

February VOICE column

By John Groh, RACVB President & CEO

Project Time Off: Vacation Closer to Home

Let's be honest, there is nothing better than a great vacation – the memories, the experiences, the time with friends and family.

Vacations have the ability to recharge us and better connect us to the world, and the to lift up the communities to which we travel. Vacations can be to far-off places, but they can just as easily be closer to home or in your own backyard.

That's why Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau is joining tourism professionals across the country in supporting the U.S. Travel Association's 'Project: Time Off' coalition to encourage everyone to use their well-earned vacation days with a simple strategy: take two- or three-day weekend trips right here in Illinois. And if you can't get away for a weekend trip, maybe a nice staycation to our local sites and attractions would fit your family and budget.

The number of vacation days Americans take has been on a steady decline for years. Between 1976 and 2000, Americans took an average of 20.3 vacation days each year. In 2015, the average decreased to 16.2 – that's the equivalent of nearly an entire week of paid time off NOT USED!

Consider this: According to the U.S. Travel Association, if Americans were to use their allotted vacation days, it would deliver a \$160 billion jolt to the U.S. economy, create 1.2 million new American jobs and generate \$21 billion in federal, state and local tax revenues. In fact, in Illinois the tourism industry generated \$37.1 billion in direct spending, \$2.9 billion in state and local tax revenue and 314,380 jobs in 2015. Moreover, tourism spending saves the average Illinois household \$1,300 in taxes annually.

So, are looking for a fun way to use those days off with a fun one-day vacation locally? Here are a few options for a fun-filled day:

For the Family – Start with breakfast at Stockholm Inn and eat the famous Swedish pancakes with lingonberry sauce. Then head over to the Discovery Center Museum and while there check out the Burpee Museum and Rockford Art Museum, as well. For a late lunch, buzz up to the Olympic Tavern and try their B.L.A.T (bacon, lettuce, avocado, tomato) sandwich. Once everyone's ready to continue their adventures, zip over to Rock Cut State Park, which has amazing hiking trails that are perfect all year long or rent a paddleboat if the weather is nice! For dinner, head to one of the most popular restaurants in our city, Lino's, and dive into their pizza and signature salad. After dinner, take in some bowling at Don Carter Lanes!

For couples – Start your day with brunch at Fresco at Anderson Japanese Garden. If the gardens are open (May – October) take a stroll through this breathtaking natural world. Then head down to Nicholas Conservatory and Gardens and explore this fantastic display of tropical and exotic plants along with their season features. A walk along the bike path and through the Sinnissippi Rose Garden is a must, especially in the summer. Grab lunch downtown at Octane Interlounge, a downtown Rockford staple since 1997 --

everything is good, you won't be disappointed. Shopping the downtown is an experience as you can explore hip stores like Rockford Art Deli, Minglewood, and Bath & Body Fusion. Or hit up boutique shops near downtown like Culture Shock or Toad Hall. In the evening, grab drinks with a fantastic meal at Tavern on Clark or Alchemy.

The tourism industry across Illinois is inviting Illinoisans to #PlanForVacation in Illinois. Don't forget to head to www.gorockford.com or www.enjoyillinois.com for resources to help you explore and plan, or request a visitors guide from our office.

National Plan for Vacation Day, celebrated on January 31, is a day to encourage Americans to plan their vacations for the year. We hope you join the movement and use those vacation days!