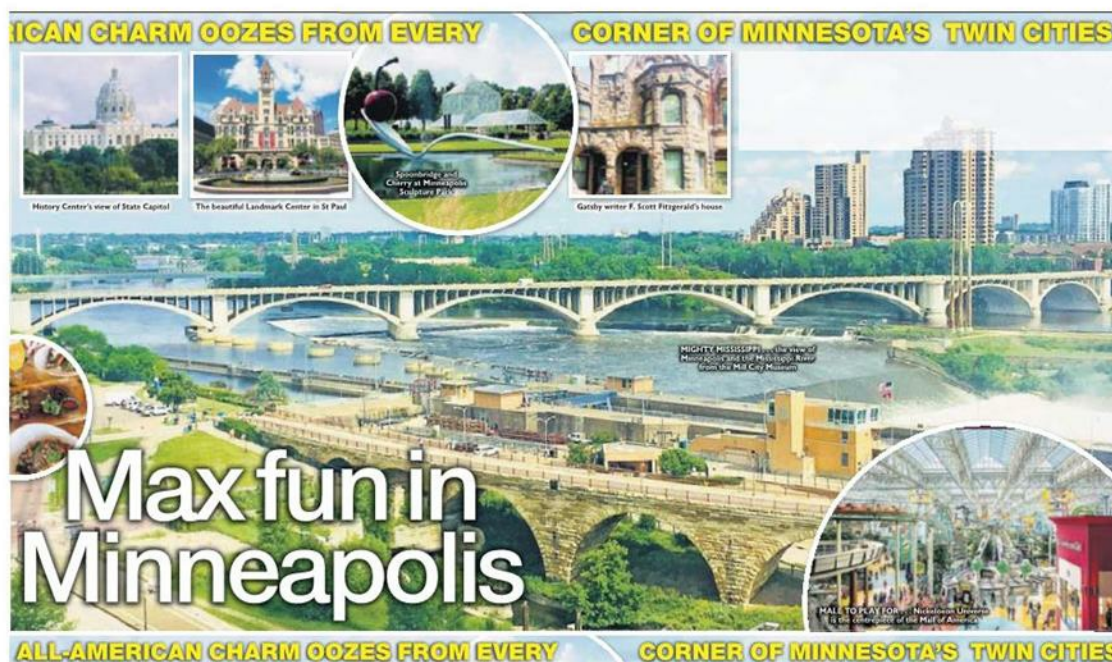


Client: Aer Lingus Ireland
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Keyword: Aer Lingus
Page: 34
Reach: 56504
Size: 1557
Value: 96845.40



FIREWORKS crackle above us, glittering shards of light melting into an inky sky.

God Bless America pulsates from speakers as the crowds at Bloomington's Normandale Lake gaze upward and bask in balmy temperatures, the atmosphere interrupted only by the occasional nip from a hovering mosquito.

With my glow sticks and a stars and stripes baseball cap, I'm about one Star-Spangled Banner away from signing up for a Green Card.

Every time I visit the US I find a new interpretation of this vast country's identity. But Minnesota is the closest I've come to true Americana.

Grab me a root beer and a corn dog, I'm off to hammer up some drywall.

Sure, I've fallen headlong into cliché, but there's a tangible magic in middle America - shopping in the mall, eating cheese curds and Juicy Lucy burgers, being greeted by smiling restaurant staff entreating me to "have a nice day" and of course, Independence Day celebrations.

Our visit coincided with July 4 courtesy of Aer Lingus which com-

menced its new route from Dublin to the twin cities of Minneapolis-St Paul earlier this month.

The eight-hour flight lands just in time for dinner and an early bedtime to beat the jetlag. And if you're feeling spendy, the business class upgrade is worth it for the lie-flat seats alone.

On arrival, it's immediately clear that the Twin Cities have under-sold themselves. There are in fact three cities - Minneapolis, St. Paul and Bloomington - arranged in a triangle 10 miles apart and interwoven by the mighty Mississippi.

Our base is the sleek Hyatt Regency Hotel in Bloomington, near the airport and linked to Minneapolis by light rail.

But that's not why people gravitate towards this particular part of Minnesota. Oh no. There's the not-so-small matter of the Mall of America, the country's largest shopping and entertainment complex with more than 520 shops, 50 restaurants, a SeaLife Aquarium and the 4D Fly Over America Experi-

ence.

However, its real USP is Nickelodeon Universe - the world's largest indoor theme park - perched right in the centre of the mall.

The clever positioning means parents can leave their kids - or partners - to enjoy all the rides and rollercoasters, and easily check on them every few minutes.

You'll recognise all the big names like Macys, Nordstrom and Nike, but the mall is also home to Khloe Kardashian's Good American, the Boots-esque Ulta and the bargain mecca DSW Shoes. And yes, that's as much ground as I covered during a frantic 90-minute shop sweep that would have Dale Winton turning in his grave.

For my efforts, I was rewarded with 75pc-off trousers from

Anthropologie.

The mall is a short drive from Paisley Park, the recording studio and estate of Minnesota's most famous son, Prince.

The enig-

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matic artist died here in April 2016, and his wish to see the space turned into a museum has now been fulfilled.

If you're the nosy type - and I am - the tour might leave you with more questions than answers as the focus is very much on his career rather than his early years and private life.

Thankfully, there are any number of musical toys and memorabilia to give die-hard music fans the shivers, but photography isn't allowed.

Fear not, you can get your photo-

graphic Prince fix over at the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul.

