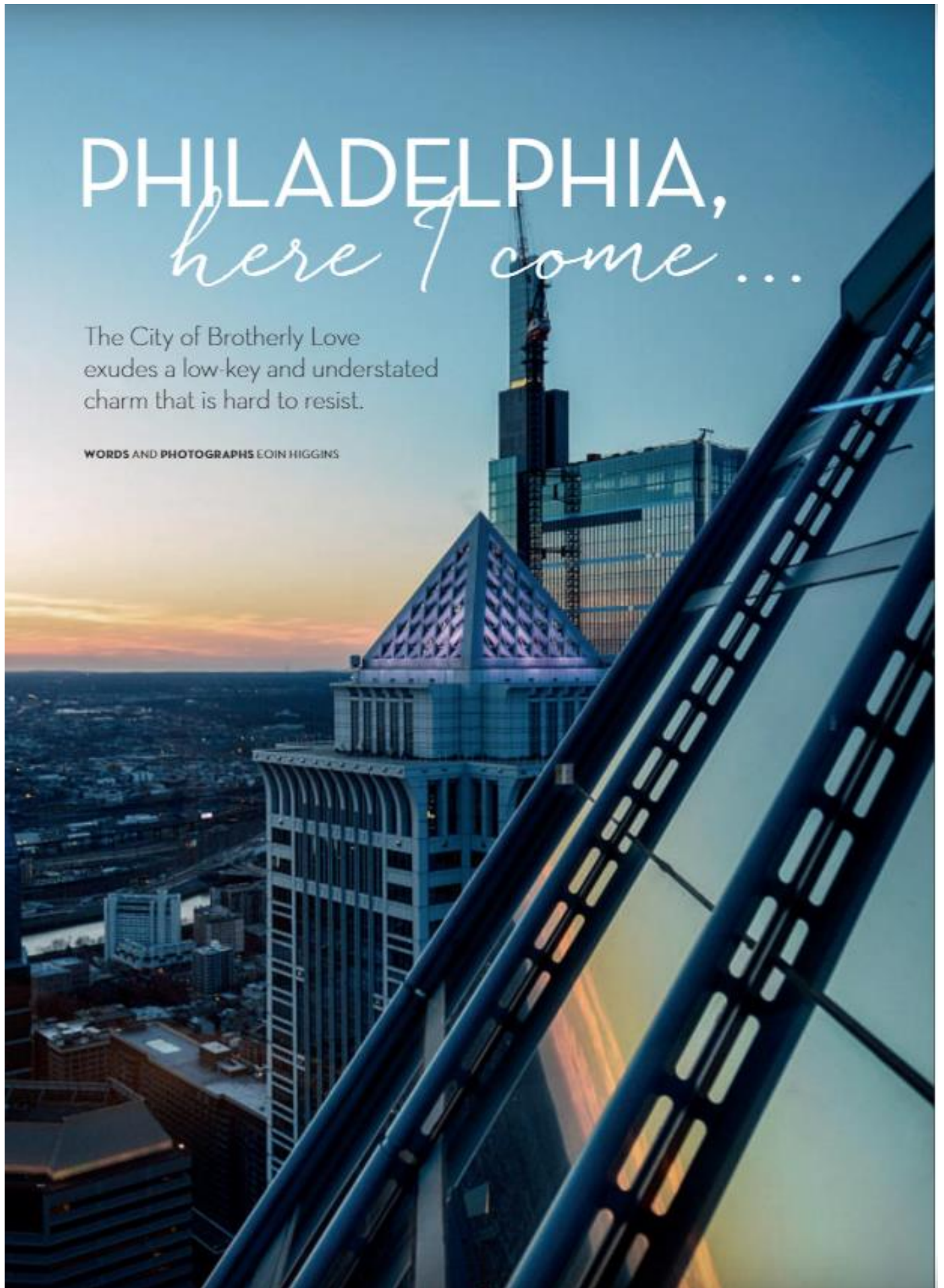


PHILADELPHIA, *here I come ...*

The City of Brotherly Love exudes a low-key and understated charm that is hard to resist.

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS EGIN HIGGINS



Heading into last year's Super Bowl the Philadelphia Eagles were classed by many as "underdogs of the playoffs". For Philadelphians this wasn't exactly new territory. Alongside more glamorous nearby metropolises, "scrappy little guy" was often how the city was perceived. But things change and that the Eagles went on to win the Super Bowl says a lot about the City of Brotherly Love today – they've been underdogs, sure, but contemporary Philadelphia is currently very much on the up, and not just on the football field.

Tourism figures are rising steadily, the economy is flush and employment rates have seldom



seemed rosier. There's even a new direct Aer Lingus flight from Dublin – high praise, indeed! – so it's not surprising to find there's a palpable sense of optimism in the air, but it's a very Philadelphian kind of optimism. The little city that could has never been a blowhard. Instead, it exists as a welcome, low-key alternative to some of its more blustering East Coast neighbours.

Founded by William Penn in 1682, the city has served as the nation's capital, George Washington's home, the setting for the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and is where the US Constitution was debated and written (inside its **Independence Hall**). It is also still the permanent residence of perhaps the most iconic symbol of American independence, the Liberty Bell.

