

Filling Philly stacks up as an ideal family destination

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I don't personally have anything against lying on the beach. I'll slather sunscreen and dig a moat like the next guy. I'm happy to sweat, swim and swig a cold Corona, and you'll never hear me complain about sand in my sandwich.

But — and this may sound like sun-worship sacrilege to you — lying on the beach can get kind of old after a while. Especially if you do it every year. Especially if you are trying to squeeze it into spring break, when your kids' school schedules don't always match.

So a few years back, we traded our towels for good walking shoes and decided to make spring break a time to visit the great cities of North America. Many aren't very far away: Chicago. Toronto. Washington, D.C., and Baltimore. New York City. All of them were incredible and interesting, combinations of urban grit and triumphant spirit.

This year our destination was Philadelphia. Where the U.S. Constitution was hammered out and signed. Where the nation's first capital resided. Where Rocky ran past the Italian Market and up the art museum steps. And where competing cheese steak tourist spots send out a "wiz wit" and an "American widout" faster than you can finish your order.

"I think Philadelphia was my favorite," said my 16-year-old son. And that's saying something for a kid who had visited the set of "Saturday Night Live," who had inched himself onto the glass floor of the CN Tower in Toronto, who had stood at the foot of the majestic Lincoln Memorial and who had caught the Jell-O mold during a performance of the Blue Man Group a short train ride away from the Loop in Chicago.

Philadelphia holds its own. It's

walkable, with tons of interesting architecture dominated by its iconic City Hall, the largest masonry building in the world and the largest municipal building in the United States. There is plenty of public art, good public transportation — the train ride from the airport is a breeze. Cabs are plentiful.

And it has a terrific mix of things to see and do. You go from Benjamin Franklin to Rocky Balboa in one brisk walk, from the spot where the Constitution was hammered out to the spot where the goofball "guys" from "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" hammered on each other.

All that, and cheese steaks, too.

We flew to Philly, though it's not a bad drive, because our time was constrained and because we always try to incorporate a Major League Baseball game into our trip. The Phillies were playing against the Cardinals on a Thursday afternoon, then leaving town for the weekend. So we went in early and caught the game. Nice ballpark, though sterile and nothing compared to Progressive Field, Camden Yards in Baltimore or, my personal favorite, PNC Park in Pittsburgh. It's a short and convenient trip on the subway from the City Hall stop.

We stayed near City Hall at the Marriott Downtown, which was overrun with tall teenage girls in town for a volleyball tournament. The staff stepped up with an oversize room and two solid rollaway beds when our original request for two queen beds (which we learned is not a guarantee despite what the Internet site implied) could not be accommodated. Two adults and two teens in one bed? Uh, no. The workaround ended up providing us the most spacious, most comfortable accommodations we've ever had for the modest price.

Each day brought new experi-

ences. A short, six-block walk down Market Street brought us to some of the oldest historical sites in the nation. Independence Hall packs so much power into such a small space. And the National Constitution Center brings you face to face, literally, with the signers of the Constitution. Life-size bronzes populate a room where visitors can stand and touch and pose.

Our secret to success is to space out our activities. We stayed four nights, blocking out the time so we didn't have to squeeze it all into two. It's vacation, after all. Sure you can try to do it all in one day, but why not relax? Grab a drink. Read a book. Chill.

One night it's gelato at Capogiro's, the next it's beverages in the room watching a too-expensive pay-per-view movie, another it was an evening of laughter at the ComedySportz improv show, kind of like Cleveland's Something Dada, but with a referee. Kids and adults alike were gasping for air from the laughs.

We reserved one day for a visit to the Italian Market. It was a haul from our hotel on foot, but we proved it could be done. And just a few steps farther brought us to the famous Geno's Steaks, which is catty-corner from Pat's King of Steaks.

We waited in line at Geno's next to, coincidentally, another Cleveland family there for college visits, and made sure to be quick and accurate with our orders. First the cheese. Then "wit" for "with onions" or "widout" for "without onions."

After a 45-minute wait, the four of us shared two sandwiches. We digested in the line at Pat's, where we did the whole thing over again. You can scoff at "tourist traps" or you can jump in with both hands, napkins blazing. We chose the latter. Pat's, by the way, was the unanimous king in our informal poll.

(Speaking of committing to the "tourist" thing: We often ventured



off the beaten path, but there's nothing wrong with availing yourself of the tourism industry in the cities you visit. We enlisted in a "Duck Boat" tour of the city that offered laughs, memorable moments and plenty of photo ops. And the look on my daughter's face when the bus became a boat and motored along the Penn's Landing shoreline was precious.)

Cheese steaks aren't all Philly has to offer, by the way. Zavino was a cool neighborhood spot that would be right in place in Tremont. The "polpettini" pizza with ricotta-stuffed veal meatballs is worth returning for. Han Dynasty offered searingly spicy Chinese food in a majestic setting. At Moshulu, we ate Easter Brunch on a listing four-masted ship in the Delaware River (after Easter Mass with other tourists at the gorgeous Cathedral Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul.) At City Tavern, where John Adams was taken in 1774 when he arrived for the First Continental Congress, we stepped back in time. Waiters and waitresses dressed in period garb walked across creaking wood floors and filled our pewter mugs the minute they went dry.

And most impressive was Reading Terminal Market, across the street from our hotel, which has the feel of the West Side Market but is entirely different. At Reading, almost every booth is a restaurant, complete with stools and counters. Our favorite was Tommy DiNic's. Roast pork on a hard roll with sharp provolone and broccoli raab. It is the ultimate expression of brotherly love.

