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## AN OHIO ADVENTURE

# Touring C-Towns and Isles of Lake Erie

Story and Photos by Richard Varr

At first glance, the house looks like any typical Ohio neighborhood home with a mustard-yellow façade, trimmed hedges and a shaded porch, where I could easily pass the time enjoying a gentle summer breeze. But, with a closer look, I realize I've seen this house before – not in person, but on TV – over and over again.

All of a sudden, scenes of a famous Christmas movie come vividly to mind. “You’ll shoot your eye out kid,” says Santa to young Ralphie Parker who squeamishly asks him for a Red Ryder BB gun.

Inside, I see the shapely leg lamp draped by a fishnet stocking that Ralphie’s father gloats over in an awkward family moment. And, around back is the door where a pack of hungry dogs escapes the father’s ire after devouring the Christmas turkey.

This house in Cleveland’s blue-collar Tremont neighborhood is where *A Christmas Story* was filmed in part – the 1983 movie we see every Christmas on the TBS network, a 24-hour marathon that started in 1997.

The home is one unique highlight of my travels to Ohio over the last year or so, where I visited some of the state’s most popular cities, coincidentally, all beginning with the letter, C — Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus and Canton. Each has its own character and world-class institutions, museums and attractions – some of which you won’t find the likes of anywhere else.

### Cleveland: Comeback City

With a strong manufacturing base, Cleveland became the na-



*The “Christmas Story House” sits proudly in Cleveland’s Tremont neighborhood. It was featured prominently in the movie, “A Christmas Story.”*

tion’s seventh largest city during the turn of the 19th to 20th century, due in part to John D. Rockefeller founding Standard Oil. Lagging railroad and steel industries led to economic collapse in the 1970s and 80s but, in recent years, Cleveland has earned the reputation as a “Comeback City” with renewed energy, revitalization and growth. Today, it’s home to nationally-known Progressive Insurance, Sherwin-Williams and the Cleveland Clinic.

Yet, key to what makes Cleveland a worldwide destination is its number one attraction, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. A scintillating city icon on the shores of Lake Erie, “Rock Hall,” as the locals call it, sits within a shiny glass and steel pyramid – the centerpiece of downtown’s boat-filled harbor area. On seven floors with four theaters, collections include everything a rock and roller might dream about – from Elvis Presley’s 1968 glittering gold suit and John Lennon’s 1964 Rickenbacker guitar, to the band Kiss’ drum set and the dress Tina Turner wore in her

“Private Dancer” video.

A short walk leads to pedestrian-packed East 4th Street, where on many nights you’ll find crowds swelled within its trendy bistros and cafes. Downtown’s streets stretch into Cleveland’s diverse neighborhoods, with some communities defined along historic ethnic lines – Slavic Village and Little Italy, for example. The craft beer-popular Ohio City neighborhood – once a separate municipality – is awash in colorful street art murals and is anchored by the city’s popular West Side Market with its 137-foot clock



*The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum in Cleveland opened its doors for the first time on September 2, 1995. The museum was designed by famed architect I.M. Pei. The museum honors all aspects of Rock and Roll.*



East 4th Street in Cleveland

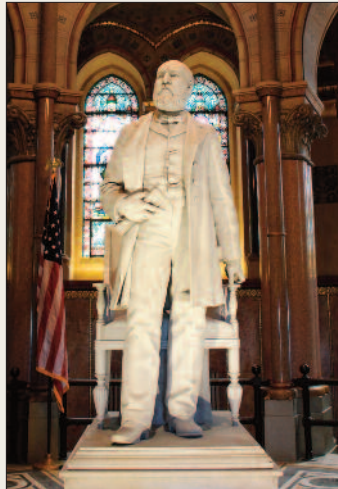
tower, a Cleveland landmark.

The city's thriving arts and culture scene is located within University Circle, with world-class museums, educational institutions and performing arts venues are packed within a square mile. They include the Cleveland Orchestra's domed neoclassical Severance Hall, the Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland History Center and Case Western Reserve University.

Centered by green and treed Wade Oval, it's where the stately façade of the Cleveland Museum of Art reflects off the waters of scenic Wade Lagoon.

Yet, another grand highlight is the impressive gothic-styled President James Garfield Memorial within Lake View Cemetery, the final resting place for other such notables as John D. Rockefeller and FBI organized crime fighter Eliot Ness. Relief carvings decorate its outside façade, while a 12-foot statue of the bearded 20th president stands within the tower's ornate domed interior.

"This is a grand monument to one of the poorest presidents in U.S. history," noted guide Bob Hook. "Garfield was shot in Washington in 1888, serving only 200 days as president."



The President James Garfield Memorial can be found within Lake View Cemetery in Cleveland.

