

## Boom time in Baltimore

BY MIKE QUANE

Sunday, June 8th 2008



Fort McHenry National Monument

[Baltimore](#) used to have a rep as the kind of place you couldn't leave fast enough. Today, it's a destination - and then some. Now it's a vibrant city with many things to do - just figuring out your priorities can be tiring.

In the old days, Baltimore was a spot you merely passed through on the way to [Washington, D.C.](#), or points south. Back then, its now-pulsating Inner Harbor area was a shabby eyesore. But a lot of creative thinking, in both the government and private sectors, has given Baltimore an "extreme makeover," and it's become one of the most tourism-oriented cities in the country.

For a tour of the highlights, start at the centerpiece of "new Baltimore," the Inner Harbor, where the modern resurgence began. The downtown waterfront has boat rides, restaurants, clubs, trendy shops, historic ships, museums and more. The most popular attraction here is the National Aquarium, with more than 11,000 marine animals and a stunning exhibit on [Australia's](#) wildlife, called "[Animal Planet](#) Australia: Wild Extremes."

Nearby is [Oriole Park at Camden Yards](#), the first of today's "luxury ballparks," worth seeing even for those who aren't baseball fans. Daily tours of the park are available. Across from Camden Yards is [Geppi's Entertainment Museum](#), a surprising collection of American pop culture artifacts from many eras, including toys, posters, souvenirs and other collectibles. It's worth a visit for the comic book collection alone.

Also in the same complex is Sports Legends at Camden Yards, with exhibits devoted to the [Baltimore Orioles](#), the [Baltimore Ravens](#) and the former [Baltimore Colts](#), including [Johnny Unitas](#), arguably football's greatest quarterback. Nearby is the [Babe Ruth Museum](#), devoted exclusively to the legendary "[Sultan of Swat](#)."

One of the key factors in Baltimore's renewal has been its embrace of the arts. A stop at the [American Visionary Art Museum](#) shows why it's been voted one of the best in the country. The museum has sometimes funny, sometimes startling works by folk or "untrained" artists, in addition to more conventional sculptures and paintings.

Baltimore also has plenty of sites that make it a magnet for history buffs as well. Most famous is the [Fort McHenry National Monument](#) - you can see where the "Star-Spangled Banner" continued to wave after a British attack during the War of 1812. At the [Frederick Douglass-Isaac Myers Maritime Park](#), there's a "living history" museum that chronicles the first African-American-operated shipyard in the [United States](#).

For a fun activity, take one of the Fells Point Ghost Tours to learn about haunted houses, pirates, sailors, barkeeps and ladies of the evening who lived in Baltimore's old seafaring neighborhood - and some say still do. You also can visit the [St. Jude Shrine](#), a modest but moving pilgrimage site dedicated to the "saint of hopeless causes," or see the final resting place of the "poet of the macabre," [Edgar Allan Poe](#).

All the sightseeing might make you hungry. Baltimore is home to a number of great restaurants, including the Brass Elephant, which re-creates the dining experience of the gilded Victorian era, and Pazo, which offers a Spanish tapas-style menu in a stunningly refurbished factory building.

One comforting thing about Baltimore in the midst of today's depressing gas price situation is that it's easily accessible by rail, with frequent daily service on [Amtrak](#). Since most attractions are in a compact area near the harbor, and there's a good city bus system to other neighborhoods, it's not necessary to take a car to get around.

The only bad news here is that there's too much to see in Baltimore with just one weekend trip. But the good news is, you get to go back.

For additional information on attractions in Baltimore, contact the Baltimore Tourism Web site, [www.baltimore.org](http://www.baltimore.org).