

November 7, 2004

WHAT'S DOING

In Little Rock

By RUTH ANN HENSLEY

Six bridges span the scenic Arkansas River in downtown Little Rock, but soon there will be a new bridge in town - one that wasn't built to cross a body of water, but instead to connect Little Rock to the rest of the world.

On Nov. 18, the William Jefferson Clinton Presidential Center and Park will be unveiled on a roughly 30-acre site on the eastern edge of the downtown River Market District. Mr. Clinton will be there, and President George W. Bush and former chief executives have been invited. The "bridge to the 21st century" theme of the Clinton presidency inspired the bridgelike design of the library building.

Although the economic revitalization of Little Rock, the state capital, began shortly after Mr. Clinton chose it for the project in 1997. New hotels have opened and old ones have been restored. Museums and galleries have attracted big-city-caliber collections, and condominiums and restaurants breathe new life into old warehouses and storefronts.

And a \$20 million trolley system has been installed to link the city's bustling River Market District to major hotels and attractions. The trolley also crosses the tree-lined Arkansas River to the Victorian neighborhoods, shopping and expansive parks of North Little Rock, forming a pedestrian-friendly connection between the two cities.

Events

The opening of the Clinton Presidential Center will be celebrated Nov. 14 to 18 with events all over town, including Aretha Franklin with the Arkansas Symphony (\$115 to \$300), on Nov. 16 at 8 p.m. at the Robinson Center Music Hall, 426 West Markham, (501) 666-1761, and "An Evening With Al Franken" (\$50 to \$150) Nov. 15 at 7:30 p.m. in the Arkansas Repertory Theater, 601 Main Street, (866) 684-3737, or visit www.therep.org.

"Art and the White House: Presidential Selections 1960-2000," at the Arkansas Arts Center, MacArthur Park at Ninth and Commerce Streets, (501) 372-4000, www.arkarts.com, is an exhibition of works that presidents from Kennedy to Clinton borrowed from museums for display in the White House during their administrations. Included are a collection of American Indian-themed oil paintings by the American artist George Catlin, which the Reagans once borrowed from the National Gallery of Art, and the 1782 oil painting "Benjamin Franklin," by the French artist Jean-Baptiste Greuze, displayed during the Ford and Carter administrations. It runs Nov. 19 to Jan. 25. "Diana Walker: Photojournalist," Nov. 19 through Feb. 27, displays

her engaging views of presidents' public and private lives. Admission is free. Closed Mondays and major holidays.

The River Market, 400 President Clinton Avenue, (501) 375-2552, www.rivermarket.info, is the be-there spot, day and night, in the heart of downtown's arts and entertainment district. A Presidential Pavilion fall market, featuring the works of Arkansas artisans and fresh produce, will be held Nov. 16 to 18. Restaurants, bars and museums surround the market building and keep the area humming from early-morning coffee at the Andina Café to late-night live music across the street at Sticky Fingerz Rock 'n' Roll Chicken Shack, 107 Commerce Street. Vendors operate year-round in the Market Hall.

LeAnn Rimes's "Symphonic Christmas" opens the holiday concert series of the Arkansas Symphony, (501) 666-1761, or visit www.arkansassymphony.org, on Dec. 4 at 8 p.m. in the Robinson Center, 426 West Markham. Tickets are \$36 to \$100, The symphony's annual Yuletide Spectacular features a new collection of holiday music, gospel favorites and klezmer music, Dec. 17 and 18; \$16 to \$54.

Sightseeing

The \$165 million Clinton Center includes the presidential library and museum, the nation's largest presidential archive, a restored 1899 railroad station affiliated with the University of Arkansas that houses the Clinton School of Public Service, and an 1899 railroad bridge converted to pedestrian use that will connect the park to 15 miles of riverside trails. There is also a replica of the Oval Office and the Cabinet Room, with interactive displays. General admission is \$7. The center is at 1200 East President Clinton Avenue, (866) 773-7542, www.clintonpresidentialcenter.org. Open daily, except holidays, beginning Nov. 19.

Little Rock's rich history is showcased at the Old State House Museum, 300 West Markham Street; (501) 324-9685, www.oldstatehouse.com. Majestic columns lining the front of the museum exude a Southern pride befitting one of the nation's oldest state capitol buildings. The multimedia museum houses a Civil War collection, a tribute to Arkansas music and rooms reflective of bygone eras. Open daily; free.

While in a Southern mood, take a camera and explore the Old Mill, Fairway Avenue and Lakeshore Drive in North Little Rock, (501) 791-8537, www.northlr.org, a faux 1880's gristmill shot on location for the opening scene of "Gone With the Wind." A sculpture garden, abundant with flowers and streams highlight the destination.

Among the choices from Little Rock Tours, (501) 868-7287, www.littlerocktours.com, are "Bill Clinton's Little Rock" (\$25) and "The Presidential Tour" (\$69), which features a trip to the former president's birthplace of Hope, Ark., and his boyhood town of Hot Springs. Tour buses pick up visitors at the River Market and most major hotels.

In September 1957, all eyes were on Little Rock Central High School, 2125 Daisy L. Gatson Bates Drive, (501) 374-1957, www.nps.gov/chsc, the site of a crucial desegregation crisis during the heat of the civil rights movement. Across the street a Mobil gas station, restored to its 1957 appearance, serves as the visitors center and museum. Free admission. Closed holidays.

