



Clockwise from left: Taliesin, Frank Lloyd Wright's summer home; a sign welcomes you; one of many mermaids at the House on the Rock; the house's carousel; a local farm's stand; a charming roadside marker



WRIGHT STUFF

Home to architectural wonders, Spring Green, Wisconsin, is a bucolic retreat with drama in its past and present

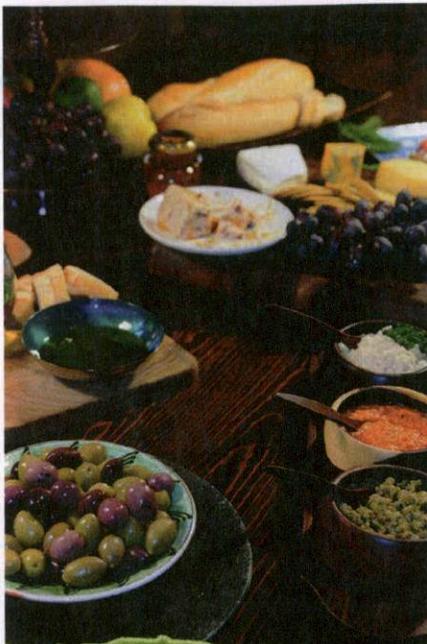
I am gawking, slack jawed, at what is surely the world's largest indoor sculpture of a whale. In the mammal's crushing maw, a life-size rowboat is in splinters as its occupant, a fisherman, stands frozen midscream. Below him, a squid larger than my four-door Honda sedan is trying to kill the whale. Or mate with it. I can't tell. This is just one of the approximately countless moments of astonishment

I have experienced since entering the House on the Rock in Spring Green, Wisconsin. The massive roadside attraction houses one man's collection of gimcracks and gewgaws from around the world, including 269 musically rotating beasts in the Carousel Room and dozens of floor-to-ceiling robotic orchestras in the Music Room, where, so the brochure informs me, tunes such as the theme from *The Godfather* and Hungarian Rhapsody play in constant rotation. One room is devoted entirely to Santa Claus.

If you want to see the House on the Rock in its entirety, you'll need about four hours and the stamina of an Olympic

power walker. I gave up at the three-and-a-half-hour mark, soon after the Infinity Room, which is a horizontal glass spire jutting over a deep ravine. Post-Infinity, I collapsed, dazed, in the faux-fifties-diner décor of the house's soda fountain/pizzeria, surrounded by busloads of field-tripping elementary schoolers. Apparently they had just come from Spring Green's other architectural wonder: Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin. "B-o-r-r-ring," said one kid of Wright's summer home. "This is way cooler." Ah, beauty. Forever in the eye of the beholder.

Spring Green is a small town west of Madison that is apparently large enough to accommodate Wright's minimalist masterpiece as well as the House on the Rock's phantasmagoric excess. Settled by European immigrants in the 1800s, Spring Green has more recently attracted an influx of actors, shopkeepers, and artisans. You can revel in the slow-food cuisine at the family-owned Spring Green General Store and



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then shop for handmade greeting cards, soap, and jewelry at the boutique next door. The town's most famous artist? That would be Wright, who lived in Spring Green off and on from 1911 to 1959. He spent much of that time designing and building—then redesigning and rebuilding Taliesin—the home and studio built into a hillside near the south side of town. Robert Campbell, the Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic, called Taliesin “the single greatest building in America.” With its sleek lines and airy, open rooms, it could also be called the Anti-House on the Rock.

Official tour guides will deny it, but according to popular local legend, Wright's masterpiece has a connection to the House on the Rock. The story goes that Alex Jordan Sr., a local architect, revered Wright and wanted to work with him; when they finally met, Wright told Jordan he wasn't fit to design a chicken coop. Miffed, Jordan selected a rocky outcropping near Taliesin and built what looks like a faux-Japanese parody of Wright's home. Jordan's son, Alex Jr., eventually took over the project, adding rooms and wings. The House on the Rock has become a tourist attraction, complete with an adjacent resort and golf course.

There are nonarchitectural reasons to visit bucolic Spring Green. One of the most consistently compelling is American Players Theatre, whose devotion to Shakespeare and the classics lures some of Chicago's best directors—among them, Kate Buckley, James Bohnen, and William Brown—to set up shop there during its season, from June through October.

Getting to the top of the hill where APT's theatres are nestled is part of the fun. Preshow picnickers—think Ravinia, minus the bone china place settings and crystal wine goblets—gather at dusk. After the show, they pack up their baskets and take a path through a forest that feels like a magical Shakespearean wood. In the gloaming, the moon has an almost alchemic effect on the area, as if Peaseblossom and his fairy friends are flitting about just beyond the fireflies.

APT has two theatres—the massive 1,148-seat outdoor amphitheatre called Up-the-Hill and the 200-seat Touchstone Theatre. For a 1,000-seat venue, Up-the-Hill is surprisingly intimate; you'll feel engulfed in the action onstage whether you sit in the first row or the last. Shows go on rain or shine. When temperatures rise above 80 degrees, the

actors pad their costumes with ice packs and the gift shop sells out its supply of paper fans. A tip for the fanless during superhot matinee performances: Bring a towel, soak it under the faucet in the restroom, and wear it on your head. It's Wisconsin. Nobody cares.



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Five different tours of **Taliesin** are offered through the Frank Lloyd Wright Visitor Center (5607 County Hwy. C; 877-588-7900, taliesinpreservation.org), ranging from a 60-minute visit to Wright's Hillside drafting studio and school (\$16) to a comprehensive four-hour exploration of the home and Unity Chapel (\$80, with tea service). The “Ultimate Experience” tour of the **House on the Rock** (5754 State Rd. 23; 800-334-5275, thehouseontherock.com) lets you see all three wings for just \$28.50 per person, including the Infinity Room (section 1) and the Heritage of the Sea Room (section 2). **American Players Theatre** (5950 Golf Course Rd.; 608-588-2361, americanplayers.org) offers some of the best theatre in the Midwest, be it under a roof or the stars.

WHERE TO STAY The **House on the Rock Resort** (400 Springs Dr.; 800-822-7774, thehouseontherock.com) has two golf courses, a white-tablecloth restaurant, and a spa on-site; weekend rates start at \$205 a night (admission to attraction included). The **House on the Rock Inn** (3591 State Rd. 23; 888-935-3960, thehouseontherock.com) is suited for families with children, offering a pool with an indoor submarine, a video game arcade, and a casual pub/restaurant; rates range from \$95 to \$195 a night. (The resort has free shuttle bus service to the American Players Theatre.) The family-owned **Usonian Inn and Gardens** (E. 5116 U.S. Hwy. 14; 877-876-6426, usonianinn.com) takes its architectural cues from Frank Lloyd Wright and its eco-friendly operating philosophy from the lush green surroundings; rates range from \$104 to \$110 a night.

WHERE TO EAT **Spring Green General Store** (137 S. Albany St.; 608-588-7070, springgreengeneralstore.com) is a brunch favorite among locals. For fine dining, the **Bank Restaurant & Wine Bar** (134 W. Jefferson St.; 608-588-7600, thebankrestaurantandwinebar.com) combines quirky design (the 1915-built neoclassical building was originally a bank) with marvelous food. ●