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MISSOURI



A neon sign marks the famous Blueberry Hill restaurant and nightclub in the Loop area of St. Louis.



The Saint Louis Science Center presents a dizzying array of displays and activities for all ages.



The interior of the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Louis nearly glows from the extensive glass mosaics.

St. Louis on the cheap

A good time can be had nearly free in this Midwestern hub

By LINDA DuVAL
Special Contributor

ST. LOUIS — Traveling on a budget doesn't mean you have to give up on all the best stuff a city has to offer. The proof? St. Louis.

Next time you're thinking of an urban destination that won't cost you a fortune, consider this Midwestern metropolis that boasts more free attractions than nearly any other major U.S. city outside of Washington, D.C.

"We have so much free stuff here, we're spoiled," said a visitor in the lobby of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

"We're always shocked when we have to pay for something!"

The free stuff isn't just for residents; visitors get in on the free-for-all, too. Much of the best stuff is in the lovely 1,300-acre Forest Park, a city park dotted with attractions. But there are lots more.

Caveat: At many attractions, admission is free during certain hours or days, so plan accordingly.

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A boy grins for a photo from within Igor Mitoraj's sculpture of a head, in Citygarden.

Photos by Rick DuVal

INTERNATIONAL

In Switzerland, hiking's not just a summer pastime

Resorts offer groomed trails, crisp air, warm fondue at the end

By SUZANNE MORPHET
Special Contributor

You don't expect to see people hiking in Switzerland in the winter.

But there's nothing quite as invigorating as walking in the Alps on a cold, sunny day, or on a clear, starry night, followed by a cheese fondue or a soak in a natural hot spring.

I boot-tested trails at three

resorts in the Valais region last winter, all of which are easily accessible by train and funicular (cable cars) from major cities.

Crans-Montana

On a plateau almost a mile above sea level, Crans-Montana basks in sunshine most of the year. According to one study, it has the cleanest air in Switzerland. It's just the place to give your lungs a workout.

In winter, 40 miles of trails, including two at high altitude, are maintained for walking. Just before dusk, I joined a guided hike on snowshoes. We were soon walking under the

stars with the crunch of snow underfoot the only sound. Our destination was Relais, a restaurant that specializes in traditional food such as polenta and cheese fondue. While you're eating, old black-and-white photos flash on the walls, showing how families once practiced vertical farming, drove cattle from village to village and lived in high-altitude chalets.

The most fun was at the end of the evening when we put on headlamps, mounted sledges (small sleds on runners) and practically flew back down the path we hiked up earlier.

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Crans-Montana Tourism

Crans-Montana boasts 40 miles of groomed trails for winter hiking and snowshoeing. Or, if you prefer to get off the beaten track, there's plenty of space for that, too.