### Cincinnati: The Queen City

Cincinnati dates back to 1788, right after the American Revolution, and is thus considered the first major city founded in a young United States. Its nickname stems from its growth in the early 19th century, as one newspaper flagged it, "Queen of the West." From the top floor observation deck of the 49-story Carew Tower, I imagine what the fledgling city looked like before skyscrapers dominated the downtown view.

"Think about this without all the buildings," said tour guide Janice Forte. "Everything

below you was trees and fertile soils. Within 25 years of getting off the flatboats, this city grew to almost 35,000. And, at any given time from 1830 to 1900, there were maybe 100 riverboats coming and going with goods taken off the boats day and night." Today, Cincinnati is home to the corporate headquarters of Macy's, Kroger and Procter & Gamble.

To me, Cincinnati seems like a small big city. As a native New Yorker, I love gazing at the John A. Roebling Suspension Bridge named after its civil engineer—especially at night. It is, in fact, the same design as the Brooklyn Bridge, Roebling's most famous project, opened 16 years after Cincinnati's bridge linked the Queen City with Northern Kentucky in 1867.

The William Howard Taft National Historic Site is the birthplace and childhood home of the only U.S. president to also serve as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The two-story, Greek Revival-style house has period furniture, a few original paintings and exhibits detailing his years in public service. The historic Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, once home to German immigrants, is noted for its 19th

century architecture and many theater venues.

Sitting along the banks of the Ohio River, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center highlights the continuing struggle for civil rights and the plight of enslaved people—even today—through exhibits, paintings and more.

"Our mission is to tell the story of freedom's heroes during the era of the Underground Railroad to modern times," said Will Jones, marketing and communications manager for the Freedom Center. A must-see is an authentic, restored wooden slave pen moved to the museum from Mayville, KY.

"It was so well preserved because it was actually kept within a tobacco barn," said Jones. "Tobacco soaks up a lot of moisture, and that's why it was so well intact when they found it."

The city's two world-class art museums include the Taft Museum of Art, housed in a grand home once owned by the family of President Taft's brother, and the Cincinnati Museum of Art, located in hilly and scenic Eden Park.

The Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal, a grandiose art deco former train station, houses several museums and exhibits, including Dinosaur Hall and The Cave, where spelunking enthusiasts can traverse twisting pathways in this replica limestone cave. Union Terminal's rotunda is the largest half-dome in the Western Hemisphere. And, neon signs, from Howard Johnson's to the yellow trim of a mid-20th century McDonald's marquis, glow and buzz in the fun and quirky American Sign Museum featuring more than 100 years of American sign history.

Always having a strong interest in astronomy, I was particularly thrilled when I toured the Cincinnati Observatory, home to two telescopes from the mid

continued on page 44

19th and early 20th centuries, and thus called the Birthplace of American Astronomy.

“It was the first American telescope to see Neptune,” said Cincinnati Observatory astronomer Dean Regas of the 11-inch lens and 16-foot-long Merz and Mahler refractor from 1842, the oldest public telescope in the country. “It’s the oldest in the world that you’re allowed to touch.”

The observatory’s other telescope is the 16-inch Alvan Clark and Sons refractor from 1904, each housed in separate buildings atop Cincinnati’s Mount Lookout. Of course, the telescopes cannot compete with modern-day instruments, so the observatory is now open to the public for tours and for evening stargazing.

### Columbus: Calling all Cars!

You’ll surely remember that line if you’re a comic strips buff or watched the old Dick Tracy cartoons on TV years ago. What about Snoopy and the round-faced caricature of Charlie Brown in the comic strip “Peanuts?” Remember “Beetle Bailey,” “Gasoline Alley,” “Pogo” and “Superman” and the many superheroes? These are just a few of the characters that jump back to life in the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum at Ohio State University in Columbus, home to the largest collection of comics and original cartoon art in the world.

“Getting to see original ‘Peanuts’ artwork, original ‘Calvin and Hobbes’ artwork, and discovering new titles that people never heard of before is always exciting,” said Caitlin McGurk, the assistant professor and museum’s associate curator for outreach. Breaking it down, she added, holdings include 350,000 original art cartoons, 30,000 comic books, 75,000 graphic novels, over 6,000 boxes of manuscript materials, and 2.5 million comic strip clippings and newspaper pages.



Columbus reminds me of Austin, both having a river slicing through with scenic green areas and biking paths, and with capitol buildings and state office buildings. And, both have a bohemian feel in some neighborhoods since each is home to a large university: UT in Austin and Columbus’ OSU.

One such neighborhood, the Short North Arts District, lies just north of downtown Columbus. Galleries and boutiques line central High Street, mural art decorates building facades, and nightlife pulses within chic restaurants, trendy cafes and clubs. My favorite lunch spot is the nearby pedestrian-packed



*Within Schiller Park in Columbus, trees shade “Umbrella Girl.”*

North Market, where vendor stalls teem with Polish pirogues and dumplings, Vietnamese and Indian specialties, and vegetarian dishes, including cauliflower and quinoa, to name a just a few.

