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WHAT THE HELL TO DO IN IOWA
BY ANDREAS HAFFAR

You find yourself smack dab in the middle of the United States, feeling deprived of fun and exciting things to do or see. We’re here to help by presenting a handful of ideas to save you from your enervating boredom.

THE GROTTO OF THE REDEMPTION
WHERE: West Bend (about 2h northwest of Ames)
This majestic and extravagant piece of art by Father Paul Matthias Dobberstein is the world’s largest, and quite possibly the most beautiful, man-made grotto in the world — and it’s right here in Iowa. Dobberstein, a deeply religious man from Germany, fell ill with pneumonia in the late 1800s and he pledged to construct a shrine if the Virgin Mary saved him. Whether it be divine intervention or a stroke of good luck, Dobberstein survived his sick spell, came to America, became a priest and spent 14 years collecting rocks for his masterpiece. He worked thoroughly and tirelessly to fulfill his promise until his death in 1954, after which many others would continue his work. The grandiose monument, sometimes referred to as the “Eighth Wonder of the World,” consists of nine other smaller grottos, each with several precious stones, multi-colored minerals and crystals and rare gems placed into the walls. The shrine is open for exhibit 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and even holds daily mass. You can also enjoy the Grotto Museum, the Grotto Restaurant and the Grotto’s campgrounds. This is truly a landmark of hard work and dedication.

THE IOWA 80 TRUCKSTOP
WHERE: Walcott (2h 40 min. southwest of Ames)
You simply can’t just take a quick bathroom break here. With 220 acres of land and serving more than 5,000 customers a day, the Iowa 80 Truckstop is the world’s largest truck stop — and it’s not your average truck stop either. It was founded by Bill Moon in 1964, even before Interstate 80 was finished, and hasn’t looked back since. Located off Interstate-80 Exit 284, this tourist attraction gives a whole different meaning to the concept of a “service station.” In addition to the fast-food options such as Wendy’s, Orange Julius, Taco Bell and Blimpie (oh yes, that’s still around) there’s a barbershop, a dentist, a chiropractor, a 60-seat movie theater, a workout room, laundry and shower facilities, a Verizon store kiosk, a custom embroidery and vinyl shop, and the Super Truck Showroom. In 2008, the Iowa 80 Museum, a lifelong dream of Moon’s, opened with truck displays and vehicular memorabilia, available by appointment. Every year in July, they also host the Walcott Trucker’s Jamboree celebrating American truckers, with last event’s attendance reaching 44,000. It’s the one-stop gas station, museum and shop that you just have to see for yourself.

ESCAPE CHAMBERS
WHERE: Des Moines (45 min. south of Ames)
It’s just like a movie — you find yourself locked in a room with a few other people. There are clues and hints on how to get out but only after you solve the riddles and puzzles. You can’t compete against each other, you have to work together. Your palms, sweaty. Your knees, weak. Your arms, heavy. The intensity, high. It’s a beat-the-clock adrenaline rush, with many different scenarios, demanding extreme mental focus and clever problem-solving abilities, all with one goal: to break out of the chamber. The catch is you and your team only have an hour to do so or else — you die. Not really, though. It is, however, a great way to bond with coworkers and have fun with family and friends. They have many perplexing puzzles and it costs $30 per person, with all prices based on a total group amount. As they mention on their website, some Escape Chamber scenarios have “fear factor” elements as well. Like what, you may ask? Be brave, be bold and go find out for yourself.