

The Valdosta, GA Daily Times Online



Omaha Nebraska city more than good beef and Warren Buffett

Posted: Friday, January 30, 2015 8:24 pm
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For most Americans the mention of Omaha brings to mind steaks, the College World Series, and Warren Buffett.

Mutual of Omaha and Marlin Perkins may create a slight buzz, but only for those receiving Social Security.

In truth, like nearly every large city, Omaha offers more than most travelers realize, if only they knew where to look. This is a good reason to become better acquainted with the community sometimes called “Gateway to the West.”

Omaha’s Past and the Present

An increasing number of settlers began crossing the Missouri River and heading west following President Thomas Jefferson’s 1803 Louisiana Purchase.

Most were in a hurry to cross the Rockies and few stopped for more than a short rest on the river’s west bank where present-day Omaha now sits.

It was another half century before things really began to hum, when in 1854, the Nebraska Territory was created as a part of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

Three years later, Omaha was officially incorporated by the state legislature. The town that took its name from a Native American Tribe (meaning: “those going against the wind or current”) would become a major hub for Midwestern transportation and commerce.

The Union Pacific was selected in 1862 to build the eastern portion of the Transcontinental Railroad that was to begin in Omaha and head west along the Platte River Valley. Thus, began the Union Pacific’s storied history from its Omaha headquarters that continues as one of the city’s major employers.

The town grew quickly as wholesale industries developed and supporting businesses boomed. Passengers along with mountains of goods were loaded onto trains that became a lifeline to those who moved west.

Omaha's first school was constructed in 1863 when the town started to grow. Less than three decades later the number of schools had grown to 61. By then the city's stockyards were the third largest in the nation, and by the 1930s, Omaha had become a leader in meatpacking.

City's Decline and Rebirth

Packinghouses and other businesses gradually consolidated or closed while new companies took their place.

Magnificent Union Station closed in 1971, and the market district of downtown Omaha commenced a downhill slide. In the mid-1980s, the tide turned when individual entrepreneurs and companies began converting the old brick buildings into commercial outlets.

This area, now known as the Old Market District, is once again thriving with stores, restaurants, art galleries, office space, and apartments.

With a current metro area population of nearly one million, Omaha boasts a surprising number of historical, cultural, and sporting attractions, along with wineries, brew pubs, and restaurants.

Not surprisingly, considering that Omaha was once primarily known for its huge stockyards, the latter category includes some excellent steakhouses.

New developments along the river, including public parks and the attractive CenturyLink Center, host of major conventions, shows, and sporting events, have enhanced this section of the city.

Five Fortune 500 businesses currently call Omaha home: Berkshire Hathaway, ConAgra Foods, Union Pacific, Peter Kiewit Sons', and Mutual of Omaha. Five additional companies in Fortune's top 1,000, including TD Ameritrade, have also chosen Omaha for their headquarters.

Omaha enjoys a number of theaters, museums, and sporting venues including TD Ameritrade Park, which annually hosts the NCAA College World Series. Four of the city's particularly interesting places to visit are described below.

Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium

Begin with Omaha's world-class zoo and aquarium that in 2014 was voted by Trip Advisor as the world's best.

With or without children in tow, Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium offers a great experience and visitors who harbor a love of animals and nature should plan on spending most of a day. The zoo, which opened in the late 1800s, houses almost 60,000 animals (including fish, which, no matter what you've been taught, really are animals), representing 1,740 species on 130 acres.

Getting around the zoo is facilitated by a transportation system that includes a train, tram, and the Skyfari, all of which operate from Memorial Day through Labor Day. Although the transportation is discontinued from late fall to early summer, the zoo remains open year round.

The zoo is comprised of more than a dozen major areas including the recently renovated aquarium that contains multiple fish tanks; a 70-foot shark tunnel; an Amazon River section; and two areas, one with tufted puffins and the second with Antarctic penguins, that can be viewed above and below water.

The zoo's major architectural feature is its Desert Dome, the world's largest geodesic dome that houses an indoor desert with plant and animal life representing three deserts of the world.

The Lied Jungle houses America's largest natural rainforest that includes approximately 90 animal species in regional environments from Asia, Africa and South America.

Other specialized areas include Bear Canyon, Giraffe Complex, Hoofstock Row (zebras, antelope, etc.), Expedition Madagascar, Orangutan Forest, Gorilla Valley, Cheetah Valley, Kingdoms of the Night, Cat Complex, Sea Lion Pavilion, an aviary, a butterfly conservatory, and even an insect pavilion.

The Joslyn Art Museum

The Joslyn Art Museum boasts an outstanding collection in a magnificent structure. The museum opened in 1931 with a concert hall surrounded by art galleries following a three-year construction project funded by Sarah H. Joslyn as a memorial to husband, George.

