

Seattle has Something for Everyone:

Music, museums, good food and ‘The freedom to be peculiar’

By Mary Welch

It's a long way from The Big Chicken to The Space Needle.

Seattle is about as far away from the ATL as you can get in the Lower 48. From the bottom right to the upper left of the map is more distant than a half dozen foreign countries are. Geography alone assures you that a visit is going to be something different.

Like the travelogue says, Seattle is a city of contrasts.

From one window of your hotel room you can see a sweeping expanse of Puget Sound and the deep blue Pacific. From another window you see the gleaming snowcapped summit of Mount Rainier. Blink and you won't see a thing because clouds and a light drizzle have moved in as quickly as a time-lapsed photograph.

Continuing the contrast theme, hungry visitors have a wide variety of cuisines, flavors, and menu choices. From fresh-out-of-the-ocean seafood at Elliott's Oyster House to exotic Asian dishes found in the Chinatown-International District to some of the cutting-edge farm-to-table cooking at Le Gourmand or the Steelhead Diner.

Residents of Seattle seem to be almost universally laid back and friendly toward visitors whether they be hi-tech nerds in the software firms and defense plants, or tattooed and studded grunge rockers sitting on the curb, sucking on a cigarette and chugging a cup of Seattle's Best.

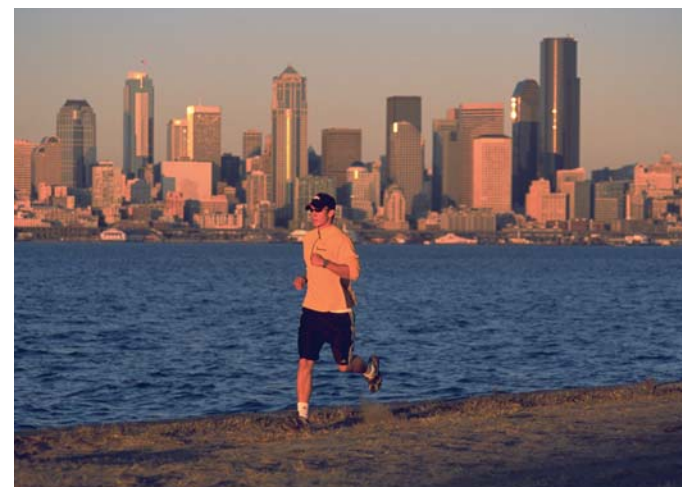
Unlike sprawling metroplexes like Los Angeles or even metro Atlanta, Seattle is surprisingly compact with many attractions within

walking distance or a short cab ride away. We started at Seattle Center, a 74-acre urban park, home of the Space Needle, not to mention the Children's Museum, Children's Theatre, Experience Music Project, Seattle Opera, Seattle Repertory Theatre, INTIMAN Theatre, Pacific Northwest Ballet, and Key Arena. And on many weekends the park grounds hosts the sounds and music of open-air festivals.

The center is what Centennial Olympic Park here in Atlanta should be and eventually may become. The 605-foot tall Space Needle was built for the 1962 World's Fair and is still the towering symbol of the city. Go to the observation desk – or have a meal in the revolving restaurant – and you will get a panoramic glimpse of the city and its environment. On a clear day, you can see Mt. Rainier, but remember clear days and Seattle aren't necessarily synonymous.

Coming down from the Space Needle, we opted for some pop culture fixes, which were found in two museums housed in the same exquisitely attractive building. We first went to the Frank Gehry-designed Experience Music Project, a 140,000-square-foot facility offering interactive exhibits, pop culture, live music venues, and recording studios that explore creativity and innovation in popular music. Our favorite location there was the sound labs where you can use real instruments to learn how to play the guitar, bass, keyboards, or drums. It then allows you to jam with others, or karaoke with recorded music. Rarely do a middle-aged mother and fifteen-year-old

The Public Market sign hovers over the Pike Place Market.



