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St. Louis, Missouri, Is Rebounding From A Long Decline By Focusing On Its Historic Heritage



John Mariani Contributor ⓘ

I cover the world's best hotels, restaurants and wine.



St. Louis, Missouri, USA downtown cityscape with the arch and courthouse at dusk.

Don't for a moment think that the city fathers of St. Louis weren't thinking of Paris's Arc de Triomphe, Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, New York's Statue of Liberty or San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge when they put up their 630-foot tall Gateway Arch. If iconic is an over-used word these days, none better applies to the Arch, finished in 1965.

I remember seeing its graceful shape far off in the distance when my wife and I drove across America in 1977, and my son remembers the looming sight of it when he did the same drive in 1998. Now there's a vast new visitors center and museum

at its base, amidst well-landscaped grounds (they buried a highway that used to run through it), that will tell you everything you'd want to know about the design and construction of this Midwestern wonder of the world.



This French Madonna and Child from the Medieval Period is a highlight of the holdings at the St. Louis Museum of Art [EXPLORE](#)
ST. LOUIS

Although St. Louis has only 320,000 people, it has the feel of a bigger city as it

sprawls along the Mississippi River, married briefly to both the Missouri and the Illinois and crisscrossed by four interstate highways, with 79 designated neighborhoods.

This is the city so lovingly exalted in the 1944 movie “Meet Me in St. Louis,” centered around the opening of the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition (though filmed on MGM’s back lots), the same year it hosted the Summer Olympics.

The city dates back to fur trading days, founded by the French in 1764, acquired by the United States in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Steamboats plied its rivers by 1818, and Missouri became a state three years later.

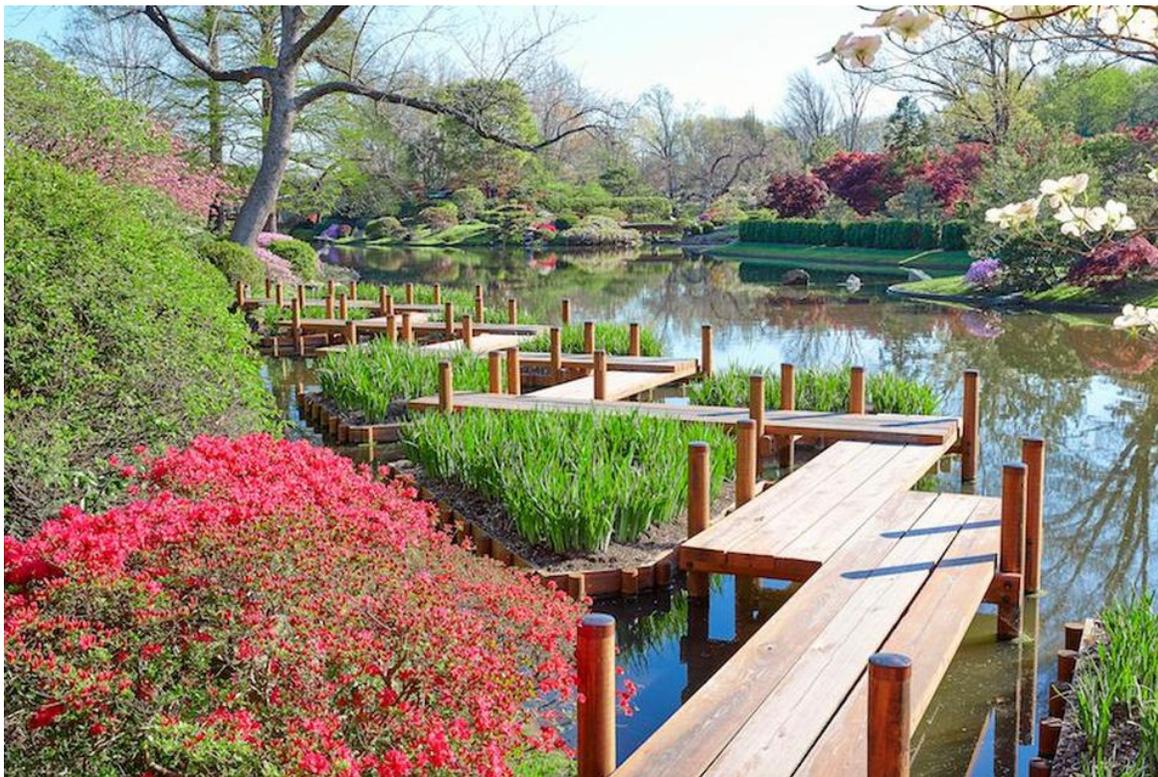


The bandstand located in Forest Park, St. Louis, Missouri.

