

November 26, 2006 : 36 Hours

Philadelphia

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PAY your respects to the Liberty Bell if you must, but linger too long on Independence Mall and history fatigue sets in. As the birthplace of the nation, [Philadelphia](#) can seem far less entertaining than educational. But look past all that and you will find a younger, more vibrant city emerging — perhaps exemplified by the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#)'s decision to hire the architect [Frank Gehry](#) to design an addition and a renovation. Just around the corner from Betsy Ross's house, a boutique for custom-made bags posts this sign: "Betsy did flags, we do handbags." Bars and clubs hold knitting nights, letting patrons drink margaritas and drop stitches. Add an infusion of ethnic and regional cuisine, a strong arts and music scene, and still-affordable prices, and you begin to understand why tourism is up in the City of Brotherly Love.

Friday

2 p.m.

1) GETTING TO THE CHEESESTEAKS

O.K., O.K., two in the afternoon is a bit early to arrive in any city on a Friday, but the cheesesteaks at John's Roast Pork (14 East Snyder Avenue, 215-463-1951), which closes at 3 o'clock sharp, are worth it. John's was called one of "America's Classics" by the James Beard Foundation last May. The 76-year-old luncheonette makes each cheesesteak to order, folding in the cheese and onions as the rib eye spits and sizzles on the grill (\$6.25). Vonda Bucci, the owner, sits with her regulars outdoors, reminding everyone to eat up before closing time.

4 p.m.

2) UTOPIAN VISION

Duck around the tourists (who don't know better) and dart into the Curtis Center (601 Walnut Street). Just inside the stately lobby, behold "Dream Garden," Maxfield Parrish's 1916 vision of utopia rendered with 100,000 bits of exquisite Tiffany glass. The 49-foot-long mosaic energized the city's preservation movement in the late 1990s when the casino owner [Stephen A. Wynn](#) tried to buy it for his Bellagio Hotel in [Las Vegas](#). A local foundation paid \$3.5 million to keep it in Philadelphia. Consider yourself the beneficiary.

8 p.m.

3) FOR THE VEGANS

Meat overload from lunch? Try the all-vegan dishes at one of the city's best new restaurants, Horizons (611 South Seventh Street, 215-923-6117; on the Web at www.horizonsphiladelphia.com). With folk art on the walls, the dining room evokes a night out in the tropics as ceiling fans whirl. The food is no less sunny. Jamaican barbecued seitan (textured wheat gluten) is savory enough to pass for beef (\$8). Follow that with Korean glazed tofu steak and edamame-spiked mashed potatoes (\$18). For dessert, cheesecake ice cream (from soy milk) floats in a pool of crushed blueberries (\$5). Sorry, there is no faux cheesesteak.

10:30 p.m.

4) WHERE NIGHT OWLS GATHER

Sate your late-night cravings with a stroll around the corner to South Street, a pulsating, slightly seedy strip of bars, nightclubs and tattoo parlors. Yes, all the neon signs are touristy, and the frat-boy culture continually spills onto the sidewalk. But for sheer kinetic energy, there is nothing else like it in the city.

Saturday

10 a.m.

5) THE FIRST BOTANICAL GARDEN

Philadelphia's other famous garden is one that might have inspired Maxfield Parrish. Hop onto a city trolley for the 15-minute ride to Bartram's Garden (54th Street and Lindbergh Boulevard, 215-729-5281; www.bartramsgarden.org) along the banks of the Schuylkill River in southwest Philadelphia. It was there, in 1728, that the naturalist John Bartram planted what has become the nation's oldest living botanical garden. Look for his best-known discovery, a flowering tree called *Franklinia alatamaha* in honor of his friend Ben Franklin. The bedrock where Mr. Bartram once pressed apple cider makes for a nice spot to rest. Admission to the grounds is free; house tours cost \$5 for adults.

Noon

6) CHEESE WITHOUT THE STEAK

Stand in line at the panini counter at Di Bruno Brothers (1730 Chestnut Street, 215-665-9220, www.dibruno.com), a mainstay of the Italian Market since 1939 that expanded last year with this luxe food emporium in Center City. Choose from among 500 specialty cheeses, like Epoisses, a creamy French, and rochetta, a soft Italian, kept in a cheese cave as big as a studio apartment. For a taste of Old [Italy](#), go with the prosciutto-stuffed "Mamma Mia."

2 p.m.

7) CUSTOM-MADE HANDBAGS

In the tradition of Betsy Ross, the staff at Viv Pickle (21 North Third Street, 215-922-5904; www.vivpickle.com) will sew almost any handbag you design. Pick the shape, style and fabric (from 150 patterns), then fork over your credit card. Your made-in-Philly souvenir will be shipped home in six weeks. Handbags start at around \$35. Not the bag type? This block of upscale shops also caters to the home chef at Gourmet of Olde City (26 North Third Street, 215-627-8890), the anachronistic scribe at the Papery (57 North Third Street, 215-922-1500) and the pampered pooch at Bonejour (14 North Third Street, 215-574-1225).

