

Statewide Sights to See

Regions Offer Variety of Tourism Destinations

By Charlee Beasor

Hoosiers have a propensity to travel south for fun in the sun during spring and summer breaks. But a sandy, sunny, freshwater beach is much closer when you head north to the Lake Michigan South Shore.

And who needs Las Vegas or Atlantic City when you've got casinos here, including a newly-updated riverboat in Evansville.

Did you know you could go white water rafting in downtown South Bend? Or catch a TinCaps minor league baseball game at Fort Wayne's Parkview Field.

You get the picture: Indiana has a lot to offer Hoosiers and out-of-state or international visitors. We won't get to touch on all of them here, but we're going to take a closer look at what's available in Evansville, Fort Wayne, South Bend and the Lake Michigan South Shore.



A variety of attractions and activities are available to travelers around the state, including (clockwise) gambling at the Tropicana Evansville riverboat casino; a TinCaps baseball game at Parkview Field in Fort Wayne; white river rafting down the East Race Waterway in downtown South Bend; and getting closer to nature at the Indiana Dunes State Park (even in winter).

Get 'em in the doors

The leaders of the local visitors' bureaus assert that there are world-class sights to see in every Hoosier's backyard.

South Bend gets about 4.2 million visitors each year, leading to an economic impact of \$447 million in direct spending to the local economy. Its No. 1 attraction is not a surprise.

"You can't deny it's Notre Dame," contends South Bend/Mishawaka Convention and Visitors Bureau Executive Director Rob DeCleene. "We are very proud and we accept and embrace the recognition. With tourism, you try to take ahold of that recognition and use that as your motivation to teach people more. But we can't deny Notre Dame is our calling card."

The South Bend/Mishawaka area actually has five universities: Notre Dame, Indiana University South Bend, Bethel College, Saint Mary's College and Holy Cross College. There are about 25,000 undergraduate students in the area.

The city is also home to the Studebaker National Museum, with the largest residential carriage collection in the country. (Check out the sidebar for some reasons locals and guests visit the museum and other attractions mentioned here).

To the west from South Bend is the five-county region that encompasses the Lake Michigan South Shore. The South Shore Convention & Visitors Authority is led by president and CEO Speros Batistatos.

"We're one of those parts of the state that has a pretty significant list of amenities and they're fairly diverse. We're in the heat of beach season and we just had the first really good beach weekend this year (in late June), and our beaches, the national park (Indiana Dunes State Park) were just jammed," he declares.

Batistatos points to a rich ethnic culture as one of the South Shore's draws. He contends that the area has the best independent restaurants, and calls the annual Pierogi Fest in Whiting a "microcosm of ethnic diversity." The Pierogi Fest was recently named by Trip Advisor to its top 10 list of bizarre festivities. Pierogi, or dumplings, is a traditional Polish meal.

"We have more than 80 different ethnic peoples who call the South Shore home," Batistatos maintains. "We have found the ability to tell a story through culture in our food. A great example of that is Pierogi Fest; it's an Eastern European festival, a must-see festival."

Socially Speaking

Here's a sampling of what people are saying about Hoosier destinations on Facebook.

FORT WAYNE

Science Central:

"My new favorite place to take my 3yr old...LOVE it!" – Vanessa McCarty

"It was this place that I visited in third grade that took my drive to understand to a whole different level, and if it had not been for experiences like this I may not be as incredibly driven to learn, as I am today." – Amber Spradlin

TinCaps at Parkview Field:

"This place is awesome!! Greatest facility in minor league baseball and very cheap!!"

– Austin Finicle

"Summer isn't complete without baseball, and Parkview field is a great place to start."

– Jack Ankenbruck

EVANSVILLE

Tropicana Evansville:

"I love it there, good food. Good service. Good people. I have learned a long time ago you do not go to the boat to win. You go to have a good time!!!! So enjoy and you may get lucky!!!!" – Linda Markovich-Hicks

"Just wanted to say thanks for having us this week! Everyone was so nice to us, guests and staff!" – The Dave Lutz Band

Mesker Park Zoo & Botanic Garden:

"Fun for the whole family!" – Steven N Jennifer Hopper

"My son loves the zoo, can't wait to take him again :) Thanks for the tickets :))" – Lydia Maggie Chapman

SOUTH BEND:

Studebaker National Museum:

"Better than Disneyland, cooler than any 57 Chevy." – Edsel G. Tattooer

"Three floors dedicated to a great American brand. An amazing collection and a very friendly staff." – Jason White

South Bend Chocolate Café (South Bend Chocolate Company)

"I went on a blind date with a man here in 2011. In 2012, the manager helped my husband set up a romantic proposal at the café. (I said yes!) I'd definitely say this has been a lucky place for us! We come here all the time for the great drinks and dessert and the pleasant atmosphere. (And the memories)" – Kelly Diane Howland

SOUTH SHORE

Indiana Dunes State Park:

"Best sunsets" – Randall Tishner

"I definitely recommend the beach at the Dunes, haven't seen the rest of it yet, but the beach was amazing! Will be going back for sure!" – Adria Pollock

Pierogi Fest:

"Happy July...that means Pierogi Fest is coming :) :) YIPPEE" – Shary Kilmecko

"Yummy yummy yummy I got pierogi in my tummy..." – Thomas Harvey

Business or leisure?

Evansville gets about 4.3 million visitors on an annual basis, with a majority of those traveling for business purposes, offers Bob Warren, executive director of the Evansville Convention & Visitors Bureau.

