

Ypsilanti

NOVEMBER 30, 2007



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YPSILANTI - MODE'S GUIDE TO YPSILANTI

BY: JON ZEMKE | DATE: 8/28/2007

Elvi. It's the plural form of Elvis.

One weekend each July, downtown Ypsilanti is swarmed with Elvi from all over America. They come in all shapes, sizes and genders. There are the young versions with the slicked hair and blue suede shoes. And there are the older versions with the thick sideburns and rhinestone jumpsuits. You can't escape them. They are everywhere in Ypsilanti for the Michigan Elvisfest, the second biggest event dedicated to The King in America.

"It's Middle America writ large. Its blue collar America writ large," says Peter Rinehart, a downtown resident and business owner. "It's the kind of down-to-earth, heart-and-soul stuff that people appreciate."

"You really haven't lived until you have dealt Texas hold'em to three Elvi and they look up at you when they're not getting good cards with that Elvis look that says, 'Hey, I'm the King. You can do better than this,'" adds Megan Turf, an Ypsilanti resident who volunteers at the festival.

If one thing characterizes Ypsilanti, it's this. Forget the infamous water tower and Eastern Michigan University. Elvisfest is arguably the quintessential Ypsilanti experience. It brings out the best of the down-to-earth type of people who call Ypsi, as it's commonly known, home and shows just how much fun one can have in the small college town.

Downtown

Most tourists attending Elvisfest will probably say it's held in downtown Ypsilanti. Actually, it's in Depot Town. Although they are two distinct areas, downtown and Depot Town are not far apart physically and figuratively.

Ypsilanti's traditional downtown is on Michigan Avenue around the Huron Street intersection. Like most of Michigan's downtowns dating back to the 19th Century, it's filled with classic storefronts detailed with distinctive Victorian architecture.

What once housed the basic necessities of the retail world now mainly serves as an entertainment district filled with well-known bars, such as TC's Speakeasy and The Elbow Room. These smoky hole-in-the-wall saloons serve as the springboard for numerous local bands throughout southeastern Michigan.

"We're showing up on everybody's map, especially in the music scene," Rinehart says. "People say if it's going to happen in southeastern Michigan, it's going to happen in Ypsilanti because so many people play all of the dive bars."

Downtown definitely has that Bohemian flavor to it. Although many of the old buildings are undergoing renovations into new lofts or businesses, most of them are local. The low-rent aspect of downtown is unavoidable but so is the feeling that something good is happening there. Rinehart saw that when he and his wife moved back to Ypsilanti from Colorado five years ago to open the Bombadills Café on Michigan. Its part of a dramatic change downtown has experienced in the last few years.

"There were a lot of people we were going to Ann Arbor or Royal Oak for entertainment or just for a cup of coffee," Rinehart says. "Why not just make it accessible here?"

Depot Town

Depot Town isn't much different. The couple of blocks of downtown-style storefronts on Cross Street centered around the old train station a few blocks to the north of downtown. While downtown may be more geared toward younger clientele with dance clubs and blues bars, Depot Town is more of a haven for local residents and yuppies.

The laidback atmosphere is prevalent in places like Frenchies and the Sidetrack Bar & Grill. Pool is the game of choice at Sticks on the second floor of Aubree's.

"That has always been a vibrant place," says Rod Johnson, a retail wine salesman who lives a

few blocks away in the Historic East Side neighborhood. "That was true 23 years ago, too. All of the storefronts are filled down there."

Stewart Beal, a recent EMU graduate, sees potential in the area. The developer with Beal Group has been buying apartments in the area and plans to start restoring the Thompson Block Building in Depot Town into luxury lofts and retail space this fall.

He was the developer behind creating West Michigan Lofts in downtown a few years ago and hopes to repeat that success in Depot Town. For him it's easier to do in Ypsilanti than Ann Arbor because prices are significantly lower. Even an established place like Depot Town is still much more competitively priced than Ann Arbor's Kerry Town but offers many similar amenities.

Little Brother

It's hard to talk about Ypsilanti, which is named after Greek General Demetrius Ypsilanti, without Ann Arbor popping up in the conversation. Despite all of Ypsilanti's steps forward, it somehow seems to pale in comparison to the leaps made by Ann Arbor.

But that's selling Ypsilanti short. Ypsilanti isn't inferior by any stretch of the imagination. Ypsilanti is still uniquely Ypsilanti.

In fact, some people liken Ypsilanti to the cheap artistic haven Ann Arbor was 20 or 30 years ago.

Johnson is one of those people who found Ann Arbor too expensive and put roots down in Ypsilanti instead. He and his young family moved into a historic neighborhood filled with mature trees and Victorian homes and quickly became proud Ypsilanti residents.

"You have a chance to be part of the whole scene here," Johnson says. "In Ann Arbor, you can live there and not be part of the city. This is a vibrant city that is on the edge of some really great things."

There are already signs of organic growth in both attracting residents and growing businesses. The Clean Energy Coalition, a non-profit dedicated to promoting clean energy technologies, is based in Ypsilanti. ISSYS, which is developing fuel cell batteries, also calls Ypsilanti home. An Ypsilanti resident, Greg Napolitan, has started up a company called Bamboo Styles to design and sell environmentally-friendly bamboo clothing.

Even with these new-economy start-ups, the city's blue-collar flavor still prevails. "Ypsilanti is the most real city I have ever lived in," Rinehart says. "I have lived in Ann Arbor, Denver, Milwaukee, the whole nine yards. People come to work hard here every day."

Turf sees the same qualities. The Ann Arbor transplant bought her first home in Ypsilanti in 2002 and never looked back. She is now heavily involved in her local community organizations, such the Ypsilanti Jaycees. She loves being able to be involved with so much of the community and making it better.

"Ypsilanti is more of a hidden community," Turf says. "Until you live here and have been here you don't really know what's going on."