



AMERICA'S BIRTHPLACE,
REBORN

Philadelphia may be one of America's most historic destinations but that doesn't mean it dwells in the past. Erstwhile resident Laurel Munshower shops, sips and dines her way through a city pulsing with a revolution of renewal

Photo: PHILCB/Paul Gotthard

“PHILADELPHIA SEEMS SET TO
RISE FROM THE SHADOWS CAST
BY NEIGHBOURS NEW YORK
CITY AND WASHINGTON, D.C.”



Walking into Goorin Bros. hat shop is akin to stepping back in time, with its old-fashioned space filled with hats fit for the most dapper gentlemen and classic ladies

Shopping bags in tow, I am tripping the light fantastic down Philadelphia's Walnut Street, and like Scarlett O'Hara with a new bonnet on her head, I've nary a meaningful thought found in my bonce. Little coincidence, as I too am flaunting a fine new be-feathered *chapeau* procured from a nearby millinery I'd just discovered while shopping, sipping and dining my way through a town I once called home. The City of Brotherly Love (from the Greek *phileo*, "to love", and *adelphos*, "brotherly") has been changing for some time, but perhaps never so much as recently, and seven years after my departure I have returned to explore its latest incarnation.

Bursting with cool Panama hats, glam wide brims and a bar of feathery accoutrements for personalised touches, the hat shop Goorin Bros. (1427 Walnut St.; +1 215 665 1895; www.goorin.com) is the first of Philadelphia's many new delights and surprising changes that I encounter, but it's far from the last. Walnut Street's bougie Rittenhouse Row (www.rittenhouserow.com) is lined with fabulous shopping with everything from Stuart Weitzman (1711 Walnut St.; +1 215 640 0400; www.stuartweitzman.com) to Barneys New York (1811 Walnut St.; +1 215 563 5333; www.barneys.com) among the recent high-fashion openings. For those who take shopping to a level that's bordering on competitive, Philadelphia's less-crowded pavements and more relaxed shopping philosophy mean that you can take your time finding the season's hottest items – like the impossibly cute fringed gladiator sandals that I lovingly clutched at Stuart Weitzman, which, according to the sales rep, flew off the shelves weeks ago at New York's Madison Avenue location.



The Robert Indiana sculpture that gives Love Park its name is one of the city's most iconic sights

South Broad Street, also known as "The Avenue of the Arts" due to its performing arts venues, leads to City Hall

Visitors gather in front of Independence Hall (previous page), where the Declaration of Independence was adopted and the Constitution was drafted

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Bordered by the Delaware River on the east, the city's historic and older neighbourhoods, clad in 18th-century brickwork, hug the shore

The Philadelphia Museum of Art (bottom) exhibits more than 227,000 works of art, while its grand staircase has its own place in cinematic history, in *Rocky*

“AS FAR AS URBAN SPOTS GO, IT’S A PICTURESQUE

ONE, WITH SKYSCRAPERS TOWERING ABOVE”



While the sparkling new shops catch the eye, the chi-chi old guard hold their ground. Previously situated on Walnut Street, trendy Knit Wit (1729 Chestnut St.; +1 215 564 4760; www.knitwitonline.com) and Joan Shepp (1811 Chestnut St.; +1 215 735 2666; www.joanshepp.com) continue to thrive at their new locations, a mere two blocks away on Chestnut Street, which is becoming a welcoming haven for independent boutiques. A revered haunt for Philadelphia's hippest fashion set, Joan Shepp lays out a veritable smorgasbord of cutting-edge designers. Hot-off-the-runway looks by Ann Demeulemeester, Junya Watanabe and Maison Margiela are displayed over two levels of neatly arranged racks attended by stylists with a keen eye for the achingly cool.

After my I'm-not-here-to-buy-anything browse results in the acquisition of a new Jean Paul Gaultier dress, I venture on to the east end of town. Shopping isn't limited to the Rittenhouse neighbourhood – Old City's low-rise-lined and leafy streets feature shopfronts filled with urban, funky goods, like Third Street Habit (153 North 3rd St.; +1 215 925 5455; www.thirdstreethabit.com), where I snap up a boho-chic bracelet by Los Angeles-based jewellery designer Chan Luu. And on Market Street east of City Hall – previously inhabited by stretch of pawn shops – change is in the wind, with a new luxury development slated to host upscale shopping

and residences upon completion, while the oft-overlooked Gallery mall is getting an estimated US \$325-million facelift with slick glass storefronts, digital signage, clean white interiors and more than a hundred new restaurants and higher-end shops.

Despite the city's plentiful shopping, don't make the mistake of thinking that Philly is only good for splashing cash on designer purchases. You can also burn through it quaffing Veuve Cliquot at Rouge (205 South 18th St.; +1 215 732 6622; www.rouge98.com), cosied in one of the plush banquettes or outside on the bistro's sidewalk seating overlooking one of the city's loveliest and most popular urban green spaces, Rittenhouse Square. Since opening in 1998, Rouge has been Philadelphia's see-and-be-seen destination – and its award-winning burger dripping with gruyère makes a nice alternative to the city's famed, but greasy, Philadelphia cheesesteak served “Whiz wit” – that is, with the locally preferred “processed cheese sauce” Cheez Whiz topping.

