

Oh, brother

There's plenty to love in Philadelphia, finds David Whitley

Of the big US cities, there's a strong argument for Philadelphia being the most inexplicably underrated. Often reduced to a short stop between New York and Washington DC, or sacrificed altogether, the City of Brotherly Love has an astonishingly strong barrage of attractions that would make it the number-one destination anywhere else in the world.

It's also a place with a high degree of character and soul. Hop between restaurants, craft beer bars and distilleries along East Passyunk Avenue, and you're likely to end up in deep conversation with whoever is sitting on the bar stool next to you.

► SELL: ART OF THE MATTER

Philadelphia's strong suits are history and art, and it is not shy of playing on them. It's the birthplace of the United States, and for anyone with even the slightest interest in the country's heritage, the Independence National Historical Park is going to grip for hours. The highlight is Independence Hall, where both the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution were debated, drafted and signed. Decor and furniture are either original or kept as close to period as possible, and the tour guides make a good fist of hamming up the gravitas.



Philadelphia's street art includes thousands of murals painted on walls across the city

It's not just one centrepiece, though. The park and surrounds are crammed with dozens of points of historical significance, whether it's the country's first bank or the house where Thomas Jefferson temporarily lived.

If narrowing it down (and,

let's face it, you'll probably have to), the open-air President's House exhibition offers a thought-provoking look at how slavery was part of everyday life for America's Founding Fathers. And the Benjamin Franklin Museum ends up as a multi-pronged dive into the local hero polymath whose work stretched from getting French support in the Revolutionary War to inventing lightning rods and greatly expanding our knowledge of the Gulf Stream.

On the art front, the big-hitter is the Philadelphia Museum of Art. If you see people running up and down the steps, it's in pilgrimage to *Rocky* – the



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➔ iconic training scenes from Sylvester Stallone's boxing movie were shot there, and there's a statue of Rocky Balboa at the bottom.

The collection, rather than the presentation, is the star inside. There's a phenomenal hoard from around the world, with a particularly strong set by French impressionists and one of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* paintings. It's an old-school place aimed squarely at art lovers.

Just down the Benjamin Franklin Parkway is an arresting alternative. The Barnes Foundation was set up by irascible medicine magnate Albert Barnes, who stipulated that his collection must be displayed in a certain way. This leads to higgledy-piggledy walls with great works of art stacked in formation, with multimillion-pound Van Goghs and Cezannes used as building blocks to form pyramids - and it's a masterpiece of playing with expensive ingredients.

But the art that'll make people fall in love with Philadelphia is public. On South Street, Philadelphia's Magic Gardens sees dozens of buildings covered in glorious glass mosaics, while there are thousands of murals painted on walls across the city. Viator sells walking and Segway tours that take in some of the more impressive murals.

▶ SEE: MARKETS AND MUSEUMS

Before stepping into the overwhelming tide of cultural fixes, Reading Terminal Market is a fabulous place to sample Philly's character over breakfast. There's an amazing array of food stalls, selling everything from cranberry cookies and shaved meat sandwiches to cheese made on site.

From there, the worthy but excellent attractions around the Independence National Historical Park can be tackled.

The National Constitution Center does a cracking job of explaining the world's first written constitution, the arguments that took place over what to include in it and the changes that have been made since. This might seem exceedingly dry, but it's not. The experience kicks off with a rousing theatrical presentation, before unleashing visitors into a circular hall that dives into slavery, states' rights, unionisation of workers and more. There's great use of touchscreens, allowing you to find out about 100 people (well, 99 people and one mouse) that have had an impact on shaping the constitution, and to choose your favourite in a fantasy election between two American presidents selected at random.



The Museum of the American Revolution is equally grand and serious, but takes you through the causes, battles and aftermath of the war with considerable flair. There's a high "Ooh, I didn't know that" quotient, including the Great Union Flag - which had the



FAR LEFT:
National
Constitution
Center

LEFT:
Independence
Hall

Union Jack in the corner rather than stars - that could have easily ended up as the independent American flag. Also fascinating are the attempts to draw the uninterested French-speaking Quebecois into fighting off the British, and the origins of the term

'USA', which started off being branded on gunpowder casks, and then appearing on soldiers' buttons.

Something altogether different is the Mutter Museum, which is officially about medicine and surgery, but attracts people

through sheer weirdness and ghoulishness. It has an amazing collection of deformed skulls, body parts in jars, gruesome old-school surgical implements and even microscopic slides of Einstein's brain. It delves into deformities, psychotic delusions, poisons and diseases, and is either going to totally gross you out or have you utterly transfixed.

If there's one absolute must-do in Philly, however, it's a visit to the Eastern State Penitentiary, a fortress-like former prison on the hill. This hulking, enormously atmospheric beast of a place was staggeringly influential, providing the design for hundreds of prisons around the world. And the superb audio guides don't just explore this particular prison's past and escape stories - they go into the whole system of incarceration around the world. It's thought-provoking, hard-hitting and intensely memorable. ➔

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The Study at University City is the second in a planned chain of hotels targeting university areas. And it plays the educational theme nicely by having museum exhibits dotted around the lobby. That might be a glass cabinet of shells and feathers, or Babylonian artefacts tucked away in drawers, ready to surprise anyone who pulls them out to investigate.

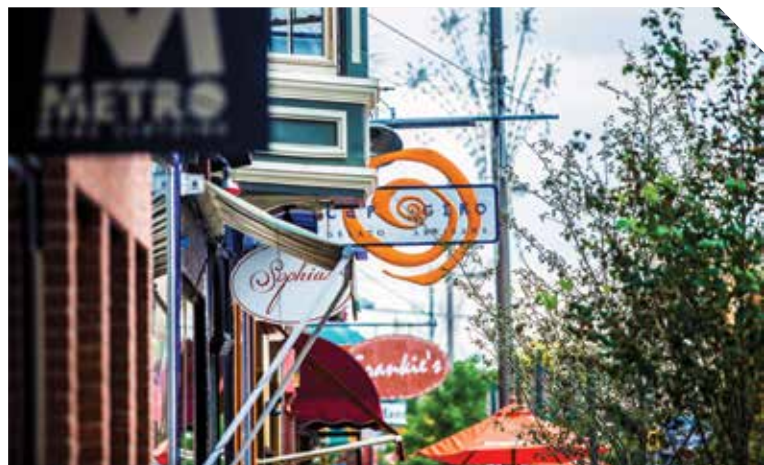
It's aimed at the sort of person who might sit around in the lobby for an hour reading, or admiring the original, one-off artworks which are scattered all over, including in the bedrooms. There's a calming feel to the rooms – all light wood and bookshelves – and an air that's classy and comfortable rather than ostentatiously luxurious. Doubles cost from £184.

The newly-opened Cambria Hotel in the city centre taps into

the music and theatre venues around it, with light musical theming and cute touches such as using drums as tables. Big, bold colours and nifty design statements, including beds in the centre of the room and Bluetooth music players in the bathroom mirrors, elevate it above the cookie-cutter. Doubles from £109.

The Rittenhouse Hotel is generally regarded as Philadelphia's top address, and is where the rich and famous often hole up. Large rooms, plush bedding, marble-clad bathrooms and separate dressing areas give the air of refinement, while the indoor pool, steam room and sauna are rarities in central Philly. Doubles from around £299.

The Independent Hotel is a strong boutique option, inside a handsome Georgian Revival building that's on the National Register of Historic Places. Prices start at around £100. **tw**



ABOVE:
East Passyunk



LEFT:
The Rittenhouse Hotel

PICTURES: VISIT PHILADELPHIA, NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER

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