



PHOTO BY GREGG SCHIEVE

Where: Located about 80 miles due west of Milwaukee, Madison's trademark is "Lake, City, Lake" because of its origins on the isthmus between Lake Mendota and Lake Monona. The downtown is still located on that narrow strip, affording lake views from just about anywhere. Surrounding conservation land makes Madison one of the nation's most picturesque capital cities, with 10 public beaches and 6,000 acres devoted to parkland. It's also a college town, the home to one of the highest-rated public universities in the country, the University of Wisconsin, where Bucky Badger reigns as the popular mascot.

Why: Its beauty, livability and variety of attractions. When my son told me he got a job offer and was moving to Madison, WI, I had two simultaneous thoughts: "Woo hoo, he has a job!" and "Wait, what? Where?" So I got on Google and found that



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Madison has been listed as the No. 1 city for people in their 20s, one of the most livable cities in the country and one of the most bike friendly. The accolades continued whenever I told people where my son was moving after graduation. Their eyes would invariably light up as they told me what a fabulous place it was. So yeah, I was predisposed to like it. But I wasn't prepared to fall in love. The combination of the beautiful lake setting, the number of affordable things to do, variety of restaurants and the ease of getting around completely charmed me. **Bikes and Sites:** People bike year-round on more than 250 miles of shared-used trails and paths. Visitors can hop on one of 350 bikes at 35 stations in the B-Cycle program. The downtown area is fairly compact and you can bike to the 16-acre **Olbrich Botanical Gardens** or around the 1,260 acres of shore, stream and prairie grass at the **University of Wisconsin Arboretum**. Our tour of the city began by water on the family-run **Betty Lou Cruises**, a perfect introduction to Madison's beautiful lakefront homes and many of the city's major attractions. To paddle yourself, rent a kayak or canoe at **Wingra Boats** on nearby Lake Wingra. Weather permitting, any visitor to Madison should make extra time to relax in one of the candy-colored chairs on one of the four levels of the **Memorial Union Terrace** at the University of Wisconsin, Madison's "back porch." My son and I lounged

here, taking in the sights of the sailors, swimmers, walkers and even a wedding party photo session by the lake. **The State Capitol**, modeled after our nation's capitol in D.C., may be the most beautiful in the country, built with 43 kinds of stone, and the *only* one with a granite dome. Considered "the peoples' building," anyone is welcome to come in and view it or take one of the several free tours offered daily. This magnificent building was completed in 1917 after a major fire destroyed the previous one. Walk up to the roof for spectacular views of Madison. Every Saturday since 1972, around 20,000 people a week flock to the **Dane County Farmers' Market** held on the streets surrounding the State Capitol.



They buy produce, cheese curds, flowers, baked treats and local favorite, Stella's Spicy Cheese Bread, from the 160 producer-only

PHOTOS: JAN SCHROEDER

vendors. Traffic always moves in the same direction to keep the crowds manageable. During the winter months the market moves a block away but still features 50-60 vendors. Frank Lloyd Wright lived and worked in Madison for a while and his work can be seen at the **Unitarian Meeting House**, one of the most innovative examples of church architecture and a National Historic Landmark. For a truly fascinating tour, head out of town about 30 miles to nearby Spring Green to visit **Taliesin**, the home where Frank Lloyd Wright lived, worked and ran his architecture school. The house has a tragic history, as readers of *Loving Frank* know. His mistress and two children were murdered there by a workman. Wright also worked on plans for the stunning **Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center**, built right over Lake Monona and the first silver LEED-certified convention center. The center has two cafes, offers tours and many free and low-cost community events. Visit the Rooftop Garden for beautiful views of the surrounding area. A memorial honors Otis Redding, who died in a plane crash at the lake just three days after recording *On the Dock of the Bay*.



The founder of the popular American Girl dolls, Pleasant Rowland, lives in Madison. After selling the Pleasant Company to Mattel for \$700 million, the family donated the money for the magnificent **Overture Center for the Arts**, which houses an art gallery, performance space and provides plenty of community programming, including free organ concerts and kids shows and free tours on Saturdays. The **Madison Children's Museum** and the **Henry Vilas Zoo** are also great options for families. Winter sports enthusiasts will want to visit in the colder months when ice boating (sailing on ice), ice fishing, ice skating, snowboarding and skiing are popular.

Madison Eats: You can't escape Madison without nibbling on a cheese curd. Go all out with the fried Sassy Cow cheese curds at the hip restaurant **Graze**, made with vodka batter and served with house ranch dressing. ("My health insurance provider called after I ate one to tell me they won't insure me any longer," my son joked.) For a healthier option, try the popular beet & walnut burger while enjoying a view of the



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State Capitol through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows. For another artery-hardening treat, check out the toasted marshmallow milkshake at **DLux**, made with local ice cream. Other items on the menu include burgers and salads, with all items under \$9. DLux is one of 16 restaurants in the Food Fight Restaurant Group and you can't go wrong with any of them. Check out **The Old-Fashioned**, where the Wisconsin-focused menu includes items with cherries from Door County to Green Bay chili — and plenty of items made with locally produced cheeses. **Michael's Frozen Custard** is another local favorite. One reviewer wrote, "This might be the best use of fat since the invention of bacon." Meanwhile, **Babcock Hall Dairy Ice Cream** has been serving students, alumni and locals gourmet ice cream on the University of Wisconsin campus for 90 years. My son selected top-rated fine dining **L'Etoile** for his birthday dinner, a sister restaurant of Graze, where we enjoyed a wonderful evening. Beer is big here, and Madison has 56

craft breweries. The city hosts a 10-day **Craft Beer Week Festival**, the World's Largest Brat Fest and plenty of foodie fairs. **Where to Stay:** The Greater Madison area is filled with options, but I prefer to stay downtown to see the city by bike and foot. I loved the bar at the stylish



boutique **Hotel Red**, directly across from UW's **Camp Randall Stadium** and located on Monroe Street, along with several stores and restaurants. The shops on State Street are less than a mile away as well. The **Hilton Monona Terrace** offers views of Lake Monona and is just one block from the State Capitol. **The Madison Concourse Hotel** is top rated and also in the heart of downtown Madison. Nearby **Middleton, Wisconsin** has all the major chains, as well as a quaint downtown of its own. — Jan Schroeder



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Top left: View of downtown Madison from aboard a Betty Lou Cruise; Bicycles are a common sight in Madison year-round thanks to a popular bike-share program; the author's son, Chris Butsch, relaxes at Memorial Union Terrace. This page: Fried cheese curds at Graze; strollers on State Street; The Saturday Farmers' Market at the State Capitol; A room at Hotel Red.