Bikeable Buildings and Other Surprises in Bentonville

Article and photography by Jennifer Bain


Courtesy of Ledger Bentonville






Courtesy of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

The electric bike does all the work, whisking me up the outside of a gorgeous, six-storey glass office building along a series of switchbacks. That leaves me free to gawk as I cycle over dozens of mosaics embossed within the concrete ramps that depict local insects lugging precious jewels.

On the roof terrace, a final Venetian glass mosaic — partially obscured by patio furniture — combines those same colourful jewels to spell out an upbeat message.

"Now is better," it says.

Indeed it is a good time to be alive, and I love how the Ledger, as this co-working space and community hub is called, has infused this short bike journey with Austrian-born, New York-based graphic designer Stefan Sagmeister's art.

As I study 13 insect species including convergent ladybugs and Hell Creek Cave crayfish, I have to remind myself that what's touted as the world's first bikeable building is in Arkansas and not the Netherlands or another bike-friendly country.

I've got sweeping views of downtown from the roof terrace but only have eyes for the concrete parking garage right below me that features two shimmering smallmouth bass on its eastern wall.

Made by Sagmeister with 268,946 stainless steel disks, the oversized fish (one the size of a blue whale) are a nod to the Natural State's abundant waterways and booming outdoor recreation industry.

It's my third visit to Arkansas, an unsung state between Tennessee and Oklahoma where I've kayaked down the Buffalo National River, collected enormous quartz




Drager Creative Courtesy of Visit Bentonville



crystals on a public dig with Avant Mining, and delved into the unique medical bathing history of Hot Springs National Park.

Bentonville, population 63,000, is another hidden gem I decide after going from the tiny Northwest Arkansas National Airport to Yeyo's bright yellow food truck for pork carnitas tacos and then Onyx Coffee Lab for an on-trend golden milk latte.

The fast-growing city calls itself the "mountain biking capital of the world" and has an extensive trail system to prove it. There are city trails, road rides and the Razorback Greenway to explore on the bike of your choice, plus connections to regional systems across Northwest Arkansas.

This is also the headquarters of Walmart, which was founded in 1962 in nearby Rogers by Sam Walton and has grown into the world's largest retailer. What you probably don't know is that Walmart's "New Home Office" — a dozen buildings spread over 350 acres — boasts 11 kilometres of walking and biking paths, more than 1,000 bike parking spots and a rentable bike fleet.

The Walton family is invested in making Bentonville a better place to live.

At the Walmart Museum, inside the original Walton's 5 & 10 Store, a hologram of the late Sam Walton answers questions and his retro office has been recreated. The museum expects to draw more than 400,000 visitors (most of them loyal customers) this year.

Then there's Walmart heiress Alice Walton, Sam's art-loving philanthropist daughter who created the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art as a non-profit charitable organization with free admission.

Designed by renowned architect Moshe Safdie, famous for Montreal's Habitat 67 and Ottawa's National Gallery of Canada, the stunning museum opened in 2011 and sits on 134 acres of Ozarks woods. It's also home to Bachman-Wilson House, designed by renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright, and has an outdoor art trail.

A gritter satellite location, the Momentary, focuses on contemporary visual and performing arts. It's in a former cheese factory and also has free admission.

On the day that we rent e-bikes from Phat Tire Bike Shop, we tackle the Ledger first and then explore part of the New Home Office before cruising down some of the city's protected bike lanes.

Plan A is to cycle through the Coler Mountain Bike Preserve to Crystal Bridges, but we only get as far as Airship at Coler, an open-air café accessed in the woods, before a downpour. Plan B means we return our rentals, dry off and then drive to the museum for a tour and lunch.

Speaking of the culinary scene, Bentonville punches above its weight on that front, too.

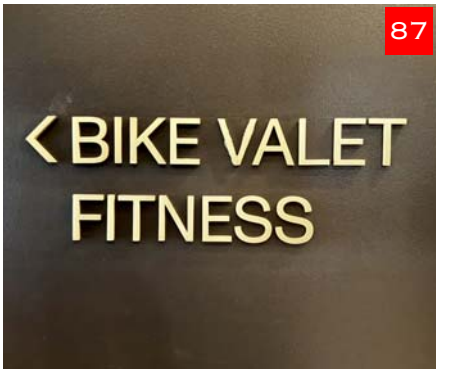
There is that popular Mexican food cart in Bentonville Square. Yeyo's also has brick-and-mortar branches inside the Bentonville 8th Street Market and downtown Rogers. There's a smoked prime rib plate special from Wright's Barbecue, which I walk to from Crystal Bridges.

At Conifer, a farm-to-table restaurant that's fully gluten free, we try almost everything on the short, ever-changing dinner menu but I go back for seconds of the cheddar biscuits with whipped butter.

Breakfast at the Hive in the 21C Museum Hotel features house-made sorghum sausages (it's an ancient grain) and grits made by the War Eagle Mill in Rogers. But I'll always remember dining beside one of the boutique hotel chain/contemporary art museum's four-foot-tall, recycled plastic penguins. Each 21C has its own flock of roving penguins in a signature colour. Bentonville's penguins are green.

"It fits in perfectly with the green landscape you find in Northwest Arkansas," the hotel said on Facebook when announcing the results of a public vote.

Speaking of hotels, I stay at Motto by Hilton. It has ""cleverly compact" rooms with smaller carbon footprints, flexible social spaces, and a bike storage and valet service. But, more importantly, my room looks right at the Ledger.



It draws people who look like locals — young couples holding hands, new parents pushing strollers and rambunctious kids burning off steam. It also attracts folks like me who are wobbling around on rentals, clearly delighted to bike their first building.

"It is pretty incredible how many trips get taken here in a day," says Aimee Ross, who does bike-based business development here and takes us cycling on that rainy day. "I don't know if anyone's actually counting it."

Someone really should be. The ramps of this unique attraction are open daily from sunrise to sunset in good weather.

I get to return before leaving town, this time walking the ramps (all 1.2 kilometres of them) for a better look at the mosaic critters hauling gems.

Now I know that the seemingly insignificant bugs are quietly collaborating to create something better. Now I understand that the bikeable building doubles as an outdoor art experience and has been designed "to be used, walked, biked, meandered, photographed and shared TO and FOR the public." ■

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