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Grab popcorn and parka for film fest



LISA MEYERS McCLINTICK, Special to the Star Tribune

Downtown Fargo won't disappoint visitors looking for boutiques and lively restaurants.

Fargo's historic downtown is humming with activity, including a booming film festival every March.

By LISA MEYERS McCLINTICK, Special to the Star Tribune

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Tell people you're going to Fargo, and it can elicit a smirk. It could be wood-chipper

flashbacks to the movie "Fargo" -- or too many Weather Channel whiteouts.

Here's a little secret, though: Fargo is thriving. Despite the economic downturn in much of the nation, western North Dakota's oil boom and a stable Fargo economy has kept its historic downtown humming with sophisticated boutiques and artsy restaurants that began filling in five years ago. It has a youthful feel, too, with three major universities in the area.

Blazing above it all is the iconic **Fargo Theatre** marquee, which beckons people to escape winter with its independent, artsy flicks. The 870-seat Art Deco theater shines brightest around Oscar season when it often shows the non-mainstream nominees and each March during the **Fargo Film Festival**, now in its 11th year.

The festival, set for March 1-5 this year, has grown from a few submissions to more than 130 entries from 28 states and six countries. It's particularly known for its choice of animation movies -- two of which are up for Oscars ("The Gruffalo" and "The Lost Thing"). Narrative features and documentaries address everything from medical tourism in India to quirky and comical, such as "The Lutefisk Wars." A full-access pass to all

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screenings costs \$125 (\$100 for students); single-session passes can be had for as little as \$5 (1-701-239-8385; www.fargo.filmfestival.org¹).

If you're at the theater on any weekend night, you might catch one of three players who can make its Mighty Wurlitzer sing and tell stories -- with two-story pipes, bells, train whistles, gunshot effects and bass drums rumbling through the walls. Upstairs, you can pose with Marge, heroine of "Fargo," who's appropriately carved by chainsaw and stands like a sentinel with her Elmer Fudd-like hat.

The biggest photo op, though, is outside below the marquee. "It's a huge, bright light on a cold, dark night," say Margie Bailly, the theater's executive director. "And it's such a touchstone for the community. There are very few of these Art Deco theaters around."

Shopping, too

The best shopping is near the theater, including **Zandbroz Variety**, a definite standout with an impressive selection of books and vintage display cases of fine pens, art papers, home decor, jewelry, handbags and a toy store filled with fun, nostalgic items (420 N. Broadway; 1-701-239-4749).

Other notable downtown shops include **Boucle** for fine yarns made of local bison fur or ultra-soft yak (311 N. Broadway; 1-701-356-9276); **O'Day Cache** for colorful Asian imports and accessories (317 N. Broadway; 1-701-293-2088), and **Shannalee**, a hip and stylish women's clothing boutique with a dressing-room waiting area that caters to husbands (313 N. Broadway; 1-701-232-3300).

Nothing plain here

The **Plains Art Museum's** location in a reclaimed brick machinery warehouse offers open, airy space for large-scale installations. Current shows include a new photography collection and Donald Renner's mixed-media "Encoded Solutions." Permanent exhibits have an impressive collection of American Indian artists (open Tue.-Sun.; \$5 for adults, free for students; 704 1st Av. N.; 1-701-232-3821; www.plainsart.org²).

The museum's Cafe Muse is a pleasant stop for a light weekday lunch. The museum shop peddles some of the best souvenirs, including T-shirts bearing the words "I live in Fargo. Really."

Admire a Viking ship

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Across the river in Moorhead, Minn., you can't miss the **Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County** with its distinctive tent-like roof (created by the designer who also did Denver International Airport's famous terminal). Its Hjemkomst Center can be seen from Fargo's downtown, and was created to house the hand-built replica Viking ship that made a harrowing journey to Norway in the 1980s. Bundle up to visit the unheated but impressive Stave Church on museum grounds (\$5-\$7; 202 1st Av. N.; 1-218-299-5511; www.hscsonline.org³).

Chocolatey diversion

You have to stray a bit from downtown to find **Carol Widman's**, a candy institution in the Oak Park Plaza strip mall that sells chippers (popular chocolate-covered potato chips) and other chocolate-covered goodies, including pickles and olives (4325 13th Av. S.; 1-701-281-8664).

When it warms up ...

Sprawling **Lindenwood Park** surrounds a wooded oxbow of the Red River, making it a beautiful place to pitch a tent, rent a surrey or tandem bike, or let the kids roam free on its many play areas (1700 5th St. S.; 1-701-232-3987; www.fargoparks.com⁴).

St. Cloud-based Lisa Meyers McClintick wrote "Off the Beaten Path: The Dakotas" and "Minnesota Lake Vacations," an iTunes travel app.

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