

Oak Leaves

Oak Park tour company offers trips around Chicago area and beyond

BY MEREDITH MORRIS | Contributor February 14, 2013 5:04PM



City Ventures, based in Oak Park, does cultural day trips around Chicago as well as out-of-town trips, such as this excursion to Nashville, Tenn. City Ventures owner Pam Risher is at far right. | Provided

Updated: February 14, 2013 5:04PM

OAK PARK — Making what's familiar new again - and again and again - is a passion for Pamela Risher, owner and operator of City Ventures Tours.

Based in Oak Park, City Ventures specializes in high-quality, culture-oriented tours. That means developing both day trips and overnight adventures for local people exploring in and beyond Chicago, as well as tour services for visiting groups that want to see the local sights.

"We try to find things that are vibrant, unusual and different," Risher said, with an emphasis on architecture, museums, gardens and Chicago's ethnic enclaves. "People will say 'Oak Park; I've been to Oak Park.' We tell them, we will take you in a new way and you will see new things," Risher said.

Risher, a former teacher and 30-year village veteran, launched City Ventures with a colleague 15 years ago when she was home with young children. Inspiration came from her mother-in-law.

"I love culture and I love going to exhibits," she said, explaining that she would frequently visit her mother-in-law in the New Jersey suburbs of New York and want to attend a city museum. Her mother-in-law wasn't comfortable going to New York City spontaneously, however. She preferred going with a local motor coach company's day tours.

Conjecturing that the Chicago area had plenty of suburban residents who felt the same way, Risher created City Ventures. Her partner, Marilyn Cantisano, retired several years ago, leaving Risher solo.

Mildred Erhardt of River Forest has traveled with City Ventures on day trips -- such as a tour of celebrity chef Rick Bayless' organic garden -- and longer tours, to places including Minneapolis-St. Paul.

"Pam is very detail-oriented. She does a historic background about everything and makes it so exciting. Her passion carries over," Erhardt said. "Your days are full. She tries to fit the day around a central theme and if she has time left, she'll fit in something else. I've lived in the Chicago area my whole life and she's introduced me to things I've never seen."

Part of the pleasure of being an independent agent, Risher said, is that she can tailor even her established tours to accommodate certain groups' interests. Once the itinerary is set, she said, she sticks to it; but it is flexible up to that point.

Risher is also open to suggestions from tourists. One participant, for instance, expressed interest in seeing the Field Museum's recent Maharaja exhibit. Risher ran with the concept and shaped a day that also included an Indian meal and Devon Street tour.

"You cannot work in a vacuum," Risher said. "I love the learning, the experiences and the people. I love the research. It exposes me to things that are unfamiliar, and that energizes me."

Visiting tour groups are another important segment of City Ventures' business, including groups from a residential design firm in Saskatchewan, Canada, that come in pursuit of Prairie School architecture, and others from sources such as Bradley University and the Oak Park and Chicago convention and tourism bureaus.

As for the tours themselves, Risher's most popular include an overnight trip to Door County and ethnic-themed Chicago day trips, such as Deutschland Chicago, French Connection and jaunts to Chinatown and Irish, Polish, Swedish and other neighborhoods.

Her own favorite is the City Ventures tour to Pittsburgh and Falling Water, she said. Upcoming tours include a 5-day motor coach trip to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas, in honor of her company's crystal anniversary, Risher said. That trip, April 16-20, will also include the Clinton Presidential Museum and Library and other stops.

A March 13 day trip into the city will explore Irish heritage in Chicago. And in May, Risher will host a 40-person group from Canada, visiting Oak Park for the Wright Plus walking tour.

Tour prices run about \$85 for an all-inclusive day trip (about 25-30 options per year), with discounts available for groups. For more information, visit CityVenturesTours.com.

<http://oakpark.suntimes.com/business/18164093-420/oak-park-tour-company-offers-trips-around-chicago-area-and-beyond.html>