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OFF THE BEATEN TRACK | NOVEMBER 4, 2008

Kalamazoo, Michigan

By RHONDA L. RUNDLE

What to do: Kalamazoo, a small, charming college town in southwest Michigan, is home to the nation's most prestigious annual boys' tennis tournament and a biennial international piano competition. Make a beeline for the Kalamazoo Valley Museum, an unpretentious but bewitching repository of local artifacts and history. Walk over to the library to pick up a free brochure and map of Kalamazoo's Historic Homes, then stroll down tree-lined South Street, past Bronson Park, to view the old mansions along a two-block stretch considered part of the city's architectural heritage. For detailed commentary, local historian Lynn Houghton offers free 60-90 minute walking tours on Thursday evenings and Friday mornings, from June through October (tel. 269-342-5996; gazellesports.com). A short drive from town is the Kalamazoo Nature Center, which hosts winter hikes and outdoor activities including a regular Sunday afternoon family program (Tel. 269-381-1574, www.naturecenter.org). A few miles farther away is the Gilmore Car Museum, founded in 1966 by the late Donald Gilmore, a onetime CEO of Upjohn company. On a 90-acre site, covered with red barns, over 200 classic cars are displayed along with sometimes slick, sometimes silly, advertising copy from their heyday -- making for an entertaining lesson in 20th-century popular culture (open May through October; adults \$9; tel. 269-671-5089; gilmorecarmuseum.org).

Where to stay: The Kalamazoo House, one of the renovated stately homes on South Street, is now a bed-and-breakfast inn. Rates range from \$109 to \$149 and some rooms include whirlpool baths (tel. 866-310-0880; www.thekalamazoohouse.com). The Henderson Castle Bed & Breakfast, built on a hill in 1895, is a city landmark in another historic neighborhood on the edge of Kalamazoo College (Rates range from \$150 to \$275; tel. 269-344-1827; www.hendersoncastle.com).

Where to eat: Several hip restaurants are located along the downtown pedestrian mall, which Kalamazoo reopened to traffic some years ago to help local merchants. At Epic Bistro, try the Grilled Duck Breast with fig compote and port syrup for \$25 (tel. 269-342-1300). Jazz lovers can find live entertainment -- often performed by Western Michigan University faculty and students -- at the Union Cabaret & Grille down the street, though the volume can be off-putting (tel. 269-384-6756). On warm nights, there is outdoor seating on the terrace overlooking the mall at Zazio's, a contemporary Italian restaurant at the Radisson Plaza Hotel (tel. 269-343-3333). For a welcoming fireplace and quiet refuge away from the city center, try the Great Lakes Shipping Co. (Tel. 269-375-3650).

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