

Weekend Getaway to Columbus, Indiana

Midwest Living / Travel / Indiana / Columbus Indiana 3/14/14

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From where we stand, the curved gray and green surfaces of Henry Moore's Large Arch seem to enfold architect Eliel Saarinen's First Christian Church. The 1942 building, with its starkly upright, rectangular design, appears much more contemporary than it really is. "Too bad Saarinen didn't design us," I say. My wife, Melissa, raises an eyebrow, then relents with a smile.

Saarinen's church foreshadowed a revolution instigated by J. Irwin Miller, longtime head of locally based Cummins Engine Company. In the 1950s, he launched a program to subsidize public buildings with the stipulation that they be designed by great architects. He wanted to foster a world-class community, and he helped fund the investment in the town because he believed that, ultimately, "Mediocrity is expensive."

The result is a town filled with more than 70 buildings created by famed architects, giving Columbus (a city of 45,000) a skyline that mixes 20th-century masterpieces with 19th-century structures. That means the anchor of any weekend in Columbus (45 miles south of Indianapolis) should be a tour of the most notable buildings. Walking tours explore downtown, and the visitors center hauls busloads of camera--snapping guests around to see roughly 50 art and architectural treasures. Other tours explore the Miller House and Garden, a 1950s icon designed by Eero Saarinen.

But like the girders supporting monuments, Columbus' many restaurants and shops bolster the headlining buildings and round out a getaway.

Want an example? The Simmons family has spent 120 years farming the land now occupied by 450 North Brewing Company and Simmons Winery. Twelve of those acres currently produce grapes for the Chardonel, Chambourcin and other wines they serve. It's their microbrews like Copperhead Road ale that pair best with pizzas hot from the brick oven, and the garlic knots are irresistible. The steamy bread coils weep melted butter and garlic goodness. In the dining room, families hail friends across the room. Vintage agriculture tools and old farm photos reference the rural address. You don't feel a bit guilty licking butter off your fingers after eating a garlic knot.

A friendly welcome awaits anyone who meets Hotel Indigo's resident pooch, Miles. The bichon frise presides over the intriguing lobby, watching guests check in. We take turns exclaiming over the framed vintage textiles, rugged old fence posts and Eero Saarinen Womb Chairs. Our room is just about as extraordinary; its panel-separated foyer and curving bathroom walls help create a fresh, modern feel.

For travelers staying two nights, the Inn at Irwin Gardens' lustrous English oak interiors, vintage furniture and hand-carved ceiling perfectly balance a stay at the modern Hotel Indigo. Equally

impressive are the bed-and-breakfast's Pompeii-inspired sunken gardens, with statues and water features from around the world.

Another stop not to miss before heading home: Mill Race Park, just west of downtown. A covered bridge reflects in the circular pond, and a riverfront deck makes an ideal spot for listening to birds and the burbling confluence of the Driftwood and Flatrock rivers, joining here as seamlessly as old and new do in town.