Like all expanding Midwest cities, wealth brought culture, and today St. Louis is a hub for some extraordinary museums and attractions—most of them sublimely open to the public gratis. Some lie within Forest Park, site of both the Exposition and Olympics, that attracts 12 million visitors each year. It’s much larger than New York’s Central Park and includes the Missouri History Museum and one of America’s greatest cultural institutions, the St. Louis Art Museum. On a recent trip there, I was struck not only by the comprehensive nature of its 34,000 holdings, from Ancient American art and Art of the Pacific to Medieval and Renaissance rooms, Islamic exhibitions, stunning Asian pottery, and modern art (with one of the

largest collections of the German artist Max Beckmann), but with its perfect, soft lighting in both galleries and open spaces.

Elsewhere in St. Louis are the Contemporary Art Museum and the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum. The city's Symphony dates back to 1880, now performing in the gorgeous and opulent Powell Hall. The National Blues Museum has become both a major attraction and music venue downtown.



The Zig Zag Bridge at the St. Louis Botanical Gardens crosses one of many water sites. [EXPLORE ST. LOUIS](#)

The Missouri Botanical Garden, spread out over 79 acres, is the oldest of its kind in the U.S., with an indoor rainforest, waterfalls, tropical birds, a serene Japanese garden and children's educational area, all connected by an on-and-off tram.

I'll be writing about the city's culinary offerings in upcoming articles, but I can't fail to mention that St. Louis is an historic and major beer producer, with visits to huge breweries like Anheuser-Busch (now owned by Belgians) requisite, along with brewery tour companies that visit artisanal and microbreweries throughout the city.





Chuck Berry is one of dozens of St. Louis natives with a bronze star in the Delmar Loop. JOHN MARIANI

One of the most revealing aspects for me while touring the city's bustling Delmar Loop in the University area were the sidewalks implanted with bronze stars commemorating St. Louis's native sons and daughters of national and international renown, including actors Betty Grable and Vincent Price; authors T. S. Eliot, William Inge, Marianne Moore, Maya Angelou and Howard Nemerov; sports figures like Yogi Berra, Jimmy Connors and Sonny Liston; and a slew of musicians including Josephine Baker, Tina Turner, Albert King, Chuck Berry and Scott Joplin. Probably its best-known citizen was the man flew the airplane he named after the city, Charles Lindbergh.

Not all of those natives loved their hometown, and many left as soon as they could. “I ran away from St. Louis,” said Josephine Baker, “and then I ran away from the United States, because of that terror of discrimination.”

After the war, St. Louis was not without its urban problems. There is much decay surrounding the downtown area, gray stretches of un-patched roads and trash-strewn vacant lots; in fact, today its population is 100,000 people less than it was in 1950, when a flight to the suburbs began. Only Detroit and Youngstown, Ohio, have seen such precipitous declines. The city has had to battle its image as having the highest murder rate per capita in the U.S.



St. Louis, Missouri, USA - July 15, 2018: Busch Stadium is where the Major League Baseball team the Cardinals play.

But infusions of Asian immigrants in recent years—the Chinese in the Central West End, the Vietnamese in Dutchtown—and Latinos have enriched the ethnic base of the city, now almost 50% African-American. A lavish casino has helped revive downtown, and the city’s sports teams—the Cardinals and the Blues—do very well; the city’s major industries are sound, its colleges and universities well regarded. Ten Fortune 500 companies reside there. Boeing employs 15,000 at its campus north of the city, and, as in so many Midwestern cities now, the medical sector is a leader in technology and employment. Washington University’s medical school is ranked one of the top ten in the U.S.





An image of the Boeing F-15 Strike Eagle fighter aircraft is displayed on the assembly floor of a Boeing Defense, Space & Security facility in St. Louis, Missouri, U.S., on Monday, July 24, 2018. Bloomberg.

Symptomatic of both that decline and current rebound is one of the city's most extraordinary pieces of reclaimed architecture, the landmark St. Louis Union station, once the largest and busiest train station in the world, with 100,000 passengers a day arriving or departing on 22 train lines, a true crossroads of America. Opened in 1894, it thrived until airlines drove the passenger railroad lines into bankruptcy, so that by 1978 no trains pulled in or out of this majestic station. Those that do come to St. Louis now do so through an adjacent shack.





St Louis Station fell into decrepitude until renovated to be a deluxe hotel, now run by Hilton. EXPLORE SY. LOUIS

So saving the landmark terminal has demonstrated the resilient 21st century spirit of St. Louis. A \$150 million renovation turned the station into an upscale hotel, now run by Hilton, and several times



St. Louis Train Station each day plays a spectacular light show against its grand lobby's arch. JOHN MARIANI

a day now a spectacular laser light show is splashed across its vast 65-foot-tall Grand Hall and stained glass windows proudly commemorating St. Louis as the center of the American heartland.



John Mariani Contributor

John Mariani is an author and journalist of 40 years standing, and an author of 15 books. He has been called by the Philadelphia Inquirer, "the most influential food-win... [Read More](#)