

Grand Rapids Historic Walking Tour

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Finalized Tour Link - <https://izi.travel/en/04e2-along-the-river-exploring-grand-rapids-michigan/en#093b9006-085a-42bb-9745-9794e8a06c58>

Introduction

Hi. Welcome to iziTRAVEL's Historic Grand Rapids Park Walking Tour, presented by ListenUp Audio. We're so glad you'll be joining us today! I'm _____ and I'll be your guide. A few notes before we get started. This tour takes approximately an hour and a half to complete. You can stop at any time and start again at the same spot later. If you'd like, you can put your phone in your pocket and just listen from here. I'll be giving you clear directions and the audio will automatically start playing when you get close to the next point of interest. If a site is closed or your path is blocked, don't worry. Just go around it. The tour will pick up at the next location. And this is important: PLEASE make sure you stay aware of your surroundings at *all* times and obey *all* traffic signals.

(pause)

Welcome to Grand Rapids, Michigan! As a city of many names, Grand Rapids is most known for its beautiful location along the banks of the Grand River, as well as its legacy as the second largest city in the state. On our historic walking tour through its downtown, we'll explore some of its most well-known landmarks, learning the rich, cultural history of this veritable, river city. Whenever you're ready to begin, please make your way to the following address: **134 Division Avenue North, Grand Rapids, MI 49503**

St. Mark's Episcopal Church

We begin our tour of Grand Rapids with a visit to St. Mark's Episcopal Church. Standing tall above Pearl Street, the twin-towered, Gothic landmark remains one of the city's crowning architectural achievements. Its roots can be traced all the way back to the 1830s, and its design is significant in that its architect had no formal training to speak of.

It is in this way that the realization of St. Mark's speaks volumes towards American ingenuity. At the time of its construction, Grand Rapids was a city of only 500 residents. Though many had gathered to form an Episcopal parish, suitable accommodations had yet to be made. Seeing the dilemma, a fellow member of the congregation stepped forth to design the cathedral you see before you today, marking the beginning of a rich legacy.

This legacy includes the growth of the church itself, as well as the impact the cathedral has had on Grand Rapids as a whole. Starting out as nothing more than a portion of a sanctuary, the original layout of St. Mark's barely included room for its organ and choir. Though neither was permanent until years later, it has since grown into one of the city's most frequented cathedrals. Of those who've attended, prominent mayors and politicians make up a large portion of the congregation. The cathedral has quickly garnered a reputation as the "Church of Mayors," and all signs point towards it growing steadily in the years to come.

Whenever you're ready to continue, please continue via the following route: Head south on Division Ave N toward Fountain St NE. Turn right onto Fountain St NW. Turn left onto Ottawa Ave NW. Turn right onto Monroe Center St NW, and the destination will be on the left.

Grand Rapids Art Museum

Having admired some of Grand Rapids' architectural history, we take some time to admire its artistic history as well. Standing here at the Grand Rapids Art Museum, we find ourselves at a place where art, design, and creativity collide. With collections ranging from Renaissance to Modern, the volume of creativity here at the museum is near endless. Affectionately dubbed "The GRAM," its exhibitions and calendar events are local favorites, with its famed GRAM Studio earning critical acclaim throughout the country.

Of its exhibitions, past favorites like *Women, Art, and Social Change* gave visitors a unique glimpse into the lives of women following the Civil War. Showcasing a quiet, but radical experiment during this time, the exhibit explored how many women of this age learned to support themselves independently, quiet training as aspiring artists and instructors. Likewise, The GRAM's current exploration of Maurice Sendak, showcase the artist's impact through his illustrations for the beloved children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*. Promising to "serve as a cultural beacon and civic anchor" to the whole of Grand Rapids, the GRAM has quickly become one of its most veritable attractions.

Whenever you're ready to continue, please continue via the following route: Head northwest on Monroe Center St NW toward Rosa Parks Circle, and the destination will be on the left.

Rosa Parks Circle

Nestled in the heart of downtown Grand Rapids, we find ourselves at beautiful Rosa Parks Circle. Formally known as Campau Square, it was later renamed in honor of Michigan resident and civil rights activist Rosa Parks. Today, the circle and its surrounding grounds act as multipurpose venue throughout the year. Regular concerts are hosted during the warmer months, while the colder months see the Circle transformed into an ice-skating rink.

Of its most star attractions, the Circle plays host to a number of special events as well. Dances are routinely put on by the Grand Rapids Original Swing Society, while the city's Grand Jazz Fest adds a new layer of fun to the mix. Just as well, concerts from the likes of local bands and traveling favorites are routinely seen in the Circle's amphitheater. Crowned by its statue commemorating Rosa Parks herself, the Circle offers one of the city's best sources of family entertainment.