In 1938, the beautiful Art Deco building, framed with Georgia Pink (Etowah Fleuri) marble exterior walls, was listed among the 100 finest buildings in the United States. A 1994 addition utilized marble from the same quarry. The two buildings are joined by an atrium that highlights two huge, but very different, multicolored glass sculptures by Dale Chihuly.

The museum's collection includes more than 11,000 works dating from ancient times to the present.

An active exhibition program presents art of the ancient world, European and American paintings, modern and contemporary art, photography, and the American West. Titan, El Greco, Rembrandt, Renoir, Monet, James Peale, Mary Cassatt, Thomas Moran, George Ault are a few of the artists represented.

Temporary exhibitions during our visit included works by Andy Warhol and Orly Genger.

One outstanding American West exhibit highlights the journals of German explorer and naturalist Prince Alexander Philipp Maximilian. The journals are accompanied by watercolor portraits of Native Americans of the Upper Missouri by Maximilian's companion, Swiss artist Karl Bodmer.

The two men spent 1833 and 1834 following Lewis and Clark's journey along the Missouri River during which they recorded their adventure in both writing and art. Maximilian's journals and Bodmer's watercolors and drawings are considered outstanding documentation of the land and Native Americans of that time.

The Durham Museum

The Durham Museum is housed in Omaha's historic Union Station, a beautiful structure designed by architect Gilbert Stanley Underwood who was responsible for several magnificent national park lodges in addition to other train stations.

The Art Deco building opened in 1931, and the last train left the station 40 years later. The Union Pacific donated the building to the City of Omaha in 1973.

The building remained empty for two additional years before the Western Heritage Museum moved in and began to tackle needed repairs. In 1995, a major campaign, led by Margre and Charles Durham, was undertaken to restore Union Station to its original splendor.

The restored main waiting room is magnificent and walking in the entrance will take you back to a time when trains served as a major mode of passenger transportation. The experience is enhanced by occasional statues representing train travelers of an earlier period. These include a woman purchasing a ticket from an agent, a young couple sitting on a bench, and World War II soldiers awaiting their trains.

Permanent exhibits in The Durham include an area that interprets the history and development of the Omaha area from the time of Native Americans and pioneers to today. Several railroad cars are open for viewing in the basement, while a 1931-vintage soda fountain serves sandwiches and ice cream sodas on the main floor.

Lauritzen Gardens

Lauritzen Gardens is an amazing oasis of 100 acres that include more than a dozen different garden areas with specialties such as roses, peonies, and herbs.

The Founders' Garden includes a gazebo and was the first garden established in 1993. This area has 50 varieties of hosta, plus many other varieties of flowers and plants that include 10,000 spring bulbs.

The four-acre arboretum and bird sanctuary include numerous species of trees and shrubs, some of which hold bird feeders and nest boxes to attract migratory birds flying along the Missouri River corridor.

The Children's Garden offers a variety of children's activities including the opportunity for hands-on gardening

And for children of all ages, the Model Railroad Garden has seven G-scale trains running through miniature landscapes May through October.

The 17,500 square-foot Marjorie Daugherty Conservatory opened in October 2014 as the newest addition to the gardens. This large glass structure is divided into areas that range from tropical to temperate gardens with beautiful landscaping that includes ponds and waterfalls.

One corner of Lauritzen Gardens designated as Kenefick Park has a stairway that leads to the display of two famous Union Pacific locomotives: Centennial No. 6900, the largest and most powerful diesel-electric locomotive; and Big Boy No. 2043, the world's largest steam locomotive.

The Surrounding Area

There is more to see and do in or near Omaha including the impressive Strategic Air & Space Museum near Ashland and Fontenelle Forest Nature Center in Bellevue.

A little more than 50 miles away, the state capital of Lincoln offers tours of the unusual State Capitol, an impressive children's zoo, the International Quilt Study Center & Museum, and the historic Haymarket District for shopping, food and drink.

If you still don't think a stay in Omaha is warranted, consider that one evening we were talking with the regional manager of a large hotel ownership group who had moved to Omaha from San Antonio. He had lived in many communities during his career and could choose from a number of cities in his current capacity since he traveled so much. However, he chose Omaha and told us how much he liked it.

If this doesn't convince you, consider this, Warren Buffett is one of the world's richest men and could afford to live anywhere, but he chooses to remain in Omaha. What does he know that you don't?

Kay and David Scott are authors of "Complete Guide to the National Park Lodges" (Globe Pequot). They live in Valdosta.

If You Go:

Round-trip flights from Valdosta to Omaha start at around \$500.

Additional Information:

Nebraska Tourism Commission; www.visitnebraska.com; (402) 713-3796.

Omaha Convention & Visitors Bureau; www.visitOmaha.com; (866) 937-6624.

Where to stay:

Two particularly nice places are:

Ramada Plaza Convention Center; www.ramadaplazaomaha.com; (402) 393-3950.

Embassy Suites Omaha/La Vista; www.embassysuitesomahalavista.com; (402) 331-7400.