Seattle has many great locales for outdoor activities. Alki Beach Park in West Seattle is a scenic location to run, bike or rollerblade.



Seattle's Pike Place Market is world famous for its fresh seafood, produce and its lively arts and crafts.

Photos by Tim Thompson

son have the opportunity to rock out together. Maybe, only in Seattle.

We also went to the Science Fiction Museum & Hall of Fame, which encompasses another 13,000 square feet of exhibit space and includes artifacts and exhibits that represent science fiction's influence on popular culture, from space suits to cell phones.

Continuing in the park we came across the Pacific Science Center that features two IMAX theaters, a planetarium, laser light shows, an insect village, and tropical butterfly house. From galaxies to bugs, there's something there for everyone.

If you're looking for something a little less cerebral, Seattle Center has it as well. An arcade and amusement area is situated in the middle of the park uniting the museums, and Space Needle. In the grassy areas, residents stroll, sleep, picnic, and chill to create a vibe that seems laid back and energetic at the same time.

Wanting to go downtown, we hopped the monorail and landed into an old-fashioned city center. Yes, a vibrant downtown. Fine, there is a downtown mall (Westlake Center), but cross the street and you're in the divine Nordstrom's flagship store. Walk around several city blocks and you will see from the sidewalk stores that are only found in malls in Atlanta – Gucci, St. John Knit, Sephora – as well as mom-and-pop shops and grills. People are shopping, sitting in outdoor cafes. The sense of a real city that hasn't torn itself down every twenty years to create something even less distinctive is a treasure indeed.

Although the city has a great transportation system, walking is just so much fun. Correction: it's fun walking down the hills, not so much going in reverse. The city has some serious hills that rival San Francisco's steepest.

We walked down the hill from the city center to another of Seattle's landmarks – the Pike Place Market and the waterfront area. The market is a kaleidoscope of flowers, foods, spices, and serendipity. Half the fun is sniffing the spices, observing the shoppers, and nibbling samples of the foods. A short walk away is the Seattle Art Museum, a wonderful place that offers a glimpse of art from the Renaissance, as well as

exhibits of art from African cultures and from the Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest.

But perhaps the most fun is exploring the city's eclectic neighbors. Our favorite was Fremont (the self-proclaimed “center of the universe”). What can you say about a neighborhood that has two symbols – a circa 1950's Cold War rocket fuselage that was attached to an army and navy store and now may be turned into a radio station, and a statue of Lenin? You can say it's a delightful place to walk around, go into the boutiques, visit the country's only fair-trade chocolate factory, fly on a trapeze (don't ask), and enjoy a neighborhood whose motto is “De Libertas Quirkas” – “Freedom to be Peculiar.”

Also, check out Ballard, which is one of the city's hippest neighborhoods but still retains its Scandinavian origins through restaurants, gift shops, and the Nordic Historical Museum. If you want to continue to partake of the city's international flair, go to two additional neighborhoods – Chinatown/International District, Rainier Beach and Othello neighborhoods in Southeast Seattle, called by many the most diverse district in the country with more than 60 languages and dialects spoken.

However, Seattle is much more than an inner city experience. Admire the nature! It's all around you. Locals list hiking as their favorite pastime, so grab a map and pick a trail – there's plenty of them – and get going! For sea kayakers, there are several outfitters who offer rentals on Lake Union and Elliott Bay. But if you really want the ultimate adventure, head up north to the San Juan Islands where you'll find stunning scenery and first-class paddling. Other water activities such as scuba diving (Puget Sound is one of the deepest, most diverse aquatic ecosystems in the Lower 48) or white water rafting or fishing, will get your heart racing and awaken your aquatic self.

With so much to do, see, and experience, any trip to this great western city will – and I bet you can see this pun coming – leave you sleepless in Seattle. ♪



Photo courtesy of Seattle's Convention and Visitors Bureau

Seattle's lively and dynamic waterfront offers sightseeing, dining and shopping galore.