

Minor Pleasures

For a record number of Americans, it's a whole new ballgame. As minor-league parks go upscale, Conor Dougherty finds luxury skyboxes, wine gardens, hot tubs... and even some baseball.

By CONOR DOUGHERTY

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Baseball season is under way, but it's been a while since there's been a major trade. Unless, of course, you count a little-noticed deal that sent Robert Spence from the St. Louis Cardinals down to the Memphis Redbirds.

Mr. Spence doesn't consider his move from the big leagues a demotion. He's an attorney from Memphis, Tenn., who decided to forgo his family's 300-mile annual pilgrimage to see the Cardinals, because he can watch a local farm team from the \$38,000-a-year luxury skybox he booked this season. "It's all here in our backyard," he says.

This summer, more Americans are saying, "Take me out to the ballgame." But not that ballgame. Far from the showboating millionaire players and \$8 beers of Major League Baseball, fans are heading in record numbers to the country's other pro ballparks.

These are hardly the rickety stadiums of old: Even at the humblest levels of the sport, minor-league teams are offering up an entertainment free-for-all with wine gardens, hot tubs with prime outfield views, climbing walls for the kids – oh, and a few guys playing baseball in the middle of it all.

So is it time to hit the minors? To get a sense of parks that mix bush-league charm with big-league sheen, Weekend Journal took a 10-city baseball road trip from Pawtucket, R.I., to Sacramento, Calif. We checked out bathrooms and beer prices, and ate our way through pulled-pork nachos in Memphis and deep-fried asparagus in Stockton, Calif.

We found everything from skyboxes with Web hookups (in Dayton, Ohio) to parks that woo fans with goofy promotions like Dr. Seuss Night (announcers speak in rhyme, and players wear striped socks).

These parks tend to draw families and casual fans turned off by big-league stadiums, where corporate groups often lock up the best seats years in advance and season tickets can cost as much as \$10,000 for a pair. Last summer, minor-league parks hosted 39.9 million fans – up 6% since 2000, according to the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues.

By comparison, about 73 million people went to see Major League Baseball games last year, up less than 1% since 2000. This year, eight new stadiums opened for minor-league teams, the most

in three years.

Fancy parks are sprouting up at all levels of the minor leagues, from Triple-A, where players are one step away from the majors, down to Single-A, where fans stand a good chance of seeing a ground ball dribble between the legs of a 19-year-old infielder.

This year in Texas, the Double-A Corpus Christi Hooks moved into Whataburger Field, a new complex with a separate field for little-leaguers, a climbing wall for kids and a swimming pool behind the right-field wall (two home-run balls have already plopped into the pool). In Greensboro, N.C., the Single-A Grasshoppers just got a stadium with a fancy brick facade and a party deck for private functions. (Price of a party for 60? \$1,650 with burgers and fries, beer not included.)

Teams are focusing on amenities not only because they're profitable, but also because they're one of the few things they can control. According to pro baseball's century-old farm system, each Major League club has roughly a half-dozen affiliated minor-league teams throughout the U.S. and Canada.

The big-league club pays

all the salaries and determines where players will report for duty. That means owners of a minor-league affiliate may boast a big talent one week – and lose him the next week to the team up the line.

Fans of teams like the Dayton Dragons have plenty to take their mind off baseball. The Dragons' five-year-old park has 30 luxury boxes (fans there get free massages on Fridays and Saturdays), a new dessert bar with \$4 funnel cakes and a guy in tights who roams the stadium roof, dropping "softy" baseballs on the crowd (he's called "Roof Man").

The front office says it has a 5,000-person waiting list for the park's 7,230 seats. And the team? It's in dead last place. Says fan Jeff Stern, a 47-year-old information-technology manager who goes to about four games a year: "They could be playing croquet and we'd still be here."

But some fans just want to see the game. Mike Eady watches about 25 Sacramento River Cats games a season and can rattle off the names of the latest pitchers to filter in and out of the team's roster. But the Sacramento real-estate appraiser says he's likely to get a beer or hit the

restroom to avoid watching promotions such as the "Hot Dog Cannon" routine, where stadium employees shoot foil-wrapped franks into the crowd. "It's like, 'Cut it out, it's not a three-ring circus,'" Mr. Eady says.

Here are highlights from minor-league stadiums across the country:

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■ **Dayton Dragons,**
Fifth Third Field, Dayton,
Ohio

BIG-LEAGUE TOUCH:

Skyboxes with leather couches

BUSH-LEAGUE TOUCH:

Park employees dress as big dots, race around outfield

INSIDE BASEBALL:

You can still buy tickets to sit on the parks grassy berm or watch games free from the sidewalk behind right field.

The new owners have brought entertainment scripts right out of Vegas: The team has four mascots (one between-inning routine involves a dragon in drag seducing an umpire), the seven-story scoreboard plays clips from "Charlie's Angels 2," and on Fridays and Saturdays luxury-suite customers get complimentary massages. Other fan favorites? On-field toddler races, and a senior-citizen act that stands on top of the dugout and performs '70's songs. (They're called the Retirement Village People.)

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■ **Kane County Cougars,**
Philip B. Elfstrom Stadium,
Geneva, Ill.

