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LIFESTYLE | TRAVEL

We're Calling It. This Small Town in Iowa Is the Place to Be This Summer.

Once the butt of jokes, the town of Dubuque, Iowa, has emerged as an unlikely hub of Midwest cool. Here's how to plan a long weekend that packs in all its charms.



One of the dozens of murals in Dubuque commissioned by the arts organization Voices Productions.

By David Farley | Photographs by riel Sturchio for WSJ

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In 1925, the town of Dubuque, Iowa, found itself singled out by Harold Ross, editor in chief of the *New Yorker*, in its inaugural issue. “The *New Yorker* will be the magazine which is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque,” he wrote. “It will not be concerned in what she is thinking about.”

Snobbery aside, Ross had a point. I was born in Dubuque and that “old lady” could’ve been my great-grandmother, whose life in that small town on the Mississippi River was far removed from Ross’s cosmopolitan preoccupations.

My family fled Dubuque for Los Angeles in 1978, just before manufacturing took a nosedive. In the early ’80s, the population dropped by 10% and unemployment shot up to 23%. One popular T-shirt at the time asked “Will the last one leaving Dubuque please turn out the lights?”

A few years ago, my sister returned from a high school reunion singing Dubuque's praises. The lights were not just back on but shining bright, she claimed. I had to see for myself, and on a recent trip, my first in 25 years, I was shocked by what I found.



ILLUSTRATION: ALY MILLER

The once-derelict Downtown neighborhood buzzes with energy. Thanks to enterprising locals and more than a few newcomers, the city has transformed into an ideal long-weekend destination. Travelers looking to step away from the usual escapes will find much to love. But so will anyone looking to see how a largely abandoned industrial hub can reinvent itself. Here's how to make the most of three days in town.



Day 1 | SATURDAY

9:15 a.m. Check in, or at least stash your bags, at the eight-floor [Hotel Julien Dubuque](#) (doubles starting at \$199), the city's old grand-dame hotel, which claims Abraham Lincoln, "Buffalo Bill" Cody and Al Capone among past guests. The elegant, high-ceilinged lobby will transport you back to the 19th century, when Dubuque was a Midwestern hub for commerce and industry.

Request a room on a high floor for views of the historic Downtown and the river.



From left: A statue at Hotel Julien Dubuque of the establishment's namesake, one of the earliest European settlers in the region; the lobby of the hotel.

9:45 a.m. Begin nearby at Monk's, a coffeehouse by day and a bar and performance space by night. The ramshackle-but-homey interior creates a lived-in feel that makes for a cozy cup of coffee.

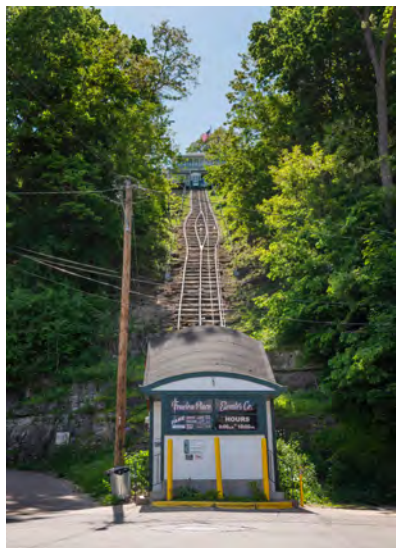
10:15 a.m. Dubuque has hosted a regular [farmers market](#) since soon after its founding in 1833. Take a stroll down Iowa Street to enjoy the latest incarnation where you'll find locals shopping for organic vegetables, eating at food trucks and browsing stalls selling everything from goat-milk soaps to freshly baked pies.

12:15 p.m. [Cremer's Meats](#) in the North End neighborhood has been making hearty turkey-and-stuffing sandwiches since 1948. It's a no-nonsense, no-seating joint, so walk your sandwiches three blocks south to the recently developed Bee Branch Creek Greenway or drive a mile and a half north to Eagle Point Park, where you can dig in with a view of the Mississippi.



Clockwise from top left: Label stamps at Cremer's Meats, a grocery in Dubuque; the storefront at Cremer's, which has been in operation since 1948; current owner Jeff Cremer talks to a customer.

2 p.m. Stroll over to the [Fenelon Place Elevator](#), which claims to be the world's shortest, steepest railroad. The 296-foot-long funicular takes you up a bluff for views of 19th-century church steeples, the gold dome of the county courthouse and the three bridges that reach across the river.



From left: The Fenelon Place Elevator takes visitors up to one of the many bluffs that surround Dubuque; the view from the top.

2:30 p.m. Grab a souvenir at [A Ripple Effect](#), which sells fair-trade treats, watercolors of local landmarks and woodwork by co-owner Jennifer Cavanagh. If you're lucky you might even meet the other co-owner, Dubuque mayor Brad Cavanagh, who is known to work occasional shifts at the shop.



Dubuque's mayor, Brad Cavanagh, at A Ripple Effect, a store he runs with his wife, Jennifer.

