



Baraboo

more than a clown town

BY AMANDA N. WEGNER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JERRY LUTERMAN

The Ringling Brothers put it on the map, but for decades Baraboo stood in the shadow of its tourist-magnet neighbor, Wisconsin Dells. Today, however, with a revitalized downtown and an array of attractions all set against a backdrop of natural beauty, Baraboo reveals its true potential as an all-around great getaway.

“The natural beauty of the Glacier Bluff region and Devil’s Lake are as good as it gets in Wisconsin,” says Deb Bauer, executive director of the Baraboo Area Chamber of Commerce. “Add that to the International Crane Foundation, Circus World, Mid-Continent Railway Museum and downtown, and you have something for everyone.”

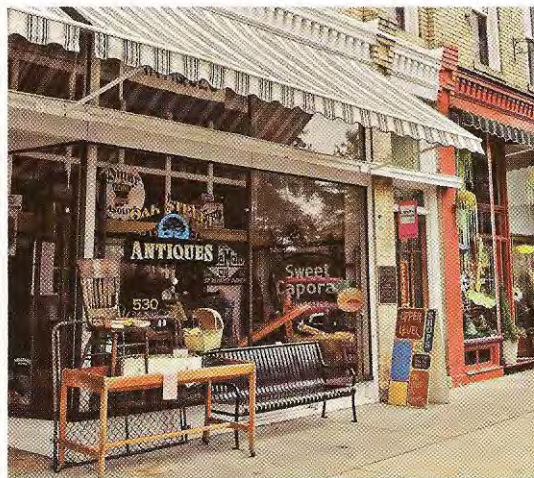
Gems aplenty downtown

Baraboo’s downtown has that “Norman Rockwell feel people are looking for,” says Rebekah Stelling, owner of Bekah Kate’s, an eclectic downtown shop that sells kitchen- and housewares, plus children’s items. “That kind of place where you can slow down, relax, enjoy. It’s like something out of a painting.”

Debi Weis, who grew up in Baraboo, agrees: “Downtown Baraboo is very charming,” with many shops, restaurants, coffee shops and bakeries surrounding the Courthouse Square.

Stelling’s store (117 3rd St.) is one such charm, located a block from the square. “The late ’80s, early ’90s were hard on the downtown,” Stelling says. “But one retailer at a time began revamping their stores. ... It really helped kick-start what we have today.”

To tour Baraboo’s downtown, start with its architectural gems, all within a short block of one another: the historic Sauk County Courthouse (515 Oak St.); the Baraboo Public Library, a Carnegie



More shops are popping up in Baraboo’s revitalized downtown (above), where you can also find the historic Al. Ringing Theatre (opposite).

library (230 4th Ave.); and the Al. Ringling Theatre (136 4th Ave.), which has been operating continuously since 1915. With its gorgeous draperies, red-carpet aisles, and hand-carved theater boxes, the Al. Ringling Theatre set the tone for playhouses built in the early 1900s. In the summer, historic tours (\$5/person) featuring the Grand Barton theater organ are offered at 11 a.m.

While you’re still downtown, stop for a shredded sirloin steak burrito at the Little Village Cafe (146 4th Ave.). If you’re more a burger-and-fries kind of person, the Baraboo version of the Dells’ well-known Monk’s Bar & Grill (116 4th Avenue) is nearby as well.

Hills & highways

The hills and highways surrounding Baraboo are filled with intrigue and splendor. “The terrain is beautiful year-round,” says Baraboo resident Jeanie Madalon. “Mother Nature is on parade every day of the year.



Circus World boasts the world's largest collection of circus wagons.

There are hills, valleys, creeks, rivers, and, of course, Devil's Lake."

Devil's Lake State Park, dubbed a mecca for outdoor enthusiasts by Weis, is a must-see. Two miles south of Baraboo, the park features a 360-acre spring-fed lake, 29 miles of park trails – including some perilous yet invigorating trails that march skyward along the face of the park's bluffs – and camping galore.

For a more contemplative natural escape, Madalon and Bauer both suggest Durward's Glen (W11876 McLeisch Road). Although it is a private retreat center, the trails, picnic area and devotional sites are open to the public.

Escape & explore

Want more to do in the 'boo? Here are five more sites in and around Baraboo where you can escape and explore.

CIRCUS WORLD

Great fun for all ages, Circus World is part of what makes Baraboo, well, Baraboo. Five brothers founded the Ringling Bros. Circus here in 1884, and many of the buildings from the group's winter quarters on the Baraboo River still remain open for tours.

"We are the real deal: authentic circus wagons and Ringling Circus buildings, phenomenal circus performances and jaw-dropping illusions shows," says performance director Dave SaLoutos.

All exhibits and attractions – from magic shows and circus skills training to the world's largest collection of authentic circus wagons – are included in the admission price. The biggest mistake people make when visiting Circus World, SaLoutos says, is not allowing enough time; conveniently, second day admission is free when you purchase a full-price ticket.