We made it to the city's famed Museum of Art, but we didn't go inside. Lame, I know, but sometimes you've got to make sacrifices, and our son, a high school sophomore, wanted to see what the University of Pennsylvania looks like. (It looks expensive.)

Like many tourists, we posed with the Rocky statue, which is no longer atop the steps but on the ground below, where its pop culture aura won't clash with the fine art inside. The kids, of course, did

the Rocky run up those steps, complete with the triumphant arms up dance. We did the steps the way Rocky did before he started training hard.

But that's OK. Vacations aren't prizefights. Our wallet, of course, came away bruised. New York and Toronto administered more brutal beatings. But beaches aren't exactly cheap, either. And when our kids are adults, they'll have a better understanding than we ever did about the distinct character of American cities.

And they'll know how to order a cheese steak without holding up the line.

IF YOU GO
Philadelphia

LODGING

Marriott Downtown: tinyurl.com/2629tom

ATTRACTIONS

ComedySportz improv show: comedysportzphilly.com

Duck Boat tour: philadelphia.ridetheducks.com

Independence Hall: nps.gov/inde

Museum of Art: philamuseum.org

National Constitution Center: constitutioncenter.org

Philadelphia Phillies' Citizens Bank Park: tinyurl.com/o83ur2k

Reading Terminal Market: readingterminalmarket.org

DINING

Capogiro's for gelato: capogirogelato.com

City Tavern: citytavern.com

Geno's Steaks: genosteaks.com

Pat's King of Steaks: patskingofsteaks.com

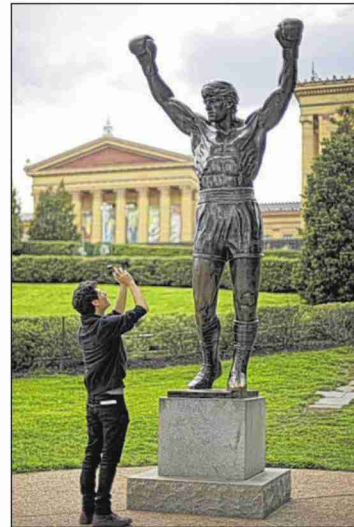
Han Dynasty: handynasty.net

Moshulu: moshulu.com

Tommy DiNic's: tommydinics.com

com

Zavino: zavinohospitalitygroup.com



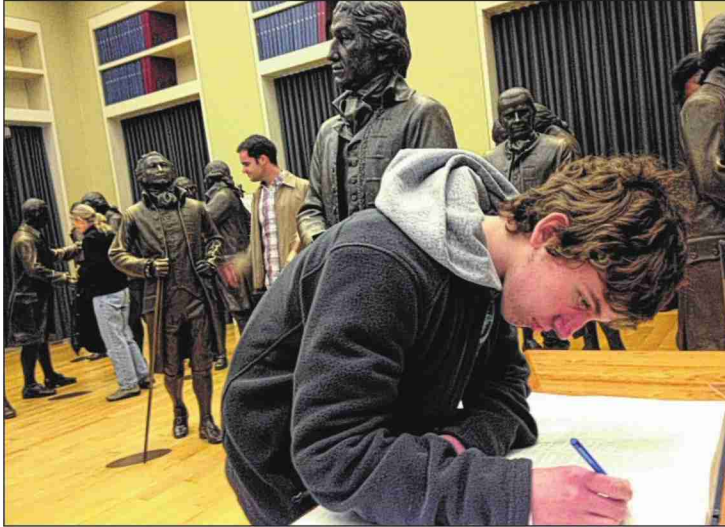
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The iconic Rocky statue outside the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



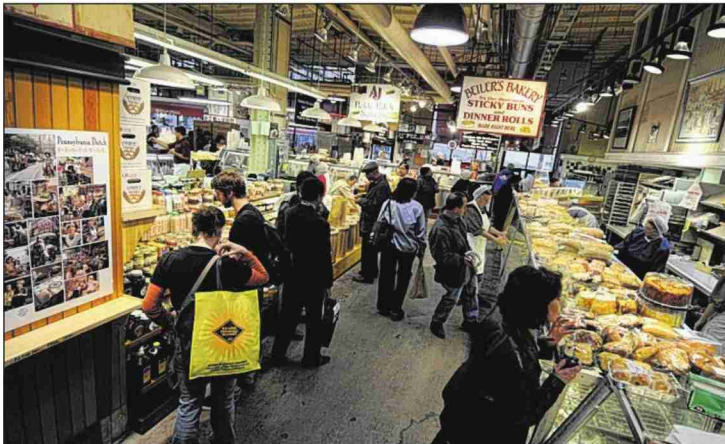
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Technician Jonathan Miller buffs the interior surface of the Liberty Bell in view of Independence Hall, at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia.



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Aidan McIntyre, son of the author, signs a copy of the Constitution amid the life-size bronzes of the actual signers at the National Constitution Center.



READING TERMINAL MARKET

More than 100 merchants line the aisles of the Reading Terminal Market, a fixture in Philadelphia since 1892.

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Signers' Hall, inside Philadelphia's National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, features bronze statues of all 42 men who signed the U.S. Constitution.



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The view of Geno's Steaks, 1219 S. Ninth St., for those waiting in line across the street at Pat's King of Steaks.



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Broccoli raab makes the roast pork sandwich with sharp provolone a virtual health food sandwich at Tommy DiNic's at the Reading Terminal Market.