“Evansville is a community where we have a very strong corporate base; there is a lot of corporate travel that comes in and out,” Warren notes. “Our Sunday through Thursday business is primarily that of business travel. That’s where our strongest portion of visitors is coming from.”

To accommodate the large amount of business travel, a new convention center and hotel are in the works, with a possible groundbreaking by the end of the year, Warren says.

“We’ve been out of the large-scale meetings business since The Executive (Inn) was torn down in 2010; we’re eager to get back into the convention business. It should generate an additional 25,000 room nights a year into our community. We’re excited about that prospect,” he adds.

The most popular attraction in the area, however, is the Tropicana Evansville casino (formerly Casino Aztar), Warren says.

“It is without question producing the largest population of visitors; 25% of our total visitation comes right here to enjoy Tropicana Evansville.”

For Fort Wayne/Allen County, being Indiana’s second largest city and the state’s largest county by size offers certain perks that other regions don’t have, including an international airport with 40 flights per day and an exhibition center that is regularly ranked as one of the top 20 in the country, asserts Dan O’Connell, president and CEO of the Fort Wayne/Allen County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

“We get five million visitors a year – they’re not all tourists, some are here for business activities, the corporate community ... and universities – we have three universities. Our business and leisure travel is worth about \$466 million a year to our local economy,” he confirms.

“We’ve built a new hotel in Fort Wayne every year for the last 10 years, expanded the convention center to twice its size and spent \$3 million to renovate the exposition arena. We have two separately operated and very busy facilities. We’re hosting 20 nationally-related conventions and sporting events this year.”

Among those conventions and activities: a Vera Bradley premier product and production meeting, as well as an outlet sale, held in the spring; and a unique one – the National Beer Can Collectors convention. Both events draw international visitors to the area.

The Genealogy Center at the Allen County Public Library attracts 75,000 guests annually to conduct family research and history. The National Federation of Genealogists is hosting a national convention there this year.

“It’s one of those niche markets that pays off year-round for Fort Wayne. It’s a double value,” O’Connell mentions.

Let’s play ball ... in winter?

While summer is still the busiest time for sports and leisure pursuits, Fort Wayne’s O’Connell notes that indoor sporting events are developing, including roller derby (regional championships are held in the city) and curling (the National Arena Curling Championships are taking place there this year).

“Sports tourism is an emerging business market for us that goes year round,” he adds.

The South Bend area’s largest piece of non-football travel business during the year is the annual America’s Youth on Parade – a world series of baton twirling that brings between 4,000 and 5,000 people to the area for a week (this year at the end of July). The series has been in South Bend for 44 years in a row.

“That’s what it’s all about, being able to appeal to all kinds of groups so they keep coming back,” DeCleene adds.

But, don’t discount Indiana’s outdoor possibilities in the winter – the South Shore offers cross-country skiing and

The Riverfront Corridor in downtown Evansville stretches from Sunrise Park to the Tropicana Evansville casino. The 1.5 mile trail connects with the Industrial Corridor and includes a number of the city’s attractions along the way.





The Whiting Pierogi Fest is one of the South Shore region's top events and draws almost 200,000 visitors per year. It celebrates and "pokes a little fun" at the area's rich Eastern European heritage, with offerings such as a parade and life-size Polish pastries taking photos with visitors.

striking ice shelf formations on Lake Michigan.

"Lake Michigan is even more stunning in the winter. ... It's a photographer's dream," Batistatos adds.

Hidden gems

Each community has a unique aspect, or one that's underutilized. We asked each leader to name at least one "hidden gem" that fits that description.

"Our hidden gem is the River Greenway Bike Trail. We have 65 miles of dedicated bike and hiking trails, and it runs along the riverfront of our community and connects two different communities together," Fort Wayne's O'Connell indicates. "It's a diamond in the rough; a little-known secret. It's a fun, healthy lifestyle."

Evansville's Warren had a hard time narrowing it down

to just one.

"I keep going back to the Museum of the Arts, History and Science. The USS LST-325 (a decommissioned tank landing ship docked in Evansville) is a hidden gem. Our zoo is a hidden gem. We have the Reitz Home here. The Willard Library is a hidden gem. There's a genealogy section; it's a great place to find out about your family. I could sit here and talk all day long," he emphasizes.

In South Bend, it's the white water rafting in the heart of the city.

"The East Race Waterway. It's the first urban waterway in the country. It's operated by the parks department, open on the weekends throughout the summertime. It's right in the heart of downtown South Bend. You can rent a kayak or a raft and have an urban rafting experience," DeCleene declares. "Without question. Maybe behind that would be our culinary opportunities. Foodie travels are popular these days."

Batistatos doesn't point to one particular attraction – but the people of the South Shore region.

"To me, at the end of the day, it's all about our people. I think that when you talk with people – and I see it when I travel – we just got a little more of that Chicago edge. We're still somewhat politically incorrect; we're a fun group," he shares.

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Bob Warren, Evansville Convention & Visitors Bureau, at www.visitevansville.com

Rob DeCleene, South Bend/Mishawaka Convention and Visitors Bureau, at www.visitsouthbend.com

Dan O'Connell, Fort Wayne/Allen County Convention and Visitors Bureau, at www.visitfortwayne.com

Speros Batistatos, South Shore Convention & Visitors Authority, at www.southshorecva.com