Five minutes west of downtown Little Rock on Cantrell Road lie two distinctive neighborhoods, Heights and Hillcrest. The drive itself affords notable views of the rolling riverside hills and well-maintained historic homes. The banner-lined Kavanaugh Boulevard, which circles the Heights, contains upscale clothing stores, an independent bookstore and eclectic restaurants. Hillcrest, a few blocks south of Cantrell on Kavanaugh

Boulevard, boasts a youthful, bohemian assortment of coffeehouses, cafes and after-hours hangouts like the jazz bar Afterthoughts, 2721 Kavanaugh Boulevard, and Ciao Baci restaurant, 605 North Beechwood Street.

Where to Stay

In the historic Quapaw District, the Empress of Little Rock, 2120 South Louisiana Street, (501) 374-7966, fax (501) 375-4537, or visit www.theempress.com, has undergone a major restoration to reflect its Victorian origins. Completed in 1888 and built exclusively with Arkansas materials like blue granite and cypress, it features five spacious rooms, each with a private bath and Victorian décor. Three large suites are scheduled to open in December in an adjacent historic building. Nonsmoking. Rates are \$125 to \$195 for two, with breakfast.

Budget: The Holiday Inn Presidential Conference Center, 600 Interstate 30, (866) 900-7625, fax (501) 374-9045, www.hipresidential.com, near downtown, has recently undergone an \$11 million renovation. The 150 rooms and 11 suites are clean and comfortable. Amenities include WiFi access and a small workout facility. Request a room on the hotel's quieter west side. Rooms, \$79 to \$119.

For a view of the Arkansas River, try the Wyndham Riverfront, 2 Riverfront Place in North Little Rock, (501) 371-9000, fax (501) 907-4800, www.wyndham.com/hotels/litno/main.wnt. Standard rooms (\$69 to \$84) are clean and functional, but it's worth upgrading to a larger executive-level room (\$79 to \$94).

Luxury: The Capital Hotel, Markham and Louisiana, (800) 766-7666, fax (501) 370-7091, or visit www.thecapitalhotel.com, has stood as Little Rock's signature first-class hotel since it opened in 1876. This hotel, on the trolley line a few blocks from the River Market District, has achieved a delicate balance between preserving its historical ambience and providing modern amenities such as free Internet connections, 24-hour room service and an intimate wine cellar with a hidden plasma screen TV. The 126 rooms have an airy, open feel with high ceilings. Doubles are \$199 to \$219.

Just across the trolley track, a legendary Southern tradition from nearby Memphis continues at the Peabody Little Rock, 3 Statehouse Plaza, (800) 732-2639, fax (501) 375-4721, www.peabodylittlerock.com, with the daily parading of the ducks at 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. The luxurious new kid on the block, the Peabody completed a major renovation of the former Excelsior hotel in 2002. In addition to the health club and 24-hour room service, the 418 warm-hued rooms each offer the trademarked Peabody Dream Bed, cordless phones and a view of the river or city. Deluxe rooms are \$199 to \$239.

Where to Eat

Local power brokers congregate at Vermillion Water Grille, 200 South Commerce Street, (501) 371-9600, particularly at lunchtime for a menu that changes monthly, or for the blue-plate special for \$9.95. But the only blue you'll see in this sleek, chic destination is the vivid aquamarine-mosaic tile on the walls and the swirling, sea-blue painted floor. Blackened baked catfish is served with Asiago cheese grits and spicy greens with mango butter; among the desserts is a warm Granny Smith apple tart topped with cinnamon jalapeño ice cream. Dinner for two, about \$60. Lunch and dinner weekdays, dinner Saturday.

A riverfront patio, decadent seafood and Mason jars full of Play De do (a rum cocktail) draw throngs to Cajun's Wharf, 2400 Cantrell Road, (501) 375-5351. Openers like spicy shrimp and crayfish cakes, perched atop a Cajun cream sauce, whet the appetite for specialties like coconut-pecan sautéed talapia with a mango-chipotle reduction. Large wooden beams and high ceilings create a casual feel. Dinner for two with wine,

about \$75. Dinner nightly except Sunday.

Just up the river at Brave New Restaurant, 2300 Cottdale Lane, (501) 663-2677, the menu changes frequently as the chef, Peter Brave, takes advantage of the freshest ingredients. Entrees include shrimp with Vestal tomatoes, both farm-raised in Arkansas, served with fresh basil atop angel hair pasta. The décor is earth-tone minimalist with soft lighting and there are river views. Dinner for two with wine, about \$85. Lunch and dinner weekdays, dinner Saturday.

Doe's Eat Place, 1023 West Markham Street, (501) 376-1195, popular with local legislators and corporate heavyweights, specializes in tamales and in steaks served by the pound. Ask to see the private back room where Governor Clinton used to politic over porterhouse. Dinner for two, about \$50. Doe's isn't dressy and neither is the neighborhood, but that's half the fun. Lunch and dinner weekdays, dinner Saturdays.

When in Razorback country, one must dine on some swine, like the barbecue served at the trophy-lined Whole Hog Café, 2516 Cantrell Road; (501) 664-5025. The Whole Hawg Platter includes baby back ribs, beef brisket, pulled-pork, three sides and a roll and a choice of six sauces (if you want the volcano sauce, ask for it at the counter). Dinner for two, about \$20. Lunch and dinner Monday to Saturday.

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