

From tall ships to steamed crab, hot jazz and secret tunnels, Judith Ritter finds plenty to do in this east coast city



PERFECT 10

Baltimore

1 Inner Harbour

Baltimore's Inner Harbour, slightly bigger than Hong Kong's, has a rich history. In the earliest days of colonial America it was the site of battles against the British and an important port for shipping tobacco. Today, the harbour, filled with heritage vessels of all descriptions, is a scenic magnet for tourists. Its centrepiece is the historic tall ship the USS Constellation. Launched in 1854 and used off the coast of Africa to intercept slave traders, the beautifully restored ship is now open to visitors. Flags flutter on the soaring masts and at noon each day the crew, dressed in crisp 19th-century uniforms, fire the old cannons. Standing on the oak-plank deck looking out over the harbour, it's hard not to imagine life as a sailor two centuries ago.

2 Black history tour

Baltimore has a vibrant African-American population and a profound black history. The city was home to abolitionist Frederick Douglass, an important member of the anti-slavery organisation the Underground Railroad, and the birthplace of jazz singer Billie Holiday. The best way to enjoy the past and present of Baltimore's black community is to take a tour with Tom Saunders (www.renaissanceproductions.com), who visits landmarks such as the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum (1601 East North Avenue; www.ngbiwm.com), with its renditions of jazz greats and heroes of the civil rights movement, and an 18th-century church with a secret tunnel that was part of escaped slaves' route to freedom. Saunders also knows all the best little jazz joints, such as the cosy and

Baltimore's Inner Harbour turns it on for tourists (above) and there's shopping aplenty in the city's funky boutiques (right). PHOTO: DEBORAH RITTER



atmospheric New Haven Lounge (1552 Havenwood Road) and soul-food eateries such as New Duffy's Restaurant and Lounge (3436 Frederick Avenue).

3 Water taxi

There are many ways to get around Baltimore, but the most novel and amusing is by way of the little blue and white water taxis (www.thewatertaxi.com) that zip commuters across the Inner Harbour to any number of Baltimore's sites. Cammie Kane, who owns the 13 boats with names such as Indefatigable and Intrepid, loves the harbour and its history and so do her captains, who have lots of sea stories to share with passengers. The boats stop at 14 landings, including an old fortress, Fort McHenry; Little Italy, home to many of Baltimore's Italian restaurants; and historic Fells Point.

4 Fells Point

This area was once a rough-and-tumble shipbuilding neighbourhood. Now narrow cobblestoned streets lead from the waterfront to small shops, restaurants and bars. Once an area where sailmakers plied their trade and ladies of the night hawked their wares to sailors from around the world, today it's all sophistication. There's still just a taste of rugged sailor life to be found in the convivial spirit of pubs such as the Cat's Eye (1730 Thames Street; www.catseyepub.com). But if you really want to feel like a sailor, haul anchor for Baltimore Tattoo Museum (and tattoo parlour) at 534 Eastern Avenue to be inked, sailor style. If gritty isn't your cup of tea, how about Greek-chic?

Black Olive Restaurant (www.theblackolive.com), in a restored 18th-century building, puts a Greek spin on Baltimore's favourite seafood. The fare is all fresh, mostly organic and the closest thing to Greece you can find on the US eastern seaboard.

5 Quirky collections

The American Visionary Art Museum's collection includes 5,000 works by America's self-taught artists and everyday geniuses. The artists are farmers, postmen, housewives and plain folk struck by a vision so powerful they just had to create. Old machinery parts, buttons, paper plates and other art supplies widely available were used to fashion their masterpieces. From Linda St John's pipe-cleaner dolls, each dressed in tiny handmade outfits, to Wayne Kusy's near-five-metre replica of the liner the Lusitania, built with 200,000 toothpicks, the exhibits are wacky and stunning (www.avam.org).

