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Experience Indy

By Shari Held For Custom Publications

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Last year, nearly half of vacationers said they were considering getting away close to home.

Again this year, the stay-at-home concept is going strong. There are plenty of opportunities to pick and choose.

“On the national scene, staycations continue to be a hot trend - and Indianapolis is no different,” said Chris Gahl, associate director of communications, Indianapolis Convention & Visitors Association. “We’ve seen a growing number of in-state residents coming to Indianapolis to get away.”

Out-of-state visitors have long enjoyed the jewel that is Indianapolis. With 21.9 million annual visitors, Indianapolis ranks in the top 20 most-visited U.S. cities, according to Forbes magazine.

“In-state residents have been aware of it, but they’re now



Ian and Sarah Thomas learn how to fiddle at the Indiana Historical Society. - Photo / JOHN THOMAS

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taking advantage of it to the fullest,” Gahl said.

Big fun at less expense

Jen Schmits Thomas and her husband, John; 12-year-old son, Ian; and 7-year-old daughter, Sarah, enjoy getting away while staying close to home. During spring break this year, they spent two nights downtown.

“We had researched going to a lot of different places,” Jen Thomas said. “We even looked at going to the Grand Canyon or a beach. But when we started looking at nearby places like Cincinnati or St. Louis, we decided we ought to take advantage of what’s right in our backyard before we did other things.”

The family participated in the Indiana Historical Society’s new interactive Indiana Experience, visited the Indiana State Museum, took the \$2 elevator ride to the top of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument for a panoramic view, attended a showing at the IMAX Theater and walked along the canal and through White River State Park. Most of these activities were free or inexpensive.

A recent report from Indianapolis Downtown Inc. shows that 8 million visits were made to 24 downtown attractions in 2009.

“Total attendance at those attractions is at a 16-year high,” said Jennifer Hanson, communications director for the organization. “Since that number keeps going up, we believe that more people in central Indiana are taking staycations and coming to visit the zoo and the Children’s Museum and the concerts and all the fun stuff that’s right here in their backyard.”

7 ways to get the most from your staycation

1 Do your research to save more bucks.

“First and foremost, rely on the local tourism agency in the city you’re going to. In our case, it’s the Indianapolis Convention & Visitors Association,” said Chris Gahl, ICVA associate director of communications. “Our website provides some of the best rates — even trumping Expedia and Travelocity — and hidden packages and deals because we have a direct line of communication with local hoteliers.” Check out the ICVA site at www.visitindy.com and Indianapolis Downtown Inc. at www.indydt.com.

2 Consider upgrading. One local family upgraded to the concierge level at the Marriott for a recent staycation. For an extra \$30 per day they received breakfast, snacks, dessert and all the bottled water and pop they wanted. “The kids thought it was the greatest thing ever because it was a smorgasbord of food,” said Jen Schmits Thomas, mother of two. “We would have spent \$30 on breakfast alone for a family of four.”

3 Know what’s available. “Whatever your interests are, there are so many opportunities right in your own backyard,” said Jennifer Hanson, communications director, Indianapolis Downtown Inc. “You could spend a whole day in each of the six cultural districts. Depending on the district, there is an array of activities from dining, shopping, theater and museums.”

4 Treat it like the real deal. Tell everyone you’re going on vacation and don’t make yourself available to co-workers. Turn off your laptop and smart phone, and give your staycation the attention it deserves.

5 Engage the kids. Thomas suggests giving each child a camera -- disposables are perfect -- so they can document the vacation in a meaningful way. “Kids see things differently through a camera lens,” she said. “They get more out of it if they take their own pictures.”

A la carte options

One thing is certain: There's no danger you'll run out of options in Indianapolis. View the city through the eyes of a tourist, like the Thomas family did, and you'll discover all kinds of experiences, including world-class museums and sports venues.

You'll save money by staycationing, so you might want to splurge on a unique experience. Consider taking an hour-and-a-half guided Segway tour of White River State Park along the canal.

"It's a great way to give the kids a memorable experience that they will talk about for a long while," Gahl said.

You could treat yourself to a romantic ride along the canal in a Venetian gondola, or take three laps around the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in an IndyCar Series two-seater. At \$499 per person, the Ultimate Indy Racing Experience might be pricy, but for just \$10 you can take in an Indianapolis Indians home game; Friday-night games even include fireworks.

When it comes to lodging, spend the night in a quaint Victorian bed and breakfast, such as The Nestle Inn, or go for total luxury at the Conrad Indianapolis, with its Spa Chakra, pool and elegant dining.

The Thomas family spent two nights at the Marriott downtown.

"We stayed at a hotel, and it felt more like we were on vacation," Thomas said. "It made it more special because we packed our suitcases and swam in the hotel pool. We had a blast on our staycation." ●

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6 Tie it to a special event — preferably something you've never before

experienced. "That makes it really memorable," Gahl said. "Whether it's the opening of an exhibit at an art gallery or a sports-related event, give yourself something to look forward to."

7 Relax. Be sure to schedule time to unwind and be pampered. Make reservations at an upscale hotel and take advantage of spa services and other luxurious amenities.

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