



Falling in Love with Madison: A First-Timer's Story

The International Downtown Association Place Conference turned into an unforgettable discovery

Last week, during the International Downtown Association Place Conference, my sister and I had the joy of discovering Madison, Wisconsin for the very first time—and we absolutely fell in love with your city.

From the moment we arrived, we were struck by the beauty of downtown Madison, anchored by what we both agreed is the most beautiful State Capitol in the country. But beyond the architecture, what truly stayed with us was the warmth of the people. Everywhere we went, we were met with kindness, friendliness, and a genuine sense of welcome that made the city feel instantly familiar.

Friday night introduced us to two experiences that felt uniquely Wisconsin. First, we participated in the beloved tradition of the Wisconsin Fish Fry—a ritual that is clearly much more than just dinner. It felt like a weekly gathering rooted in community, conversation, and comfort. Families, friends, and neighbors filling restaurants together on a Friday evening created a sense of belonging that was impossible not to notice. As visitors, it gave us a glimpse into the rhythm and traditions that help define life in Wisconsin.

Later that evening, we attended the inaugural Rally women's soccer game, and the energy was electric. The excitement in the crowd, the pride surrounding the launch of women's sports in the city, and the way the community rallied around the team made it feel like we were witnessing something truly special for Madison. It was another reminder of how connected and community-driven the city feels.

Unexpected Magic on Saturday

What truly captured our hearts, though, were the unexpected moments on Saturday that reminded us what makes great downtowns magical.

We wandered into One Social for lunch, unaware there was free bingo happening that afternoon. Before long, we were laughing with locals, chatting like old friends, and somehow winning twice—heading home with a t-shirt and a six-pack of IPA. It was one of those perfectly unplanned moments that travelers never forget.



That evening, we discovered Naples 15. Without a reservation, we grabbed seats at the bar and ordered the gluten-free pasta. To say it was the best gluten-free pasta I've ever had would not be an exaggeration—and for someone with celiac disease, that is saying something. Then owner Salvatore came over, delighted that we were enjoying the gluten-free dishes. His humor, warmth, and infectious laugh turned dinner into an unforgettable experience. He even treated us to complimentary wine and gifted us a bag of their famous handmade gluten-free pasta imported from Italy.



By the end of the weekend, Madison no longer felt like a city we had visited—it felt like a place we connected with deeply.

Thank you to Downtown Madison Inc. and to the businesses, residents, and hospitality professionals who create the kind of downtown experience people carry home with them long after the trip ends. We cannot wait to come back.



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