



The northwestern area of Arkansas offers a special combination of art and nature in an accessible, inviting setting of big and small towns.

A Natural Blend

by Barbara & Jim Twardowski, RN / photos by Jim Twardowski



The Bentonville Farmers Market runs Saturday mornings April through October in the Bentonville, Ark., Town Square.

From the home of retail

giant Walmart to stunning natural beauty, Bentonville, Ark., and the surrounding northwestern part of the state provide an incredible blend of small-town charm, great accessible nature areas and amazing art that help make it easy to see why Arkansas is called The Natural State.

Bentonville may be small, but being home to the world's largest retailer certainly

helps give the city of roughly 34,000 some significant corporate energy. The city is a good place to start exploring, and the Bentonville Town Square offers plenty to see and do in a compact area.

Bentonville Town Square

As the home of Walmart, Bentonville is also home to the Walmart Museum. Located on the

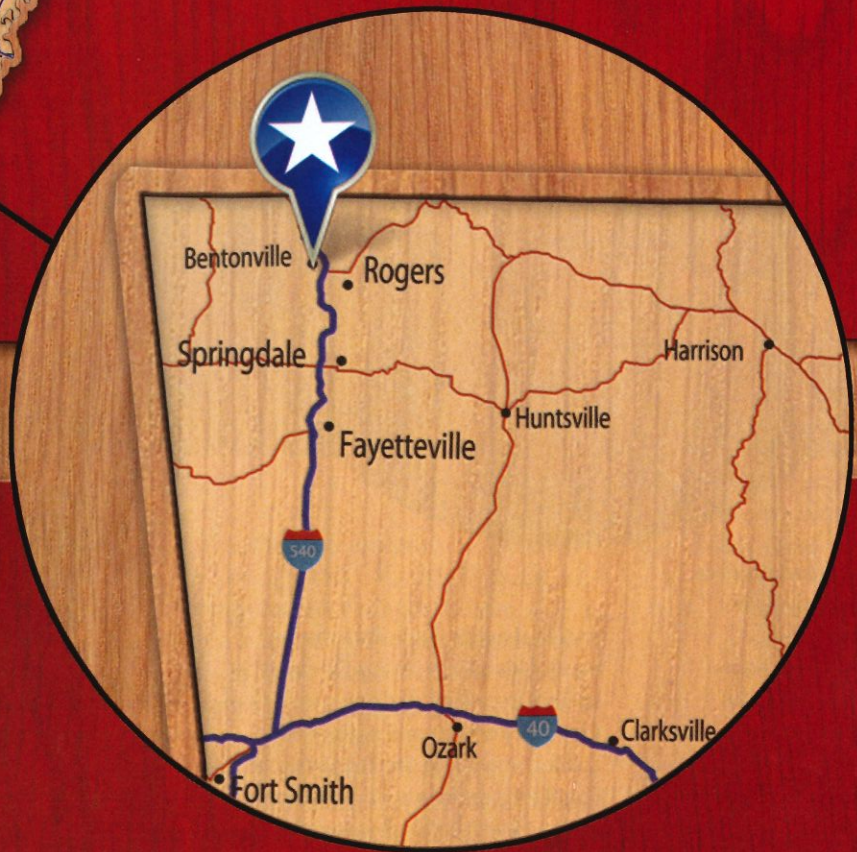


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square, the museum (walmartmuseum.com) tells the story of the company's humble beginnings and pays homage to its founder, Sam Walton.

There's nothing fancy about the free museum, which is filled with family photos, mementos and milestones throughout the megacorporation's history. The wheelchair-accessible museum also houses the Walton's 5&10, featuring a nostalgic collection of candy, games and toys.

The Spark Café Soda Fountain offers a step back in time with single-scoop ice cream cones for 99 cents. The ice box lemon pie flavor, a feature that day, was delicious.

Also located in the town square is the seasonal Bentonville Farmers Market that runs on Saturday mornings April through October (downtownbentonville.org). Area streets are closed to traffic, so wheelchair users can effortlessly roll from one booth to another.

Vendors sell produce, flowers, chocolate, leather goods, furniture, health products, crafts,



The Spark Café Soda Fountain gives Walmart Museum patrons a taste of nostalgia.



Vendors sell produce, flowers, chocolate, leather goods, furniture and more at the Bentonville Farmers Market.

toys and more. An online map of vendor locations makes finding that special item easy. Pick up a breakfast burrito from one of the food trucks, or walk to the 21c Museum Hotel for a delicious sit-down meal at The Hive (thehivebentonville.com).

The casual restaurant is run by one of the best chefs in the Midwest. Matthew McClure, a four-time James Beard Foundation Best Chef

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art encompasses 120 acres.



