



September 9, 2008

Baltimore's Inner charm

By Tracy E. Hopkins

Special to am New York

New Yorkers don't have to travel far for a little Southern comfort. Just three hours south on Amtrak, sits Baltimore. Dubbed 'Charm City,' this proud working and middle class town gets a bad rap, thanks in part to television dramas like "The Wire" and "Homicide" that portray the city as drug-infested and crime-riddled.

Like any urban center, Baltimore has its woes. However, it's also a place that celebrates its historic past, and residents warmly greet you in a drawled accent that's not quite Southern, but far from Northern.

Framed by the Chesapeake Bay < one of the major seaports in the United States since the 1700s - and boasting an assortment of restaurants, shops, and sightseeing attractions, the Inner Harbor is an ideal one-stop destination for a weekend getaway. Along with the kid-friendly National Aquarium and Maryland Science Center, and the permanently docked Civil War relic, the U.S.S. Constellation, the waterfront is anchored by the Harborplace pavilions on Pratt and Light Streets, built by South Street Seaport developer James W. Rouse and opened July 4, 1980.

Crab in all its incarnations < hard shell, soft shell, crab legs, crab cakes, and imperial < are celebrated in Baltimore. Seafood lovers will savor the plentiful, fresh variety at one of Phillips' three popular eateries in the Light Street pavilion and the neighboring Lexington Market, one subway stop away.

More recent additions to the waterfront include a Barnes & Noble superstore and huge ESPN Zone in the Power Plant entertainment complex, and the Harbor East district, which offers more restaurants, a Whole Foods Market and Landmark movie theater.

Unlike other parts of the city, the Inner Harbor is extremely walkable with many museums and historic sites nearby. One that shouldn't be missed is the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African-American History & Culture < the East Coast's largest African-American history museum.

Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were Eastern Shore, Md., natives and the 82,000-square-foot museum documents 400 years of black history including the state's slavery and abolitionist past.

One haunting installation, which has a simple sign that reads ³Witness² at the entrance and colorful yarn mimicking tree leaves and branches hanging overhead, shows horrifying footage of lynchings in the South.

Ironically, the Lewis Museum is next door to the Star-Spangled Banner Flag house, the 18th century home of Mary Young Pickersgill. The expanded museum houses a replica of the 30-by-42-foot flag she created in the summer of 1813 that inspired Francis Scott Key to pen the national anthem. The juxtaposition of these museums sums up Baltimore's complex past and present < the bitter mixed with the sweet.

FAST FACTS: Getting there It's a 3-3 1/2 hour schlep, so you can easily drive, take Amtrak from New York Penn Station to Baltimore Penn Station. If you're looking for a deal, take Greyhound (\$42 roundtrip) or a Chinatown bus (\$35 roundtrip) to the downtown Baltimore or Baltimore Travel Plaza bus station.

Where to stay: The Hampton Inn & Suites Inner Harbor is a reasonably priced, recently renovated hotel located two blocks from the Inner Harbor action. 131 E. Redwood St., www.baltimorehamptoninn.com n **Where to go:** Baltimore has more than 20 museums and galleries including the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African-American History & Culture, 830 E. Pratt St., 410-263-1800; and the Star-Spangled Banner Flag House, 844 E. Pratt St., 410-837-1793 n **Where to eat:** The Inner Harbor has dining options galore, including Phillips Seafood; 301 Light St., 410-685-6600. For a sophisticated brunch, take a short drive to Gertrude's in the Baltimore Museum of Art for Chef John Shields' modern Chesapeake cuisine. The museum is free everyday, so after brunch, peruse the outdoor sculpture garden, the impressive Cone sisters' collection with signature works by Matisse, Gaughin, and Picasso, and Rodin's famous "The Thinker" sculpture. 10 Art Museum Drive, www.artbma.org; Gertrude's, 410-889-3399