Whenever you're ready to continue, please continue via the following route: Head northwest on Monroe Center St NW toward Pearl St NW

McKay Tower

Moving right along, stand now at the base of McKay Tower. Established originally as The Wonderly Building in the early 1900s, McKay Tower is officially known as one of the city's oldest and tallest buildings still standing. Rising eighteen stories into the sky, it's undergone a number of significant changes, including but limited to its name change, as well as the addition of several of its floors during the 1940s.

Though the tower is best known as one of the city's premiere landmarks, it continues to offer a number of other basic amenities as well. Retail and office space are some of its more prominent uses, though the tower offers residential opportunities on the side. Adding to this, McKay Tower is home to several social events and gatherings throughout the year. Ascending to the second floor, guests are treated to its crown jewel, a luxurious ballroom fully equipped with a commercial kitchen and lavish, beau-arts interior. As one of Grand Rapids' most elegant venues, it never ceases to amaze.

Whenever you're ready to continue, please continue via the following route: Head northwest on Monroe Center St NW toward Pearl St NW. Slight right onto Monroe Ave NW, and the destination will be on the right.

Calder Plaza

Making our way up Monroe Avenue, we take a moment to explore Calder Plaza. Named in honor of American artist Alexander Calder, the plaza is best known as the site for the artist's prolific art piece, a public sculpture entitled *La Grande Vitesse*. Standing 43 feet tall, the sculpture towers above the hard pavement, painted vividly in the artist's signature red color.

Likewise, its name translates to mean "The Great Swiftness," otherwise known as "Grand Rapids" to those fluent in the French language. In addition, the sculpture received a fair share of controversy at the time of its inception. Some residents found the sculpture "useless," while others simply felt it was an eyesore. Many took their complaints directly to the mayor's pulpit, while others chose to voice their distaste via songs and cartoons.

Despite this controversy, the sculpture continues to be a favorite amongst tourists. Thousands flock to the plaza each year to see what all the fuss is about, and reactions vary equally across the board. Though it remains only one of the city's many art installations, it continues to inspire, adding its own special flair to the great, river city.

Whenever you're ready to continue, please continue via the following route: Head south on Monroe Ave NW toward Van Andel Arena-DeVos Place Skywalk.

Amway Grand Plaza

Not too far from one of Grand Rapids' must-see sculptures, we find ourselves at one of its must-see hotels. Established in the early 1900s, this modernized version of a much older hotel offers one of the best night's stays in all of Grand Rapids.

Resting comfortably on the riverfront with quick access to the Pearl Street Bridge and beyond, the Amway showcases the best of Old World glamour and modernized luxury. Its signature lobby features three breathtaking, Austrian Crystal chandeliers flown directly from Czechoslovakia, while its domed ceiling hosts the largest gold leaf installation in the United States.

As the venue of choice for countless weddings, social gatherings and receptions, the hotel continues to enchant residents and visitors alike with a variety of special accommodations. Its 24-hour dining service has earned critical acclaim, while its “anything is possible” attitude towards customer service is unparalleled in the city. As one of Grand Rapids most veritable getaways, guests rarely if ever leave unsatisfied.

Whenever you’re ready to continue, please continue via the following route: Head south on Monroe Ave NW toward Pearl St NW. Turn right onto Pearl St NW.

Pearl Street Bridge

Having taken some time to enjoy a touch of Grand Rapids’ luxury, we take another moment to reflect on some of its architectural prowess. Here at the Pearl Street Bridge, we’re given a real glimpse into the city’s riverside history, with front row seats to one of its earliest architectural achievements.

Having been established as early as the late 1850s, the original Pearl Street Bridge was one of the most labor-intensive projects ever conceived in the developing city. Completed at a cost of \$16,000, it remains something of an anomaly in the annals of history.

To start with, history shows that its construction was far from the realms of cost effective. Measured by today’s market, the bridge provides a keen example of just how different things were in the early days of Grand Rapids, most especially with regards to public projects. Secondly, its design has undergone severe alterations over the years, leading to a complete transformation from one type of bridge to another. Though it began as an arch-bridge, renovations and restorations to its exterior have given the expanse a significant facelift. Adorned with plaques on its northern guardrails to commemorate its architects, the Pearl Street Bridge marks one of the oldest landmarks still standing in the river city.

Whenever you’re ready to continue, please continue via the following route, bearing in mind we won’t be crossing the river until the next destination: Head west on Pearl St NW. Turn right toward Gillett Bridge. Turn left at Lyon St NW. Turn left onto Gillett Bridge.

