

May 20, 2007

36 Hours in Baltimore

By DAVID G. ALLAN

BALTIMORE is sometimes the forgotten middle child among attention-getting Eastern cities like [Washington](#) and New York. But a civic revival, which began with the harbor's makeover 27 years ago, has given out-of-towners reason to visit. Yes, there are wonderful seafood restaurants, Colonial history, quaint waterfronts and other tourist-ready attractions. But [Baltimore's](#) renaissance has also cultivated cool restaurants with innovative cuisine, independent theaters that showcase emerging talent and galleries that specialize in contemporary art. In other words, Baltimore is all grown up, but it's still a big city with a small-town feel.

Friday

4 p.m.

1) YOUR SEA LEGS

Get your bearings at the city's center, the Inner Harbor, and stroll along the edge of what was, 50 years ago, a working commercial port. Belying that workaday tradition is Harborplace & the Gallery, a pair of waterside malls that are good for little more than souvenirs and paddleboats in the shape of Chessie, the Chesapeake Bay's version of the Loch Ness monster. There's no avoiding the touristy kitsch, but authentic maritime history can be found in the well-maintained sloop-of-war [Constellation](#) (410-539-1797, www.constellation.org), the last all-sail ship built by the Navy and a veteran of the Civil War. For \$8.75, you can explore the ship's sleeping quarters, galley and cannons. Before the war, the Constellation patrolled the waters off West Africa to block slave traders.

7 p.m.

2) WILL WORK FOR FOOD

Maryland blue crab is what's for dinner. Put down some butcher-block paper, grab a mallet and start whacking away at a steaming pile of spice-smeared crustaceans. The rite of passage is not complete, of course, without cold beer. Discerning locals go to [Obrycki's](#) (1727 East Pratt Street, 410-732-6399; www.obryckis.com), known for a homemade peppery crab spice that, pardon the blasphemy, rivals Old Bay. The faux-fancy décor (stenciled brick walls and fake windows) is not why you came. It's the freshness of the crabs (\$43 for a dozen mediums), in an establishment that commendably shuts down for the winter when the local catch is lean.

9 p.m.

3) CRAWL, DO NOT RUN

For live [music](#), go bar hopping along cobblestoned Thames Street (pronounced thaymes) in the Fells Point

section. A recent Friday night uncovered a cache of performances: acoustic guitar at the rustic waterside Admiral's Cup (No. 1647; 410-522-6731); soul tunes at the dive bar Leadbetter's Tavern (No. 1639; 410-675-4794; www.leadbetterstavern.com); and a band that plays Rusted Root covers at the [Horse You Came In On](#) (No. 1626; 410-327-8111), a raucous saloon in a cavernous space with antique lamps and a well-dinged bar that has a fine selection of microbrews.

Saturday

10 a.m.

4) ROCK 'N' CINNAMON ROLLS

The [Blue Moon Cafe](#) (1621 Aliceanna Street, 410-522-3940) in Fells Point is busy, so you may have to share a table with cheerful regulars. This popular breakfast joint, with exposed brick, pressed-tin walls and rock music (Talking Heads, Stevie Nicks), serves large, satisfying portions (takeout boxes are common). Favorites include the gooey cinnamon rolls (\$3.50), crab Benedict (\$14.95), and specials like stacks of caramel-drizzled banana-bread pancakes with whipped cream (\$7.95). The exceedingly friendly servers won't let you see the bottom of your mug, refilling it with an organic blend from the local Bluebird coffee company.

11:30 a.m.

5) CITY ON A HILL

For a historic view of the city, climb up Charles Street to the old neighborhood of Mount Vernon. You'll find manicured lawns, hear young violinists practicing inside the Peabody Conservatory (1 East Mount Vernon Place; 410-659-8100; www.peabody.jhu.edu) and see an early [memorial to George Washington](#) (\$2 to climb the 228 steps to the top), predating its better-known cousin 40 miles south. Mount Vernon is also home to the recently renovated [Walters Art Museum](#) (600 North Charles Street, 410-547-9000; www.thewalters.org), which has an eclectic collection that includes Fabergé eggs that Czar Nicholas II gave to his mother and his wife. At 1 p.m., take the scheduled tour of the newly restored [Basilica of the Assumption](#) (408 North Charles Street, 410-727-3565; www.baltimorebasilica.org), the first cathedral built in the [United States](#).

2:30 p.m.

6) DOWN UNDER, THE SEA

Stop by Attman's (1019 East Lombard Street, 410-563-2666; www.attmansdeli.com), one of the last delis standing on what is known as Corned Beef Row, for a corned beef sandwich (\$5.99) before heading over to the [National Aquarium](#) (501 East Pratt Street, 410-576-3800; www.aqua.org). Yes, the aquarium has ball-tossing dolphins and busloads of children, but it also has a diverse collection that includes sharks and a giant Pacific octopus. A new Animal Planet exhibition recreates a river gorge in [Australia's](#) red-rock Northern Territory, with 120 indigenous species, including crocodiles, snake-necked turtles and gray-headed flying fox (fruit bats). Time your visit for the 2:30 feeding at the 260,000-gallon stingray tank, or the 3:30 feeding at the reef tank.