4 p.m.

8) ALONG THE WATERFRONT

If all warships look the same to you (gray, barnacled, somewhat forbidding), step aboard the U.S.S. Olympia, an 1892 relic from the Spanish-American War that is the oldest steel warship afloat (Penn's Landing, 215-413-8655). The Victorian-era officers' quarters are finished in polished chestnut. Then amble along the city's working waterfront to the Great Plaza at Penn's Landing (Columbus Boulevard at Chestnut Street), where Philadelphians gather for festivals and jazz concerts and, always, for people-watching. And don't forget the fireworks on New Year's Eve.

7 p.m.

9) TOMORROW'S STARS

Don't be fooled by the coffeehouse vibe at **World Cafe Live** (3025 Walnut Street, 215-222-1400; www.worldcafelive.com). This club near the University of Pennsylvania, which opened in 2004, has become a showcase for top indie artists like Antigone Rising, the guitarist Johnny A, and a reggae-and-folk group with a social conscience, Sierra Leone's Refugee All-Stars. Feel free to stage-hop between the concert space downstairs and a more casual upstairs stage that features local and regional talent.

10 p.m.

10) DANCING AND DRINKING

A once-seedy intersection at 13th and Sansom Streets has been reborn as the city's latest hot spot for night life. The 1225 Raw Sushi and Sake Lounge (1225 Sansom Street, 215-238-1903; www.rawlounge.net) serves 50 sakes, including Tousetsuka, which means "winter snow flower" in Japanese, and is fermented in snow-covered vats. The lounge sits in a factory that once made Stetson hats, and the tables are pushed back for late-night dancing on weekends. The Vintage wine bar (129 South 13th Street, 215-922-3095) draws more of a neighborhood crowd with its collection of more than 60 wines by the glass, including a South African malbec and a Burgundy called Hautes Côtes de Nuits, and 25 specialty beers, including Westmalle Triple, a Belgian ale, and Sagres, a Portuguese lager. Lest you fear that you've had too much to drink, that is a chandelier of empty wine bottles overhead. A dollop of peach sorbet, cut with Southern Comfort, at the artisan gelato maker Capogiro (119 South 13th Street, 215-351-0900) guarantees sweet dreams.

Sunday

9 a.m.

11) PURE COFFEE

La Colombe Torrefaction (130 South 19th Street, 215-563-0860; www.lacolombe.com) pours only unflavored house blends into single-size mugs. No soy, no chai, no excuses — and, for that matter, no menu. “We keep it simple, it’s about the coffee,” the barista said. And, oh, what coffee it is. The rich, mellow brew makes for a heady cup of espresso (\$1.75). Be sure to arrive early for the almond croissants (\$2.50) and other fresh-baked pastries.

10 a.m.

12) GREAT CATS AND AERIAL VIEWS

You must forgive the new superstars of the Philadelphia Zoo (3400 West Girard Avenue, 215-243-1100; www.philadelphiazoo.org) for not getting up to greet you, but there have just been so many people visiting lately. A new \$20 million exhibit, “Big Cat Falls,” puts you eye to eye with lions, pumas, tigers and, even snow leopards. For a different view of the city, the Zoo Balloon rises 400 feet into the air on tethered lines, weather permitting — hey, is that [New Jersey](#) over there? (Admission is \$12.95 for adults and for children 2 to 11; children under 2 are free. Balloon tickets are sold separately, \$10 on weekends, \$5 weekdays.)

VISITOR INFORMATION

[Philadelphia](#) is easily reached by car, taking about two hours from [New York City](#) and less than three hours from Washington. Amtrak also has frequent service between Penn Station in [Manhattan](#) and 30th Street Station in Philadelphia. Philadelphia International Airport is served by most major airlines. If you stay downtown, you won’t need a rental car.

Club Quarters (1628 Chestnut Street, 215-282-5000; www.clubquarters.info) is a modern, private hotel for business travelers with reasonable rates for downtown Philadelphia. Nonmembers can make reservations for weekends only through Internet booking services like www.hotels.com; from \$80.

The Loews Philadelphia Hotel (1200 Market Street, 215-627-1200; www.loewshotels.com/hotels/philadelphia) is a sleek, renovated bank building that is a National Historic Landmark. Many of the 582 rooms offer panoramic views of the city, and its central location across from the Philadelphia Convention Center and Reading Terminal Market makes it within walking distance of historic sites. Rates vary from \$169 to \$249.

For those who want to splurge, the Rittenhouse Hotel (210 West Rittenhouse Square, 215-546-9000; www.rittenhousehotel.com) overlooks one of the city’s loveliest public

squares. The hotel has 98 spacious rooms, and its French restaurant, Lacroix at the Rittenhouse, is considered one of the city's best. Weekend rates for a standard room start at \$260, and suites between \$580 and \$2,500.