3:30 p.m. Dubuque's street art scene shines, thanks in part to Voices Productions, an art gallery and grassroots organization that has commissioned [45 different murals](#). Across Downtown and the Millwork District you'll find vibrant pieces that protest book bans, depict early settler Julien Dubuque and portray the river fish of the Mississippi. Download a map of the murals at the [Voices website](#).



One of Dubuque's many murals depicts the explorer who gives the town its name.

6:30 p.m. Dinner starts early in Dubuque and options abound for Midwestern staples like fried cheese curds, meatloaf and catfish, but plenty of new restaurants also traffic in escargot, nachos and pad thai. At [Pepper Sprout](#), chef Kim Wolff oversees a seasonally rotating menu that might include dishes like venison tenderloin doused in a blueberry, caramelized onion demi-glaze and Cajun-accented mac 'n' cheese topped with smoked Gouda from Wisconsin, just across the river.

8:30 p.m. Grab a nightcap nearby at [Smokestack](#), run by Susan Price and Scott Cornwell, a couple who fell hard for Dubuque when they stopped by on a road trip in 2013. A few weeks later, they packed up their home in Brooklyn and bought this former warehouse. Sip a Manhattan or a can of Grain Belt beer on the roof deck and then check out one of the regular concerts, salsa nights and drag shows that take place downstairs.



Day 2 | SUNDAY

9 a.m. Start the day in the North End neighborhood at [Convivium Urban Farmstead](#), a nonprofit that teaches classes about cooking and farming, and grows vegetables in the lot next door. The cafe, a bright, colorful space open for breakfast and lunch, serves eggs with bright orange yolks and sweet-potato pancakes on long wooden communal tables. All proceeds go into the community via free food programs.

12:15 p.m. Thankfully, you can still find vestiges of old-school Dubuque among all the new builds.

At Paul's Tavern, a dive bar from 1948, erstwhile owner Paul's hunting trophies hang from the walls. Order a "scoop" of beer, served in a goblet the size of a softball. Even the prices are a throwback to 1980s Dubuque: The cheeseburger, the best in town according to many, will run you \$4.



The bar at Paul's Tavern; Paul's Tavern, opened in 1948, is known for cheap beer and delicious burgers.

1:30 p.m. What the [Dubuque Museum of Art](#) lacks in square footage, it makes up for with a permanent collection that includes Winslow Homer, Grant Wood, Arthur Geisert, Edward S. Curtis and Ansel Adams. Come 2027, a new building by Schulhof Rashidi Architects (known for David Geffen Hall at New York's Lincoln Center and Chicago's Obama Presidential Center) will expand the museum's footprint.



The Dubuque Museum of Art, which will soon move to a new building.

7 p.m. You'll find the restaurant [L.May](#) on Main Street near a 110-foot clock tower from 1873. Menu highlights include steak bites that come with an espresso-cream dipping sauce, and thin-crust, crispy pizzas with fun toppings: The "You're in Dubuque" comes with a tomato sauce base

liberally sprinkled with bacon, sausage, mushrooms, red onions, mozzarella and cheddar cheese.



L.May Eatery, a good choice for local staples and thin-crust 'tavern-style' pizza.



Day 3 | MONDAY

12 p.m. Head to the Millwork District for a deeper dive into the city's reinvention story. Here, 19th-century warehouses have been reborn as loft apartments, offices, yoga studios and wine bars. After a stroll, plant yourself at [7 Hills Brewing Company](#), which makes delicious beer and beery snacks like fried cheese curds, fried pickles and fried mac 'n' cheese bites. If you struggle

with the paucity of vegetables on some Dubuque menus, fear not: 7 Hills makes bright entree-size salads, too.

2 p.m. The beginning of Dubuque’s revitalization coincided with the opening of the [National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium](#) at the port in 2003, which sits next to a newly built convention center along the river. You’ll find exhibitions on the city and the river—and any self-respecting kid will love the tanks full of enormous catfish, carp, largemouth bass and playful river otters.

5:30 p.m. Dubuque is still a river town best appreciated from out on the water. [American Lady Cruises](#) offers a 90-minute “happy hour” cruise (\$26 per person) from the port on Chaplain Schmitt Island. In addition to unlimited refills of draft beer, 2-for-1 margaritas, and a buffet of fried food, the cruise makes for top-tier bird watching, so keep an eye out for bald eagles, double-crested cormorants and pelicans.



The dining room at Brazen Open Kitchen & Bar; Kevin Scharpf, the restaurant’s chef-owner.

7:30 p.m. Back in the Millwork District, “Top Chef” alum Kevin Scharpf runs the 115-seat [Brazen Open Kitchen & Bar](#). Try the ultra-tender bone-in pork chop, cooked in butter, sous-vide style. Or opt for a pizza; I recommend one particularly delicious concoction topped with mozzarella,

Parmesan, and—the secret to the bold flavor—St. Angel triple-cream brie.

—Illustrations by Aly Miller

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