

Cleveland rocks – it's a nice place to eat and sleep, too

By MARYANN HAGGERTY
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There's something appropriate about going to Cleveland to pay homage to Bruce Springsteen, the poet of Rust Belt rock. What I didn't expect in that much-maligned city was a fun neighborhood of historic bed-and-breakfast inns, up-to-the-minute restaurants and one of the best traditional food markets I have ever visited.

Cleveland was the first stop my husband and I planned on a Midwestern road trip. The goal was to see the special Springsteen exhibit that runs through Dec. 31 at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame downtown. But somehow, nearly every downtown hotel room was booked by convention-goers.

Serendipity (and some Internet trawling) led us to the J. Palen House, a B&B. Maps showed it a few miles from downtown, across the Cuyahoga River and close to a station on the city's light-rail system.

Make no mistake, the recession has battered Cleveland, already shaky from the decline of Midwestern manufacturing. The neighborhood around the J. Palen House isn't the hardest hit, but it's transitional. The B&B, a pretty purple Victo-

rian, was the most gentrified building on its block. Rooms were large and lovely, with touches that turn a night on the road into a romantic interlude.

Host Scott West offered us a tour of the neighborhood, called Ohio City. No big deal, he assured us; the walk would take just a few minutes. As Scott led us past solid renovated houses and a few old industrial buildings, he explained that Ohio City is one of Cleveland's oldest neighborhoods, once an independent city and home to Irish and German immigrants, including brewers. There's still a smell of beer in the air, but now it comes from Great Lakes Brewing Co., opened in 1988. (Although it has microbrewery cred, Great Lakes is more than a brew pub with copper tanks. It ships 100,000 barrels a year.)

We turned the corner onto Market Avenue, a restaurant-lined block lively with young Clevelanders. Scott pointed out the highlights – the Flying Fig, considered one of the city's best locavore restaurants; a nice wine bar; the Great Lakes brew pub. Around the next corner, on 25th Street, there were more shiny new restaurants mixed in with worn neighborhood storefronts.



Associated Press file. 2004

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, left, and Cleveland Browns Stadium.

And a few hundred yards away, in a red-brick building with an eye-catching clock tower, was the West Side Market, one of those century-old food-stall palaces. Later, I found that city boosters are trying to brand the neighborhood the Market District and attract even more restaurants and food-oriented retailers.

We started the evening with a pint at Great Lakes – I opted for the Burning River Pale Ale, a nod to the bad old days, when the Cuyahoga River infamously caught fire. Dinner at the Flying Fig was all that a fashionable new-American farm-to-table meal should be: creative, fresh, seasonal. Afterward, we wandered the little neighborhood and learned that in this city with brutal winters, the locals flock to sidewalk cafes and

outdoor beer gardens on a pleasant summer evening.

We read menus and added to our list of must-visit places for our short stay: Bar Cento for Italian-ish; Momocho, several blocks away, for what it called Mod Mex.

In the morning, we took the Red Line of the light-rail system, the Rapid, to the main Tower City station downtown. After a frustrating wait there, we determined that the Waterfront line, which runs near the Rock Hall, no longer operates on weekdays even though it's on all the system's maps. Nobody had bothered to put up a sign on the platform, and transit employees were dismissive. It turns out that most service on the line, always underused, was discontinued this year for budget reasons.

I grumbled, but as we knew from past visits, the walk to the Rock Hall is less than a mile. The Hall lets you go in and out all day, so you're not stuck with a museum cafeteria. We opted to hunt down Polish Boy sandwiches. The Polish Boy is a sausage topped with cole slaw, French fries and barbecue sauce. I know, but it's good – and we found some nearby, at a hole-in-the-wall called Freddie's Southern Style Rib House.

But the highlight – the big pig-out revelation – came the morning we visited the West Side Market. It's huge and sparkling clean. And the variety! Pasta, sausage, cheese, pastry, pierogies, tamales, meat, meat, meat. (Produce, not so hot.) We still had two weeks of road trip ahead, so we restrained ourselves, buying a pound of raw-milk Amish cheddar, pretzel-and-cheese concoctions called pretzel boats, and some spicy distant cousins of beef jerky known as smokies. A few days later, when we finished the cheese, we decided to shift our route home and swing back through Cleveland.

On the return leg we filled a cooler with yet more West Side Market purchases. After all, it was only a seven-hour drive home.