A statue at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

Semifinalist nominee, serves refined country food. Allow extra time after the meal to browse the hotel's extensive contemporary art collection inside and outside.



Art & Nature

Arkansas is nicknamed The Natural State, and only five minutes north of the town square you'll find an incredible and unique museum that combines Mother Nature's natural art with that made by humans.

The Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (crystalbridges.org) covers 120 acres and is set in a ravine carved by Crystal Springs and flanked by two hills. Strolling from one gallery to another, windows provide dramatic views of the unspoiled Ozarks landscape.

The museum opened seven years ago with a mission to unite art with nature. Besides paying homage to American masterpieces, we discovered some appealing wheelchair-accessible attractions. Plan to spend a full day exploring Crystal Bridges.

The museum's permanent collection contains 2,500 items that are periodically rotated throughout the galleries. The collection encompasses American masterworks and lesser-known pieces dating from the Colonial period to present day.

From a portrait of George Washington and a Pinocchio sculpture to Rosie the Riveter and Andy Warhol's Coca-Cola, the art provides insight into America's culture. Temporary and traveling exhibits are held throughout the year.

One of the best ways to see the museum is with a tour guide. Several one-hour drop-in tours are conducted by trained volunteers each day. The free tours review highlights from the museum's permanent collection and temporary exhibits, architecture, nature or special topics.

The museum's eight outdoor trails range in length from a quarter mile to 1½ miles. Twenty sculptures are located on the trails, and many of them can be easily viewed by wheelchair users. A little before dusk, we strolled the Art Trail and spied a doe with her two fawns. In the evening, we traversed the winding North Forest Trail under the moonlight to see a special exhibit of Dale Chihuly's illuminated glass.



Artist Dale Chihuly's illuminated glass spheres at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

Don't miss the Museum Store. Designed by a Fayetteville, Ark., architect, the cherry-wood ceiling mimics the underside of a mushroom. The store carries a delightful selection of decorative items, books, toys and jewelry. Not enough room in your suitcase? They'll ship the items for you.

The museum's restaurant, Eleven, serves brunch, lunch and dinner on select days. Reservations for brunch and dinner are offered online and are highly recommended. Grab-and-go items are offered at the coffee bar just off the main lobby.



A volunteer conducts a free museum tour.

The museum's interior is Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant and has several family restrooms. Disabled parking is limited and located on the lower level of the parking garage. Admission to the museum is free. Costs for special exhibits vary.



Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art blends natural beauty with man-made works of art.

Worth The Drive

The Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art trails should help pique your interest for more of Northwest Arkansas' natural beauty, and you can find it just about 20 miles east of Bentonville at Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area (arkansasstateparks.com/hobbsstateparkconservationarea).

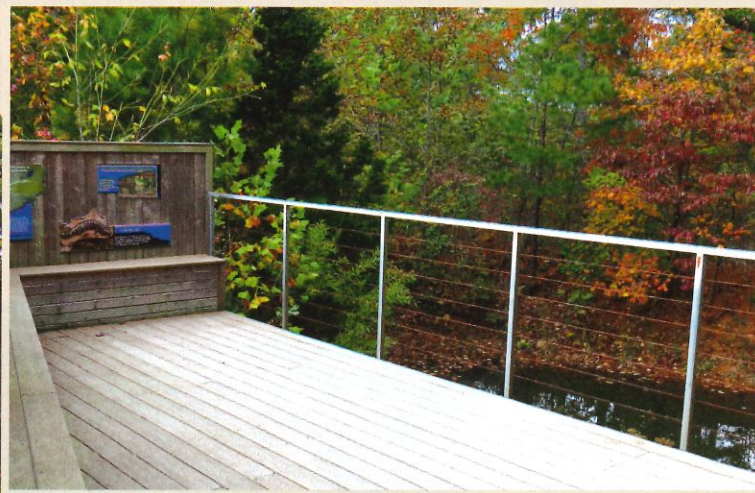
Nestled beside the south shore of Beaver Lake, the 12,000-acre park is the largest in the state. This park's landscape consists of plateaus, ridges, valleys and streams featuring an upland forest of oak, hickory and pine. The lodge-like visitor center includes taxidermy mounts, exhibits, a gift shop, tons of informational brochures, maps and helpful staff.

We explored the Ozark Plateau Trail — a barrier-free path designed for wheelchairs, baby strollers and foot traffic. The trail has two loops: an inner concrete-surfaced, quarter-mile section and an outer "challenge" half-mile loop that features crushed stone. Wayside panels tell you about the area's plants, animals and geology. An enlarged overlook area provides a view of a narrow hollow with a small spring and pools of water where wild animals come to drink.

