



A retired middle school English teacher, Joan Park began volunteering for Explore St. Louis last summer, joining four of her girlfriends at the Forest Park Visitor Center.

“They raved about the amazing city tours that they got to join, which first piqued my interest,” Joan explains. “I grew up in southern Indiana, and I didn’t branch out much when I was teaching in St. Louis, so the tours are wonderful for me. I’m blown away by everything that the region has to offer, and I’m glad I can convey that to visitors.”

Exploring the vibrant art galleries at 21c Museum Hotel St. Louis, learning about the architectural history of downtown St. Louis and discovering Pillars of the Valley and its connection to Mill Creek Valley have been some of her favorite experiences so far.

“Now that I’m retired, I do more things around St. Louis – for example, I love hiking at Shaw Nature Reserve,” Joan says, “but I hadn’t spent much time in Forest Park until I started volunteering there. It’s a local treasure, and I love witnessing people’s amazement when I talk to them about it. I also want to give a shout-out to Roger, the park ranger who’s always ready and willing to help me.”

Joan doesn’t simply hike at Shaw Nature Reserve – which, by the way, is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year! As a Missouri master naturalist, she frequently walks a one-mile route that traverses all the nature reserve’s ecosystems, documenting how many butterflies she sees along the way for the Missouri Butterfly Monitoring Program. When St. Louis gets snow, she also goes cross-country skiing across the nature reserve’s 2,400 acres.

Joan takes her adventurous spirit on vacation with her, too. “Wildlife is my passion,” she says. “Last year, I volunteered at the Wildlife Rescue Center [in Ballwin, Missouri] and this year, I’m

hoping to see my favorite animal, the grizzly bear, on a Road Scholar trip to Vancouver Island and the Great Bear Rainforest.

“Road Scholar tours are great because they’re active *and* they educate you at night,” she continues. “I did a tour of Yellowstone in the snow, and our lessons revolved around the reintroduction of wolves. I also kayaked the lower Columbia River, where we took a deep dive into the Lewis and Clark expedition.”

On other trips, Joan traveled 650 miles down the Amazon River, hiked 120 miles of the Tour du Mont Blanc and spent time at the historic Murie Ranch in Grand Teton National Park. She’s been to Costa Rica twice, Alaska and the Canadian Rockies, and she’s gone scuba diving at multiple sites off the coast of Central America. The list of epic experiences goes on and on – and you’ll want to listen to her stories for hours!

“My last year at the University of Evansville, I studied abroad at Harlaxton Manor in England,” she says. “We hitchhiked all over the country, and when the semester was over, we used our Eurail passes to travel across Europe. Until then, the farthest I had ever gone was Canada, and suddenly, I was doing all this amazing stuff. It gave me confidence to continue adventuring throughout my life.”

Back home in St. Louis, Joan spends time in her native plant garden, enjoys her season tickets to The Fabulous Fox and savors a variety of cuisines at local, immigrant-owned restaurants.

“Sports, arts, nature – St. Louis has it all,” she says. “There are so many attractions for kids, and there’s always a new restaurant to try. Volunteering for Explore St. Louis has made me more aware of what an incredible destination St. Louis is.”