New this summer is an exhibit featuring circus wagons and props used in the movie *Water for Elephants*.
550 Water St., Baraboo; open May 21–September 5; \$7.95–\$14.95

MID-CONTINENT RAILWAY MUSEUM

Chugga-choo back in time at the Mid-Continent Railway Museum, a living history museum featuring more than 100 historic railcars and locomotives, plus exhibits.

"When you visit Mid-Continent, you don't just look at a museum, you are in the museum," says manager Jeff Lentz. "When

you purchase your tickets, it is done in the same 1894 depot and at the same ticket window that was used 117 years ago. The passengers aboard the 50-minute train ride are in train cars used over 90 years ago."

The grounds and museum are free for touring. For the train, consider an upgrade to ride in the cab (\$50) or caboose (\$11–\$18); a limited number of tickets are available for each run.

Mark your calendar for August 6–14, when an authentic steam engine will be on duty. The museum's trains were long pulled by steam engines before being replaced by diesel engines when new federal rules were introduced in 2000.

E8948 Diamond Hill Road, North Freedom; open weekends only May, September and October; open daily Memorial Day to Labor Day; \$10–\$16

INTERNATIONAL CRANE FOUNDATION

Did you know a crane's call can be heard up to a mile away? Nestled between Baraboo and Wisconsin Dells, the International Crane Foundation is the only place in the world where you can see and hear all 15 living crane species. The 225-acre park features zoological exhibits, interpretive

nature trails and a gift shop with unique items from around the world.

But ICF's influence extends beyond Baraboo. Working on five continents, ICF is the preeminent organization for the conservation of cranes and the ecosystems they rely on. "Seeing the cranes on tour while learning about the challenges and victories to their worldwide conservation is truly inspiring," says volunteer coordinator/naturalist Kate Fitzwilliams.

Guided tours are available starting Memorial Day weekend, but the facility opens mid-April. Visit early in the season to see the cranes' elaborate mating dance. Consider an afternoon visit April through June, which is peak field-trip time for schools. E11376 Shady Lane Road, Baraboo; open daily April 15–October 31; \$5–\$9.50

ALDO LEOPOLD LEGACY CENTER

A consummate conservationist and considered by many to be the father of modern wildlife management, Aldo Leopold is a central figure in Wisconsin's environmental ethic. Rekindle that connection with a visit to the Aldo Leopold Legacy Center and Shack.

"Aldo Leopold was such an important figure, this is a really special place to connect with him and his ideas and be inspired," says communications coordinator Jeannine Richards.

Located on the same land where Leopold died fighting a grass fire in 1948, visitors can tour exhibits at the Legacy Center, the greenest building in the United States according to the U.S. Green Building Council, or hike less than a mile to explore his Shack. Get a more personal look at Leopold's life and a lesson in conservation and ecology with the two-hour guided Shack tour; self-guided tours of the Shack's grounds are also available, but do not include admittance to the building. E13701 Levee Road, Fairfield; open April 25–October 29, Monday–Saturday; guided Shack tours Saturdays, May 28–October 22; \$8–\$15 for tours

WISCONSIN BIG CAT RESCUE & EDUCATION CENTER

Cats make good pets; big cats do not. And a visit to Wisconsin Big Cat Rescue & Educational Center is a testament to that fact.

The rescue, started in 2005 by big-cat enthusiasts Jeff Kozlowski and Jenny Meyer, currently houses 29 big cats: 19 tigers



The International Crane Foundation is working with other agencies to introduce endangered whooping cranes back into the wild.

(including seven white tigers), six lions and four leopards. And the USDA-licensed facility turns away scores more each year.

"We have a wide variety of big cats, all of which have their own story on how they came to our facility," Kozlowski says. "We offer a beautiful, clean and loving home for these animals. We want the public to know that these cats are not pets and could never make good pets."

The facility runs strictly on donations and is open to the public. Bring your camera, and don't miss your chance to feed

the cats. Want to help but can't visit? The rescue also takes online donations; \$10 feeds the lion Kimba for one day. 305 Pine St., Rock Springs; \$6–\$9 suggested donation; open Saturdays and Sundays in April, daily May–September **wt**

Amanda Wegner has successfully convinced her preschooler that her mother was a trapeze artist in the circus in a past life. In this life, she's a writer, editor and yoga teacher.

Extend your stay with these lodging options

Rest in Victorian elegance at the **Gollmar Guest House B&B** (422 3rd St.), just five blocks from Baraboo's Courthouse Square. Ask the owners about the home's circus past: It was once owned by Benjamin Gollmar, treasurer and part owner of the Gollmar Brothers Circus.

Spring Green is famous for its Frank Lloyd Wright structures, but the Baraboo area has one of its own, too: the **Seth Peterson Cottage** (E9982 Fern Dell Road, Lake Delton). Monthly guided tours are available, or rent the cottage for a getaway.

Go rustic at one of the Baraboo area's many campgrounds. Pitch a tent at Devil's Lake or Mirror Lake state parks, or cozy up in a cabin at the family-friendly **Baraboo Hills Campground** (E10545 Terrytown Road). Weekend sites at the state parks fill up quickly, so reserve your spot early.