More Art & A Garden

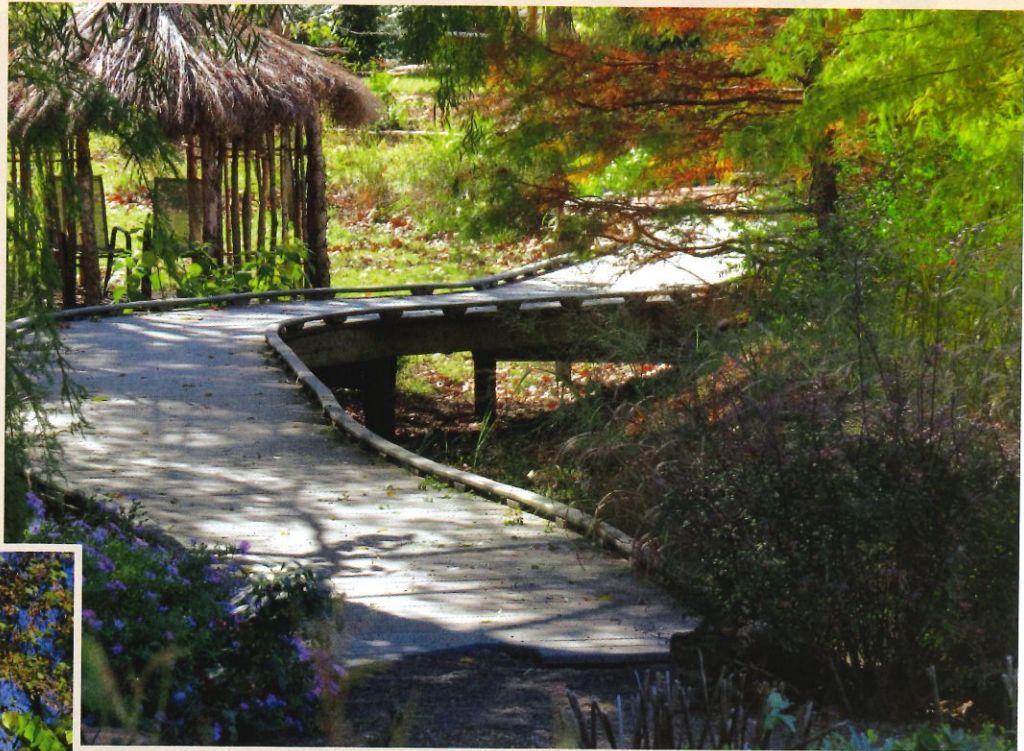
On your way to the park, you'll pass through Rogers, Ark., which features a vibrant art scene.

An overlook at Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area.



Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area, about 20 miles east of Bentonville, Ark., features a trail designed for wheelchair users, strollers and foot traffic.

We stopped in the Dotted Pig and found some lovely original paintings, throw blankets and accessories. Every second Thursday from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. is Art on the Bricks. About a dozen local businesses host a Northwest Arkansas artist or musician. Participating venues are located on First, Second and Third streets, as well as Walnut and Elm streets.



Botanical Garden of the Ozarks features a butterfly house.

A few minutes south of Rogers and Bentonville is Fayetteville, which is the third-largest city in the state and home to more natural beauty at the Botanical Garden of the Ozarks (bgozarks.org).

Lovingly built from grassroots funding and the support of countless volunteers, the 40-acre garden is a whimsical place with 12 themed gardens and a butterfly house. The wheelchair-accessible garden has paved and gravel paths.

A tiny gift shop carries items designed by local artists. Our favorite find was the repur-

posed dishware transformed into plate flowers for the garden created by Rebecca Dunn. Admission is \$7.

Home Suite Home

When it comes to accommodations, the DoubleTree Suites by Hilton Hotel Bentonville (doubletree3.hilton.com) in the south part of town is a good choice for travelers who need two separate sleeping areas.

The hotel has 140 suites. Our accessible guest room featured a bedroom with a roll-in shower and a king bed. The bed was a good height for transferring from a wheelchair but didn't provide enough space underneath for those who use a Hoyer lift. The sofa sleeper, located in the living room, makes traveling with a companion or family more comfortable.

Amenities we appreciated include a microwave, mini fridge, coffee maker, free Wi-Fi, an onsite restaurant, an indoor heated swimming pool with a chair lift and free self-parking.

For more information on Northwest Arkansas, visit arkansas.com or northwestarkansas.org.

Jim and Barbara Twardowski cover the travel industry, writing about baby boomer and accessible travel, accommodations, culinary/cultural offerings and destinations. ■

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