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## Travel

# Young and vibrant Columbus, Ohio, is a hotspot for millennials

*By Katherine Rodeghier*

Special Contributor

You might think of Columbus, Ohio, as just another boring seat of state government in flyover country, as uninteresting and flat as its Capitol without a dome.

You would be wrong.

Columbus has become a hipster hangout, young and vibrant with a sizable population of millennials, tons of fun bars, restaurants, craft breweries and coffee roasters, a burgeoning arts scene, a huge fashion and design industry, and expanding acres of green space for biking, running or just soaking up the sun.



When the Scioto River was returned to its natural course through downtown Columbus, Ohio, acres of new green space opened along the riverfront.

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Columbus ranked highest in the Midwest for visitor satisfaction in a [2016 J.D. Power study](#), and, in 2015, *Time* magazine ranked Columbus third on its list of "[Best Cities for Millennials](#)," who make up about 26 percent of its population.

Ohio State University adds to the youthful buzz, giving Columbus one of the highest per capita student populations in the U.S. Plenty of those students stay after graduation to take advantage of job opportunities and an affordable cost of living.

*They're hooked on the city's friendly, low-key lifestyle that earns Columbus its reputation as "Biggest Small Town in America," though its population tops 800,000.*

Visitors find plenty of ways to soak up the city's new energy. In the evening, head to the Arena District built around downtown's Nationwide Arena where the [NHL's Columbus Blue Jackets](#) play. You'll be awash in a young crowd frequenting bars and pubs.

Browse the stalls in the [North Market](#), a historic downtown food hall with 35 merchants selling flowers, fish, produce, beer and wine, and the city's own [Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams](#) and Destination Donuts.

Order a takeout meal from one of the food vendors or join a long line at wildly popular [Hot Chicken Takeover](#), the Nashville-style fried chicken and soul food restaurant on the market's second floor.



Visitors mingle with locals to shop or grab lunch at the North Market food hall in Columbus, Ohio.

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## River changes course

Perhaps the biggest change in Columbus has been redevelopment along the Scioto River.

Once a brown, sludgy waterway, the \$80 million [Scioto Mile project](#) restored the river to its natural flow through downtown Columbus. Thirty-three acres of reclaimed green space were added to the Scioto Mile comprising parks, fountains, a performing arts pavilion, and walking and bike paths. No bike? No problem. Check one out from the CoGo Bike Share stations scattered around the city.

Changing the course of the river also changed the course of history in the city's [Franklinton](#) neighborhood, a low-lying area once subject to repeated floods. Developers couldn't get insurance to rebuild so the neighborhood languished with a hodgepodge of run-down warehouses and factories. A flood wall completed by the Army Corps of Engineers in 2004 now protects the area and, as often happens in newly gentrifying neighborhoods, artists were among the first to move in.

An old building at 400 W. Rich St. became a warren of 140 artist studios. They open the doors to the public on the second Friday of each month when their [Handmade Market](#) stocks one-of-a-kind finds.

Next door, [Strongwater Food and Spirits](#) operates a bar and restaurant in what once was a drinking-fountain factory. [Land-Grant Brewing Co.](#) opened in an old elevator factory. The taproom serves beer brewed on-site. Edibles are supplied by a rotating schedule of food trucks.



A 50,000-square-foot expansion opened at the Columbus Art Museum in Columbus, Ohio, last fall and specializes in modernist works.

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## Arts and fashion

Franklinton is the sort of evolving artist enclave that the city's [Short North Arts District](#) once was. This former den of prostitutes and drug dealers has become a well-established neighborhood of galleries, boutiques, busy bars and trendy dining spots.

During Gallery Hop, on the first Saturday of the month, galleries and shops stay open late and street performers add to a festival atmosphere.

You might visit boutiques carrying the work of Columbus designers. The city ranks as the third-largest fashion center in the nation, after New York and Los Angeles. Among the fashion brands headquartered in Columbus are DSW, Eloquii and Victoria's Secret.

Art and fashion are found in more places than in galleries and on models. [The Columbus Museum of Art](#) opened a 50,000-square-foot wing last fall to exhibit 400 modernist works, and the Hilton Columbus Downtown has a \$1 million collection with more than 200 works. You'll see the work of Columbus designer Liz Bourgeois, on the staff of the new [Hotel LeVeque](#). Her eclectic mix of vintage and hip pay homage to the LeVeque Tower's colorful history.



Greg Lehman, co-owner of Watershed Distillery, gave up a job in the corporate world to make spirits in the Grandview neighborhood of Columbus, Ohio.

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## Drink up

No visitor to Ohio's capital city goes thirsty thanks to the [Columbus Ale Trail](#), [Columbus Coffee Experience](#), two craft distilleries and a meadery.

Millennials help fuel the success of the city's coffee shops, 21 of them on the Columbus Coffee Trail. Pick up a card at any of them, order a drink and have it stamped. After four visits you qualify for a free T-shirt.

The Roosevelt Coffeehouse opened downtown in April 2015 and quickly made a name for itself, not only for its specialty coffees but for its commitment to social justice. Half of the tip jar goes to causes, such as digging wells in Africa and fighting child trafficking. "We make coffee to save lives," says founder Kenny Sipes, a former youth pastor, and his patrons are all in.

In 2015, a young couple -- she a former editor and baker in New York, he a coffee expert -- transformed an old garage purchased on Craigslist into [Fox in the Snow Cafe](#). It soon became the in spot for coffee, from-scratch pastries and breakfast items, including an egg sandwich ordered by as many as 300 patrons on a busy Saturday morning.



Local honey is the signature ingredient used by mead maker Justin Devilbiss at Brothers Drake Meadery & Bar in Columbus, Ohio.

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Columbus has climbed aboard the craft beer bandwagon in a big way. More than half of the city's 28 breweries opened in the past five years. Pick up a copy of the Columbus Ale Trail booklet at the first brewery you visit, get it stamped after purchase, and you'll earn a commemorative pint glass after partaking of brew at four establishments.

Elevator Brewing Co. has a brewery and taproom in an old grain elevator and a restaurant nearby. Down the street, Wolf's Ridge Brewing Co. serves up craft beer and cocktails along with executive chef Seth Lassak's innovative creations, such as duck confit tacos.

The art of brewing goes back to ancient times, but the world's oldest fermented beverage is mead, says Justin DeVilbiss, mead maker at Brothers Drake Meadery & Bar, which is housed in an old auto garage. It offers tours and tastings on weekends that explain how mead is produced like wine but with honey instead of grapes.

Watershed Distillery also offer tours and tastings of some of its vodka, gin and bourbon. Co-owners Greg Lehman and Dave Rigo, chosen as CEOs of the Year by *Columbus CEO* magazine, named their business after what Lehman describes as a "watershed moment" when they made a life-altering decision to leave the corporate world.

And what did these young CEOs do before turning to making spirits? Rigo sold toilets, Lehman sold pharmaceutical drugs to pig farmers.

Sounds like a change worthy of a few strong drinks.

## If you go

Experience Columbus, 1-800-354-2657, [experiencecolumbus.com](http://experiencecolumbus.com)

**Where to stay:** Hilton Columbus Downtown, walking distance to the riverfront, Arena District, North Market and Short North Arts District, 614-384-8600, <http://bit.ly/1i68myN>; Hotel LeVeque, overlooking the Scioto Mile, 614-324-3270, <http://bit.ly/2kntSpa>

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<http://www.dallasnews.com/life/travel/2017/02/10/young-vibrant-columbus-ohio-hotspot-millennials>