BIG-LEAGUE TOUCH: Hot-tub seating, \$175 for eight

BUSH-LEAGUE TOUCH:

Between-inning race run by

staffers carrying cutout horse heads

INSIDE BASEBALL: A few seasons ago, the team fielded shortstop Rex Rundgren, son of singer Todd Rundgren. There was Thom Curtis of Plainfield, Ill., a staff sergeant on medical leave from Iraq, who threw out the game's first pitch, a fastball down the middle. ("Don't kill my catcher," said a team official, who presented Mr. Curtis the ball, which bore a Caribou Coffee logo on one side.) Over in the Kidzone, Greg and Niki Watchinski watched two of their three kids play on a "Mini Moonwalk." Over the outfield fence from right field, Jason Smith of Elgin, Ill., was wearing nothing but flowered swim trunks as he and his fiancée watched the game from the stadium hot tub. And then there was Rick McAdams, a 59-year-old from Palatine, Ill., who has been to 150 baseball games a year since he was laid off three years ago, and keeps returning to the minors because he can get to know coaches, scouts and managers. "I gotta go back to work one of these days," he says.

For the Watchinski family of Aurora, Ill., there's no contest between this and the crush of a big-league park. "I don't think there'd be a place for a stroller and blanket at a major-league stadium," says Niki Watchinski.

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■ **Memphis Redbirds,**
AutoZone Park, Memphis,
Tenn.

BIG-LEAGUE TOUCH:

\$7 beers

BUSH-LEAGUE TOUCH:

No ballpark parking lot
INSIDE BASEBALL: All team profits go to a foundation that funds youth baseball and other programs.

The Memphis Redbirds, the Triple-A affiliate of the St. Louis Cardinals, play in the minors' most expensive stadium — a \$72 million park with two levels of executive suites (starting at \$38,000 a year), a batting cage, a 24-foot-high climbing wall and a boardwalk for kids that includes a "Birdbath" watergun race. For all of this, fans pay the price: A 32-oz. beer here costs \$7, just two bucks less than the same beer at the Cardinals' Busch Stadium.

Still, fans were forgiving: The Redbirds are owned by a nonprofit foundation that funds local kids' programs. The idea was hatched by Storage USA founder Dean Jernigan and his wife, Kristi, who bought the team for \$7.5 million, then donated it and helped plan the stadium, which opened in 2000 as the centerpiece to Memphis's downtown revitalization.

In fact, the city's bar-filled core, just a few blocks away, may be the biggest distraction. Richard Collie paid a \$5 admission and sat at a picnic table beyond the outfield, but he and his wife stayed just a few innings before heading over to hear some blues just a couple blocks over. "I get the cheapest tickets they have, have a beer, then walk down to Beale Street and hit a few clubs," says the visiting insurance agent from Hot Springs, Ark.

■ **Pawtucket Red Sox,**
McCoy Stadium, Pawtucket,
R.I.

BIG-LEAGUE TOUCH:

On the field, nothing but baseball

BUSH-LEAGUE TOUCH:

Luxury suites under the stands

INSIDE BASEBALL:

Baseball's longest recorded game took place here 33 innings in 1981 featuring future stars Wade Boggs and Cal Ripken.

Even as other minor-league teams move into new stadiums with luxury boxes and more on-field entertainment, this affiliate of the Boston Red Sox hews to tradition. "The field is sacred," says team spokesman Bill Wanless. That means no mascot races between innings, and scoreboards that show statistics and highlights, not animated three-card monte. The "luxury suites" that were added as part of a \$16 million facelift in 1999 are on the ground level.

And while the Pawtucket Red Sox play 45 miles south of Fenway Park, you'd think you were in Boston. Fans in Boston shirts and hats typically outnumber those in PawSox gear, and they can watch updates from live Red Sox games on a big monitor behind right field. Still, George Arguin, a print-shop owner from Mattapoisett, Mass., likes watching young players here, before they get their multimillion-dollar contracts. "This is a purer form of the sport," he says. "You don't see that at Fenway."

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■ **Sacramento River Cats,** Raley Field, Sacramento, Calif.

BIG-LEAGUE TOUCH:

When the New Orleans Zephyrs come to town, fans in the best seats get gumbo

BUSH-LEAGUE TOUCH:

National anthem played by grade-schoolers with violins

INSIDE BASEBALL:

This team is affiliated with the Oakland A's, whose Moneyball strategy values

players who take lots of walks. Translation: Expect longer games. (Only a few minutes longer, the team says.)

The River Cats bring a big-league spin to the farm: With more than 750,000 fans attending last year, it was the minor leagues' top draw – packing its 14,600-capacity stadium and outdrawing the struggling major-league Montreal Expos club. The organization targets fans at all

levels, from the businesses that rent luxury suites for as much as \$55,000 a year down to the salmon-taco-eating families in the \$5 seats.

“Our audience is people who eat,” says Alan Ledford, the River Cats president. “That is, everybody.”

Raley Field has plenty of touches you're less likely to find in the bigs, like the musical number we caught during our visit – the Star-

Spangled Banner played by the varsity violin class from Sierra Christian Academy. Says Tim Daniel, a software executive from St. Louis, who caught the anthem during his business trip to Sacramento: “You don't see that at Yankee Stadium.”

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