As for the city's park-and-restaurant scene, it's changing, too. Once a tundra of cement at the base of City Hall that proved a tempting draw for the city's skateboarders, Dilworth Park (www.ccdparks.org/dilworth-park), along with adjacent Love Park, were so prominent in the skater scene that they were featured in one of pro-skateboarder Tony Hawk's video games. Today, the swarms of

skateboarders have been shooed away to make way for a \$55-million renovation and community space, where locals congregate to watch movies in the evening on a green lawn, let their kids scamper through a dancing water feature, learn to skate on an ice rink in the winter and eat Cuban fare at Rosa Blanca Café (Dilworth Park; +1 215 587 2761; www.garcesgroup.com). With a casual menu by chef Jose Garces – who also created Philly's acclaimed Amada, Tinto and Volvêr, to name a few – the glass-walled café includes house-made pastries, empanadas, sandwiches and coffees, all with that trademark Cubano flavour kick. It's a draw for socialising too, coordinating with the park on regular activities that include cocktail evenings and live music events (Stevie Wonder played to a weekday afternoon crowd of several thousand lunching business people in August). As far as urban spots go, it's a picturesque one, with skyscrapers towering above while set against the backdrop of City Hall's fine Second French Empire architecture, which is topped by a statue of Pennsylvania state founder William Penn. (Fun fact: A long-standing gentleman's agreement that stated no building in the city would rise above the Penn statue was broken in 1987 with skyscraper One Liberty Place, awakening “the Curse of Billy Penn” – the alleged cause of the following decades-long poor performance of the city's sports teams.)

Dilworth Park's extensive renovation includes a playful water feature and a Cuban café by one of the city's top chefs (below)





In Old City, Elferth's Alley (above) is the oldest continually resided-on residential street in America

High Street on Market (below) has an artisanal bakery that turns out inventive pastries (right), like the red-eye danish in the lower right of the photo



Chances are, if you're in Philly and have even a passing interest in history, you're not there to track down the dubious root of the Eagles' failures on the football field, but maybe to dig into the story of America's birth, which happened right here in the country's one-time capital. But first: breakfast. In Old City, a few minutes' walk from heaps of American history, High Street on Market (308 Market St.; +1 215 625 0988; www.highstreetonmarket.com) provides the fuel for a historic walking tour in the form of a hearty breakfast sandwich with pastrami, spiced hash potatoes and roasted peppers, and a so-nice-I-have-it-twice red-eye danish with coffee gravy, smoked ham and gruyère from their artisanal bakery. Hoping to work off at least one of the danishes, I stroll over to the National Constitution Center to set off on a Constitutional Walking Tour (+1 215 525 1776; www.theconstitutional.com).

As we explore some 20 sites in Independence National Historic Park and the Old City neighbourhood, my guide shares the lowdown on their place in history: We pass by Independence Hall, which hosted the rebellious signatories of the Declaration of Independence; the Liberty Bell and its famous crack, a mar often incorrectly attributed to frenzied ringing on July 4, 1776, a date on which it likely didn't ring at all; and Franklin

Court, an excavation site where a modern "ghost structure" indicates where Benjamin Franklin's home once stood tall. As a former resident of not just Philadelphia but the historic Old City neighbourhood, I wish the details would reach a bit deeper, but my Redcoat travel companion thoroughly enjoys the well-rounded introduction to the city's historic tales, citizens and architecture.



Hotel Monaco's guest rooms show off bold design aspects and wide views over Independence National Historic Park

See an expansive collection of modern art complemented by wrought-iron *objets d'art* (below) in the Barnes Foundation

A man of international popularity and endless innovation, Ben Franklin's ghost isn't limited to Old City, but can be found all over Philadelphia – such as the tree- and culture-lined Benjamin Franklin Parkway, designed in the early 1900s to emulate Paris's Champs-Élysées. It's here that museums and science institutions can be found – not to mention the infamous "Rocky steps" that busloads of tourists attempt to sprint up each day, Rocky Balboa-in-training style, largely ignoring the impressive Philadelphia Museum of Art situated at the top of the cinematic staircase.

This parkway is also where the Barnes Foundation (2025 Benjamin Franklin Pkwy.; +1 215 278 7200; www.barnesfoundation.org) relocated a few years ago, moving from the suburbs to the city centre. An enormous private collection of post-impressionist and early modernist paintings – think van Gogh, Cézanne and Seurat in spades – it's difficult not to be left in awe. However, letting one of the Foundation's docents lead you on a tour is likely to help turn what is already an interesting museum into a truly fascinating one. With an education in art history gone long rusty, I would have looked at walls bursting with paintings and dotted with iron décor as a beauteous jumble – whereas docent Anne points out the meticulous manner in which the wrought-iron *objets d'art* have been very specifically arranged to either mirror the paintings' compositions or draw the eye around each gallery wall, exposing details and spacial elements in the artworks that may be otherwise overlooked. It's the definition of "tour de force".

With so much to offer, Philadelphia appears set to rise from the shadows cast by neighbours New York City and Washington, D.C. Statistics show that international visitors are booking lengthier stays and spending more money in recent years. Even

Qatar Airways jumped on the American bandwagon in 2014 to become the sole GCC-based airline to offer a direct route to PHL International. I look forward to seeing what new delights the city will have to surprise its increasingly enamoured visitors with in the future.

My final Philadelphia morning dawns gloomy and wet. As my partner-in-travel crossed the Delaware River for a military-history fix at Battleship New Jersey, I squeeze in a last-minute shopping fix at Barneys, where I had earlier spied a pair of gloriously wide-legged jeans that had since been dancing around in my head like visions of sugarplums. A necessary purchase, I told myself, as just days earlier I had misplaced my comfortable plane-journey trousers. Later, as I curled up in my seat in the aircraft and gazed out at the shrinking city as we flew up, up and away, I knew I wouldn't let another seven years pass before my inevitable return. ✂

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