

Cleveland, Ohio

What used to be: Cleveland grew up in a powerful location: on Lake Erie, at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River, with access to canals, railroads, shipping, coal, iron ore, and factories. That geography helped make it one of America's great industrial cities. Steel, oil refining, shipping, manufacturing, railroads, and banking all helped build the Cleveland that still shows up in its grand old buildings, bridges, churches, warehouses, and civic monuments.

It was also a city of immigrants and neighborhoods. People came from countries all over Europe, and many other places, and those communities shaped Cleveland's churches, food, labor history, politics, and cultural life. That is part of why Cleveland has such a strong neighborhood identity even today.

What it Lost: Like many older industrial cities, Cleveland struggled badly in the late 20th century. Manufacturing declined, population dropped, wealth moved outward, and some neighborhoods were hit hard by disinvestment. The city became one of the symbols of the Rust Belt — sometimes unfairly reduced to jokes about decline, even though the story was always more complicated.

Today, Cleveland is a city with layers: industrial grit, immigrant history, cultural institutions, excellent medical centers, sports loyalty, lakefront beauty, and some very visible scars. It has world-class assets, including the Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland Orchestra, Cleveland Clinic, Lake Erie, and, of course, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame! The Cleveland Metroparks system is also a major strength, giving the region its "Emerald Necklace" of parks and trails.

Downtown Cleveland, where we stayed, is the city's historic business and civic core. Its Public Square goes back to the original 1796 town plan by Moses Cleaveland, and the downtown area still has the feeling of an older American city that once expected to be much bigger and grander.

That explains why the downtown felt both impressive and unimpressive. We saw magnificent buildings — The Arcade, Terminal Tower, old banks, theaters, civic buildings, and handsome commercial blocks — but we also noticed vacant storefronts, quiet sidewalks, and buildings waiting for a new purpose. Downtown Cleveland, like many downtowns, has been affected by the decline of traditional retail, the shift to online shopping, the rise of suburban office parks, and, more recently, remote and hybrid work.

But downtown is not simply emptying out... it is also being remade. That explains why some buildings look tired or vacant, while others are clearly in a second life. Downtown Cleveland Alliance reports about 21,000 downtown residents, 86% rental occupancy, and 888 housing units added in 2025. A recent report also described Cleveland as a leader in converting older office buildings and department stores into apartments, with about 30 conversions since 2013 and a downtown population increase since 2019.

Our hotel, the Hyatt Regency in The Arcade, is a perfect example — a grand 1890 shopping arcade reborn as a hotel. Cleveland is full of buildings like that: too beautiful to lose, too large to use in the old way, and now waiting for creative reuse.

The city is also trying to rethink its lakefront. Cleveland's current waterfront planning includes ideas for more green space, housing, transportation connections, and mixed-use development along the lake. That matters because, for a city on Lake Erie, downtown Cleveland has historically felt oddly separated from the water by highways, rail lines, and stadium infrastructure... which we experienced firsthand when we tried, unsuccessfully, to walk to the lake!

Downtown Cleveland feels unfinished in the most interesting way. It is not a polished tourist stage set. It is a real city, still negotiating with its past, still trying to reconnect with its lakefront, still figuring out how to turn old grandeur into new life. That made it more compelling, not less.