South of downtown, shaded and cobbled streets intertwine in German Village with its restored 1800s brick houses built by arriving settlers. Within Schiller Park, trees shade the so-called Umbrella Girl statue atop a small fountain. Each Christmas, Umbrella Girl is mysteriously draped in a red cloak as no one has owned up to the holiday gesture. The current statue is a generous replacement from a local sculptor after the original disappeared in the 1950s.

On the edge of German Village, The Book Loft is packed with mostly new books within a maze of passageways and small rooms, some only as wide as a small closet.

New to the city is the rounded arena-like National Veterans Memorial and Museum with exhibits including historic artifacts and timelines of practically all U.S. conflicts — from the American Revolution through the current War in Afghanistan. Soldiers’ and volunteers’ individual stories of courage and

patriotism are told through videos and letters from the battlefields which humanize the soldiers’ desperation and sacrifices.

Other places to visit include the Columbus Museum of Art with 19th and early 20th-century American and European art, as well as the works of local artists.

The riverside Scioto Audubon Metro Park is a great place for hiking and bird watching, and the Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens features exhibitions including colorful flora and butterflies.

### Canton: Football’s Roots

Just over an hour’s drive from Cleveland, Canton’s greatest attraction is yet another impressive presidential mausoleum — the domed William McKinley National Memorial. The 25th president died eight days after he was shot in 1901 while attending the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo. The memorial’s imposing exterior reaches 95 feet high. Halfway up the 108-step stairwell stands a statue of McKinley, a Canton native.

In the adjacent McKinley Presidential Library and Museum, I’m amazed at the talking

mannequin likenesses of McKinley and his wife, Ida, standing among some of his original furniture during his life as a soldier, congressman, governor and, then, president.

Canton is also home to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, tracing the game's beginning when the American Professional Football Association, founded in Canton in 1920. It was later renamed the NFL. Housed in an impres-



sive glass and steel-fronted building, the attraction traces football's roots from legendary Jim Thorpe, when protective gear was only simple pads, to the latest Super Bowl winners in their emblem-embazoned colors and helmets. Highlights include the striking rows of bronze busts of the game's best through the years, and when New York Jets quarterback Joe Namath comes to life in a hologram presentation.

Commerce and Visitor Center.

Put-in-Bay — South Bass' main village and often used synonymously as the island's name — is centered with DeRivera Park, a grassy and shaded lake-side green space with a gazebo and picnic areas. Restaurants and shops line the park's adjacent street, with golf carts parked bumper-to-bumper along curbsides.

Cannonballs in the park mark the original gravesites of six officers — three American and three British — from the pivotal 1813 Battle of Lake Erie.

Those graves were later transferred to the island's most spectacular site, the 352-foot-high Perry's Victory and International Peace Memorial commemorating the Battle of Lake Erie, a key victory for the Americans in the War of 1812 against the British, British Canada and their Indian allies.

From the battle comes the famous quote, "We have met the enemy, and they are ours," made by American Admiral Oliver Hazard Perry. The U.S. Brig Niagara is a replica of one of the battle's ships and sits berthed along Put-in-Bay's



shoreline. South Bass Island is also home to Crystal Cave with quartz-like Celestine crystals — the largest Celestine geode in the world.

Golf carts are again the way to travel in nearby Kelleys Island's rustic neighborhoods, where streets seem to weave in and around pastures and forestland with more hiking and biking trails than any other American island in Lake Erie. The island's must-see attraction is the Glacial Grooves Geological Preserve, where a great ice sheath 18,000 years ago carved out long, smooth tracks through sedimentary rock and limestone, creating some of the world's largest glacial grooves.

"We always tell people, if you want to be entertained, go to Put-in Bay. But, if you want to entertain yourself and get back in touch with nature and family values, come to Kelleys Island," said Jeni Hammond, the office manager of Portside Marina and Missy Magoos, an old-fashioned candy shop that still sells bubble gum cigarettes that I haven't seen since childhood.

"Go to a beach camp fire, sit down with your family and play games," continued Hammond. "That's what Kelleys Island is all about."

*Richard Varr is a freelance travel writer and longtime contributor to Houston Woman Magazine.*

### Lake Erie Islands: Golf Carts!

From Sandusky, I hop a ferry to South Bass Island where I can't help but notice golf carts crisscrossing island streets as the main means of transportation. And, driving them is all part of the fun! Visitors quickly snatch up some of the 1500 available golf cart rentals, yet trying to find one during busy summer weekends can be a challenge.

"On a Tuesday, there are two for everybody; on a Saturday there's not enough for anybody," joked Peter Huston with the Put-in-Bay Chamber of