It houses a brilliant exhibition highlighting the region's musical tradition, much of which centred around the legendary First Avenue venue which has played host to our own U2 and another great Minnesotan - Bob Dylan.

Parts of the film Purple Rain were shot in the center which proudly displays Prince's iconic violet silk costume.

The requisite photographs achieved, we took an envy-inducing drive past the mansions of Summit Avenue.

At first glance, there's nothing remarkable about the row house at number 599, but it's where F Scott Fitzgerald wrote The Great Gatsby.

By now, we've sensed the gran-

deur of St. Paul's, augmented by the astonishingly beautiful cathedral and State Capitol Building.

But that doesn't mean they can't do casual, so we change pace with a visit to the spit n' sawdust-style Shamrocks Grill. The signature dish is a Juicy Lucy medium-cooked burger stuffed with melted cheese, definitely not first date material. Because we're tourists and on a mission, we also order a portion of cheese curds. These little pellets of mass destruction are to be avoided at all costs, if you're worried about your cholesterol, but then who is when on holiday?

Deep-fried, glazed with honey, drizzled with bacon bits or whatever you're having yourself, cheese curds are a Minnesotan speciality and every restaurant offers its own

version. The only thing they all have in common is that they're fiendishly addictive.

To my shame, I took the job of sampling so seriously that those cut-price trousers don't fit me any more.

Foodies should also check out Keg and Case Market where you can take your pick from the gourmet food stalls and craft beer brewers.

Despite forecasts of rain (purple or otherwise), the sun smiled on us so we went the full Huck Finn with an authentic paddle steamer cruise on the Mississippi.

Water is also the theme at the Mill City Museum, built into the ruins of what was once the world's largest flour mill.

Perched over the river, it vividly

illustrates how the Mississippi spawned a powerful industry.

The flour production may have long since halted, but it's clear the river is still the heartbeat of the Twin Cities.

In fact, the water is hard to avoid here. Over on the Minneapolis side the following day, we hire pedal boats and explore Lake Bde Maka Ska, one of several lakes bordering the metropolis. You can of course opt for more adventurous water pursuits, but after a hearty French-style lunch at Barbette, the pedal boats suited our energy levels.

Speaking of energy, there's no better place to get a buzz than at the nearby Bakken Museum.

If you have kids, this is a must. But even big kids will love this beautiful space and its interactive displays where you can take part in static

electricity experiments. Given that it's named after Earl Bakken, the founder of Irish-based medical technology company Medtronic, this practicality shouldn't come as a surprise.

Another Irish link revealed itself that evening in the stunning Guthrie Theater, founded by Irishman Sir Tyrone Guthrie.

We caught a cracking performance of Guys and Dolls, but honestly I'd have visited just for the awesome view from its cantilevered Endless Bridge.

If it can be argued that Minneapolis lacks the instantly-recognisable landmarks of other major American destinations, the Guthrie is a worthy contender for the city's top icon.

Alternatively, the funky blue hen or the cherry on a spoon - two of the

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unique artworks at the Minneapolis

Sculpture Garden & Walker Art Center - merit instant association.

Now, I enjoy architectural brilliance as the next person, but for a true taste of the Twin Cities I needed to sample some beer.

I normally choose grape over grain, but who was I to turn down a quirky rose beer from Surly Brewing? This independent brewery is one of several that have sprung up in recent years, and you can even watch the brewing and canning process in action.

Of course, it's far better craic to drink and dine in its convivial beer hall, tasting an ever-changing rotation of brews.

I'm obsessed with the Food Network show Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives, so my fondness for Surly peaked when I discovered that spiky-haired Guy Fieri filmed here.

Anything Guy can do, I can do better, so I loosened the belt a notch and tackled its beer nuts, roasted broccoli with hummus, guacamole, brisket and a skillet of corn bread.

Okay, they call it bread, but its texture and taste scream cake. Either way, I wasn't complaining, as I'd landed in that sweet spot that Guy calls Flavourtown.

So is it my tingling tastebuds that have me pining for a return to Minnesota? Maybe, but there's more to it than food (and cheese curds). It's the all-American service with a smile, the sense of a state that prioritises nature over its urban jungles, and the recognition that this is the Americana of my childhood TV diet brought to life. Spangle me with stars and stripes Uncle Sam, I'm ready to sign up.

— AOIFE FINNERAN

GO: Minneapolis-St Paul is Aer Lingus' 16th transatlantic route direct from Ireland, operating daily. Summer fares start from €269 each-way, when booked as a return trip. See aerlingus.com.

STAY: Hyatt Regency Hotel Bloomington rooms from approx €130. See hyatt.com/en-US/hotel/minnesota/hyatt-regency-bloomington-minneapolis/msprb

GO: Minneapolis & St Paul, Minnesota

DO: Prince's Paisley Park Studios (officialpaisleypark.com); Minnesota History Center (mnhs.org/historycenter); Guthrie Theater (guthrietheater.org); Mill City Museum (mnhs.org/millcity); Minneapolis Sculpture Garden & Walker Art Center (walkerart.org);

pedal boating on Lake Bde Maka Ska (wheelfunrentals.com); Bakken Museum (thebakken.org).

EAT: Surly Brewing (surlybrewing.com); Barbette (barbette.com)

SHOP: Mall of America (mallofamerica.com).

FOR more info see exploreminnesota.com, Minneapolis.org, visitsaintpaul.com and bloomingtonmn.org.

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