Gillet Bridge

Hailed as one of Grand Rapids' most unique and beautiful river crossings, The Gillet Bridge marks the next destination on our tour. As the connection between DeVos Place and the upcoming Gerald R. Ford Museum, its roots can be traced all the way back to early 1900s. During this time, the expanse served as a railroad bridge for the Michigan Railway system, carrying its Holland and Kalamazoo cars to the newly built Union Interurban Depot. When a civic auditorium was built upon the site of the Interurban Depot in later years, the bridge was transformed into the pedestrian walkway you see before you today.

Having been featured prominently locally as well as on national television, the Gillet Bridge is best known for its role in two major events. Firstly, it served as a crossing for the funeral of former president Gerald R. Ford. Secondly, the bridge is used extensively during Grand Rapids' annual ArtPrize Festival, a special event hosted to celebrate the meaning of art and why it matters. Offering breathtaking views of the river and the city beyond, it remains a local favorite year-round.

Whenever you're ready to continue, please continue via the following route: Go ahead and cross the river here, heading west along Gillett Bridge. Our next destination will be on the left.

Gerald R. Ford Museum

Having admired the view from Gillet Bridge, we take a moment to explore the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum. Officially opened in the early 1980s, the museum hosts a wide variety of literary and personal artifacts associated with the 38th President of the United States.

Split into several floors, its main floor honors President Ford's life and career. Candid photographs of the president speaking to members of his family and fellow colleagues are displayed prominently. Likewise, a full-sized replica of the Oval Office sits furnished as it was during his term, giving visitors a unique glimpse into what the famous room would have looked like all those years ago.

Adding to this, special exhibitions showcase Ford's diplomacy contributions, allowing visitors to travel alongside him and his Secretary of State to global hotspots. Exhibitions such as this are compounded by a replica of Ford's Cabinet Room, the room where many of his most important presidential decisions were brought up, discussed, and ultimately enacted. With additional artifacts

ranging from Boy Scout materials, to gifts given to the President during State Dinners, the museum marks one of the most education experiences on our tour.

Whenever you're ready to continue, please continue via the following route: Head south. Keep right to continue towards Pearl St. NW. Turn right onto Pearl St. NW. You should find yourself right at the entrance to the Grand Rapids Public Museum, standing in front of the large, cast-iron bell out front.

The Fire Bell

Mounted on a brick pedestal in front of the Grand Rapids Public Museum, we take a closer look at the city's Memorial Fire Bell. Dating back to the city's first fire department in the late 1870s, the bell serves as a reminder of the sacrifice and honorable spirit of all firefighters who've served and continue to serve the Grand Rapids community.

Adorned with a commemorative plaque at its base, the bell was originally cast by the Meneely Bell Foundry of West Troy, New York. It first hung in a wooden tower at the southeast corner of Pearl and Ottawa Streets, just behind the home of the founder of Grand Rapids' furniture industry. In the late 1880s, the bell was then moved to the clock tower of the newly built City Hall, where it tolled the hour for the next 81 years.

As the City Hall was demolished years later in the name of urban renewal, firefighters of Grand Rapids Local 366 purchased the bell and placed it at the new City Hall soon after. Interestingly enough, few people at the new City Hall seemed to know what the bell was, with many assuming it was simply a replica of the Liberty Bell. Today, it rests comfortably here at the entrance to the Grand Rapids Public Museum, acting as its own exhibit and artifact to the city's storied past.

Whenever you're ready to continue, please continue via the following route: As our next destination is the Grand Public Arts Museum, you have already arrived at the next stop on our tour.

Grand Rapids Public Museum

Inviting us to always “be curious,” our exploration of the Grand Rapids Public Museum yields some fascinating discoveries as well. Established in the mid-1850s, the museum not only has the luxury of being one of the city’s oldest buildings, but also one of the oldest history museums in the United States. Built to always be “a living monument to artifacts, ideas, and stories,” it continues to inspire and celebrate Grand Rapids’ history through a wide variety of collections and exhibitions.

Of these exhibitions and collections, a great deal have become national and local favorites. Like nearby Rosa Parks Circle, the *Rosa Parks* exhibit here at the museum told the story of the courageous civil rights activist, showcasing the legend behind her stalwart refusal to “move to the back of the bus” during times of racial inequality. Likewise, the museum’s *American Spirits* exhibit explored the nation’s storied history with prohibition and bootlegging, chronicling the battle between those who wanted a “dry” America, and those who wanted to keep it “wet” with liquor.

Even still, exciting new exhibitions promise to continue the museum’s legacy. *Robot Zoo* offers a fascinating glimpse into nature’s mysteries as told through robotics. Likewise, the museum’s Spillman carousel continues to offer fun and excitement to children of all ages, calling back to the 1920s when it too was another “new” attraction. Promising to enrich the community of Grand Rapids in the years to come, the Grand Rapids Public Museum marks one of the city’s most unique experiences.

