught fire in 1969 and has been the poster child of the Rust Belt's toxic rep ever since. But while outsiders were smirking, Cleveland's cleaned it up (mostly), and now sea-kayak operations like [41 Degrees North](#) lead "burning river" tours past rusting relics of Cleveland's industrial past and even the [USS Cod](#), a WWII submarine-turned-museum docked in the harbor.

"Cleveland has to own its industrial heritage," says Jason Bristol of [41 Degrees North](#). "And you'll meet a lot of people who don't mind there's an aging rail bridge in their backyard."

To Steve Presser, these rusty relics are "great bones," an infrastructure that gives life to independent invention that ensure Cleveland is not like any other big city. An example is his well-named [Big Fun Toy Shop](#) in Coventry Village. If you remember life before MTV - life with bearded GI-Joes and foot-tall George Custer dolls - you must see the floor-to-ceiling collection of vintage toys you'd never hope to find in New York. The place is almost a museum.

And there are those as well. [The Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland](#) now sits behind Farshid Moussavi's steely glass masterpiece on Euclid Avenue (pictured), a destination for architecture buffs. And the scene at the [Cleveland Museum of Art](#) is, well, a scene, full of artsy types enthusiastically checking out both impressive permanent exhibitions ([Van Gogh's repetitions](#), [Renaissance religious works](#), George Bellows's "[Stag at Sharkey's](#)") and a selection of impressive road shows.

If she had taken the flight, Liz Lemon would have fallen for a place like [Melt Bar & Grilled](#), a grilled-cheese mini chain run like a band, beginning with a KISS shrine as you walk into its Cleveland Heights location, and promo posters for new sandwiches, debuted monthly. It's "grilled cheese" by name only - the Godfather comes with lasagna, the Russian has turkey and "vodka kraut."

And it's good. Has to be.

"No one gives you the time of day in this town if you're trying to be fake," says owner failed musician Matt Fish. "Everything's real. Real landmarks, real markets, real rock clubs, real people."

A real solid weekend destination.

More information: Justin Glanville's [New to Cleveland](#) is a fun illustrated local guidebook. The most memorable place to stay, 20 minutes east of downtown in Willoughby Hills, is the [Louis Penfield House](#), one of Frank Lloyd Wright's "Usonian" homes; rates are \$275 a night.

– ***Robert Reid***