6 Crabshacks

Baltimore's signature food is most certainly crab. There are dozens of restaurants that specialise in it, from the expensive to the scruffy. Baltimoreans are passionate about crab-picking, as eating crab is called. The most authentic version is steamed crab, and one of the best places to enjoy it and mix with locals is at Captain James Landing (2127 Boston Street; www.captainjameslanding.com). The restaurant is shaped like an ocean liner, but for real bliss sit outside by the water at a wooden picnic table covered with coarse brown paper. Owner and crab expert George Tserkis

dumps a mallet, a roll of paper towels and a couple of dozen steamed crabs in front of you with the warning that "when you eat crabs it's gonna be messy!" He's true to his word; Tserkis provides bibs and lessons in the art of crab cracking.

7 Cross Street Market

Baltimore has several public markets, but if shopping and eating locally is a goal, 19th-century Cross Street Market is the spot. Day and early evening the market is packed with residents shopping for meat, vegetables and fresh flowers at the farmers' stands. At noon, locals belly up to the old marble counter at Nick's Fish Market for fresh oysters, spicy boiled shrimp or crabcakes, and later catch a quick cappuccino and canoli at Baltimore's best Italian bakery, Piedigrotta's (www.piedigrottakbakey.com).

8 Cone collection

Baltimore sisters Etta and Claribel Cone were prim, proper, rich and wildly eccentric. And thanks to the avant-garde art shopping spree the siblings undertook in early 20th-century Paris, the Baltimore Museum of Art (10 Art Museum Drive; www.artbma.org) has the largest collection of works by Henri Matisse in the US and one of the country's best collections of Impressionist paintings and sculpture. The sisters, who were on first-name terms with the likes of Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Paul Cezanne, filled their 19-room Baltimore apartment with thousands of pieces that, on their deaths, were donated to the museum.

9 Hotels with a harbour view

Baltimore's Inner Harbour is the centrepiece of the city, so why not go for a room with a harbour view at the InterContinental Harbor Court Baltimore (550 Light Street; www.harborcourt.com), or the

Hyatt Regency (300 Light Street; www.baltimore.hyatt.com). The European-style InterContinental has four-poster beds, brass chandeliers and lush green marble bathrooms. It also has, according to one Condé Nast survey, one of the two best restaurants in the US: the classy, pricy and elegant Hampton. The Hyatt Regency, within walking distance of downtown and blessed with a rooftop swimming pool, is home to Pisces, an upmarket seafood spot said to have the best view and the best chocolate martini in the city.

10 Hip Hampden

The Hampden neighbourhood is Baltimore's latest hipster area. The main thoroughfare, the Avenue, is a six-block stretch of West 36th Street lined with old, pastel, two-storey houses, each home to a boutique or restaurant. Shop for retro-chic shoes as well as expensive chocolate at Ma Petit Shoe, or browse Milagro's mélange of splashily colourful bags and bangles. And be sure to stop for an old-fashioned ice cream soda at the Soda Fountain (behind Hometown Girl and Company, 1001 West 36th Street). The Soda Fountain has been dispensing sweet treats since 1910.



BIG DEAL

Peter Walbrook

A two-night stay in Siem Reap and one night in Phnom Penh, with round-trip flights on Siem Reap Airways, is available from HK\$2,490, twin-share, at Westminster Travel. Accommodation at this price is at the Lotus Angkor (www.lotusangkor.com) and the Phnom Penh Hotel

(www.phnompenhhotel.com), but other options are available, including Raffles Grand Hotel D'Angkor and Raffles Hotel Royal (both www.raffles.com) for HK\$4,290 per person. These prices are valid for travel up to December 20, with a HK\$550 surcharge during Christmas week. For details and reservations contact Westminster Travel on 2313 9800, or e-mail itravel@hkwtl.com, quoting reference number 4999. tchecks@gmail.com



Among the jazz hot spots is the New Haven Lounge (above). PHOTO: KEITH COVINGTON