Whenever you’re ready to continue, please continue via the following route: Head east on Pearl St NW. Turn right toward Blue Bridge/Blue Footbridge, and take the stairs. Turn left toward Blue Bridge/Blue Footbridge. Turn right toward Blue Bridge/Blue Footbridge. Turn left onto Blue Bridge/Blue Footbridge.

Blue Bridge

Vividly painted in its signature blue color, Grand Rapids’ Blue Bridge is easily one of the most recognizable landmarks of the great, river city. Spanning just shy of 600 feet, it’s also one of the longest truss bridges in the state of Michigan. Having been built as early as the late-1860s, Blue Bridge was originally constructed as a river crossing for the Grand Rapids & Indiana Railroad. Trains crossing the bridge traveled to and from Muskegon and Mackinaw City, carrying much of the timber, steel, and industrial supplies that helped shape the state of Michigan into what it is today.

As the years passed and the city changed, Blue Bridge too underwent its own transformation, ultimately becoming another pedestrian walkway over the river. It now marks one of the premiere bridges also used during the city's annual ArtsPrize Festival, simultaneously known for its incredible view of Grand Rapids' yearly 4th of July fireworks. Providing an excellent example of how these kinds of bridges can be transformed rather than discarded, it speaks volumes towards Grand Rapids' legacy as a city of ingenuity.

Whenever you're ready to continue, please continue via the following route, bearing in mind we're looking for the large, blue art sculpture in front of the Marriot: Head east on Blue Bridge/Blue Footbridge. Sharp right toward Louis St NW. Take the stairs. Sharp right onto Louis St NW, and the destination will be on the right.

Steel Water

As one of many U.S. cities with economies tied to water, Grand Rapids has seen its fair share of public interest projects. Commemorating the city's place in history as the first to fluoridate its public water supply, we come now to one of the city's most unique art installations. Titled *Steel Water*, it stands at an impressive thirty-three feet high, honoring the boldness of this move and its subsequent benefits.

As history would show, these benefits would come to be linked directly to the dental health of Grand Rapids' rapidly growing population. Among the equally growing list of day-to-day problems for Grand Rapids' citizens, tooth decay was quickly reaching disproportionate levels. Sensing the fluoridation of its water supply could halt these problems and more, the decision was made in the mid-1940s, much to the satisfaction of future dentists. Other cities quickly followed suit, and a legacy was born. Today, the sculpture reminds us not only of the beauty of creativity, but also the beauty of a clean smile.

Whenever you're ready to continue, please continue via the following route: Head east on Louis St NW toward Campau Ave NW. Continue onto Campau Promenade. Turn right onto Monroe Ave NW. Turn left onto Louis St NW. Turn left onto Fulton St W. Make a U-turn at E Park Pl NE, and the destination will be on the right.

Grand Rapids Civic Theatre Block

Finishing up our historic tour of Grand Rapids, we come now to one of its larger cultural blocks, home to the Grand Rapids Civic

Theater, the Children's Museum, and nearby Veterans Memorial and Monument Parks. Established in the earliest days of the city, this cultural block has quickly become a favorite amongst tourists and residents, offering a wide variety of cultural and reflective experiences.

Starting with its two resident parks, Veterans Memorial and Monument Park commemorate the sacrifices of veterans from the Civil War through the Korean War. Adorned with decorative monuments, these two parks offer deep reflection into the men and women who shaped the nation's military during those tumultuous years. Large, stone pillars at Veterans Memorial Park honor the contributions of soldiers during WWI, WWII, Vietnam, and Korea.

Likewise, history shows that the large, granite structure at the center of Monument Park was the first of its kind to honor the military contributions of men and women during the Civil War. Dedicated at the war's end, it was also the first to feature a fountain, leading many cities to adopt similar designs in the years to come.

Outside of these reflective experiences, the nearby Children's Museum offers creative and educational fun for all the city's children. Exhibits are changed monthly to offer a constant source of mystery and excitement, with past favorites including the museum's *Imagination Playground*, *Bubbles* exhibit, and *Just Playing Around* musical adventure.

Just across the way, the historic Grand Rapids Civic Theatre offers its own share of creative experiences. As one of the block's oldest institutions, it remains one of the largest community theatres in the United States as well. Its renditions of stories from *The Great Gatsby* and *Sleepy Hollow* have earned the theatre critical acclaim, while future productions promise to provide an even more dazzling experience.

This concludes our historic walking tour of Grand Rapids, Michigan. We hope you've enjoyed yourself, and should you wish to journey back to where we started, please make your way back towards St. Mark's Episcopal Church via the following route: Head west on Fulton St E toward Sheldon Blvd SE. Turn right onto Division Ave N, and the destination will be on your right.