5 p.m.

7) LE-NORE! LE-NORE!

Baltimore's darker side has a long history. [Edgar Allan Poe](#), who lived on and off in the city, died in Baltimore in 1849 of mysterious causes. Visit his [grave at the Westminster Hall burial ground](#) (519 West Fayette Street, 410-706-2072; www.westminsterhall.org). Actually, there are two sites: one, topped by a stone raven, marks the original spot; the other, a larger monument donated by Baltimore schoolchildren in the late 1800s, marks where Poe and his wife, Virginia, are now buried. The city's National Football League team, the Ravens, which plays at M & T Bank Stadium, just might be the only football team whose name was inspired by a poem.

6:30 p.m.

8) KABULI COOKING

Had your fill of crabs? Make preheater reservations for the [Helmand](#) (806 North Charles Street, 410-752-0311; www.helmand.com), an Afghan cafe that draws a well-dressed clientele and regularly makes the local best-of lists in multiple categories. It's surprising that this place has been in business 18 years because the dining room, hung with Afghan textiles, has all the buzz of a new hot spot. The prices are reasonable, the service is fast and helpful, and the food is inventive while consistently good. Start with the kaddo borawni (baked baby pumpkin drizzled with garlicky yogurt for \$4.50) followed by an entree of aushak (leek-filled Afghan ravioli for \$11.50) served with pallow (cinnamon-spiced rice). For dessert, don't miss the cardamom-flecked ice cream (\$5.25).

8 p.m.

9) TRIPLE PLAY

Alternative arts in Baltimore — a tradition that includes the filmmaker John Waters and the musician David Byrne — is alive and well. You can check out promising young playwrights and revivals of old favorites at the intimate CenterStage (700 North Calvert Street, 410-332-0033; www.centerstage.org). Or head to the strikingly modern Meyerhoff Symphony Hall (1212 Cathedral Street, 410-783-8000; www.baltimoresymphony.org), where in addition to traditional classical fare like “Peter and the Wolf,” the current season includes a tribute to Cole Porter. Or, if you prefer indie cinema, head to the 68-year-old [Charles Theater](#) (1711 North Charles Street, 410-727-3456; www.thecharles.com), a Beaux-Arts landmark.

10 p.m.

10) BEER AND A CHASER

The city's night life has outgrown its working-class, corner-bar roots. In its place are stylish new places like the art- and hops-friendly [Brewer's Art](#) (1106 North Charles Street, 410-547-6925; www.thebrewersart.com). The Belgian-inspired microbrews include the divine Resurrection brown ale (\$4). For cocktails, head around the corner to the high ceilings and stained-glass windows of the [Owl Bar](#) at the Belvedere Hotel (1 East Chase Street, 410-347-0888; www.theowlbar.com). A young, stylish crowd can be found mingling along the mahogany bar.

Sunday

11 a.m.

11) OH, SAY CAN YOU SEE?

Take a water taxi from Fells Point to the [Fort McHenry National Monument](#) (2400 East Fort Avenue, 410-962-4290; www.nps.gov/fomc), which is situated on a green peninsular park. The story of the writing of the national anthem is the subject of a 15-minute video that's either quaintly educational or unintentionally funny, depending on your sensibility. As told by the pipe-smoking actor in early-19th-century garb, Francis Scott Key wrote a poem called "The Star Spangled Banner" after he watched the bombardment of Fort McHenry by the British during the War of 1812 and the flag was there still. Perhaps you'll be inspired to hum the anthem as you take the 15-minute water taxi back (410-563-3901, www.thewatertaxi.com; \$8).

2 p.m.

12) MARKET SPECIALS

The fruit and vegetable stalls of [Cross Street Market](#) (1065 South Charles Street) are shut on Sundays, but [Nick's](#) (410-685-2020), a jovial assortment of fresh seafood bars, keeps the 1846 market buzzing. Locals are drawn to its thick crab cake sandwiches (\$13.95), heaps of freshly shucked raw oysters (\$7 a half dozen) and Old Bay-topped mussels (\$6.95 a pound). Come to think of it, you can't get food like this in Washington or New York.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Many major airlines serve Baltimore-Washington International Airport. Flights from Kennedy Airport in New York start at about \$225 on Delta. The MARC train (www.mtmaryland.com/services) is about a 20-minute ride (\$4) from the airport to Pennsylvania Station on North Charles Street, which is a stop on several Amtrak routes. The city has bus, subway and light-rail service.

The [Inn at Henderson's Wharf](#) (1000 Fell Street, 800-522-2088; www.hendersonswharf.com) is in an old tobacco factory. Rooms come with a leather-topped desk, a bottle of wine and a choice of views. A two-night stay is required on most weekends; starting at \$179 a night.

The [Admiral Fell Inn](#) in Fells Point (888 South Broadway, 410-522-7377; www.harbormagic.com) dates from the 1770s and is inhabited by actors who play ghosts. Rates start at \$209.

The [Hyatt Regency](#) near HarborPlace (300 Light Street, 410-528-1234; www.baltimore.hyatt.com) was renovated last year with flat-screen TVs and an outdoor pool. Ask for rooms above the sixth floor for views of the water. Weekend rates start at \$245.

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