A smart way to get to grips with all that history is via a walking tour of the **Old City** (also known as "America's most historic square mile") with one of **Philly Tour Hub's** (phillytourhub.com) genius guides. Discover the truth behind the **Betsy Ross House** (did the supposed seamstress of the first American flag really live there?), wander down the charming **Elfreth's Alley**, and perhaps, like this newbie, become enthused about American history like you never have before. Further illuminate your US historical blindspots then – in a fun and energising way – with a visit to the comprehensive **Museum of the American Revolution** (amrevmuseum.org) whose distinguished collection includes the mythical George Washington's marquee tent among other fascinating artefacts.

Previous pages, spectacular views from One Liberty Observation Deck, left, and right, Rebecca Solomon, brand representative at tasting room and home bar supply, Art in the Age. Clockwise from above, remembering Philadelphia's famous fictional son, Rocky Balboa; other sons of Philadelphia, immortalised in mural; a veggie version of South Philly Barbecue/El Compadre's world famous tacos.



Having filled your heritage boots, switch to the strictly visual with a marvel at the enchanting **Philadelphia Magic Gardens** (phillymagicgardens.org). Created by local artist Isaiah Zagar, the leftfield masterpiece of mosaic spans half a city block and comprises folk art statues, found objects, bicycle wheels, colourful glass bottles, handmade tiles and thousands of glittering mirrors. The site is also enveloped in visual anecdotes and personal narratives that refer to Zagar's life, family and community, as well as references from the wider world.

Higher-browed culture vultures will find plenty to pick at too. A must for brushstroke admirers is a visit to the unique **Barnes Foundation** (barnesfoundation.org), set up by another of the city's artistic outliers, Albert Barnes, who "taught people to look at works of art primarily in terms of their visual relationships". It's a rare trove of some great works by some of the greatest painters of the 19th and 20th centuries and contains a neck-cracking selection of Monets, Van Goghs, Renoirs, Modiglianis, and so (richly) on, as well as a vast array

of sculpture and ironwork by some of the great maestros of those arts too.

The **Philadelphia Museum of Art** (philamuseum.org) – atop the famous "Rocky steps" at the end of the walkable, or joggable, Benjamin Franklin Parkway – bills itself as "the cultural heart of the city". It's hard to argue otherwise; the vast Greek Revival building houses temporary exhibitions, permanent galleries and an ongoing expansion project that will open up the museum even further in the years to come. The scope of the collection is huge so assign at least a few hours to take it all in – it rewards taking one's time. Those short on time, however, should take in the bijou but bountiful **Rodin Museum** (rodinmuseum.org), where a worthy selection from the sculptor's body of work is displayed in an airy pavilion nearby.

There are vertical hectares of street art to absorb too in the form of murals (often imbued with astute social commentary). They are impressive and ubiquitous (there are almost 4,000) but it's recommended to take a guided tour if you really want to get a handle on the art, ➔



→ as well as to hear the (often moving) stories behind the works. **The Mural Arts Walking Tour** (muralarts.org) is a good place to arrange an educational excursion with a local expert.

Rise above the streets by sticking your head in the clouds at **One Liberty Observation Deck** (phillyfromthetop.com), where a 360-degree view of the city at 270 metres above street level is there for the taking. Stunning noon, day and night, the panorama here reveals a lot more about the city than you might discover at ground level; around sunset is a particularly striking time to take in the vistas.

Naturally, no visit to Philly is complete without sampling its best-known mouthful: the Philly cheesesteak. It's well worth enduring sometimes lengthy queues for the ones at **Campo's Deli** (camposdeli.com), open since 1947, but it's not just the city's cheesesteaks that blow other sandwiches out of the water. **The Reading Terminal Market** (readingterminalmarket.org) is home to, among many other impressive food experiences, **Tommy DiNic's** (tommydinizs.com), creator of, according to the Travel Channel, North America's Greatest Sandwich – this writer found no evidence to dispute that claim. The sub in question comprises hand-carved roast pork that's made via a secret, three-day process, melting and sharp provolone cheese, steaming broccoli rabe, hot and sweet peppers, and a generous ladle of pork stock, all served up in a crusty-fresh baguette roll – it's a memorable experience that comes highly recommended, just like a visit to the top dog city it calls home. 🐕

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*BASED ON 27th FLIGHTS IN FEASIBLE DIRECTION. TAXES AND CHARGES

Clockwise from top, patriotic portals on Elfreth's Alley; flowery murals downtown; Philadelphia's laid-back charm can be hard to resist.



PHILADELPHIA ESSENTIALS

STAY

MODERNIST Inhabiting the country's first skyscraper designed in the Bauhaus-rooted International Style – the instantly recognisable **Loews** incorporates Modernist lines, a primary colour scheme and bespoke flourishes. Also home to massively comfortable beds, airy rooms and cracking food and drinks options. Rooms from approx \$239. (1200 Market Street, +1 215 627 1200; loewshotels.com)

LOCAL Living like a local is the new way to travel and a stay at **Lokal Hotel** in the Old City neighbourhood is one of the best ways to do that. Choose a fully functioning apartment fitted out with all the techie mod cons you could hope for, from sound bars to iPad controls. Decor is bang up to date too but don't forget to make full use of the vintage drinks trolley – "hic". One-bedroom apartments from \$258. (159 North 3rd Street, +1 267 707 4345; staylokal.com)

VIEW ORDER With another stellar food and beverage offering, **The Logan Philadelphia, Curio Collection by Hilton** is a super hub for staying in as much as getting out and about. Huge beds ensure sound sleeps, while the sophisticated rooftop bar – Assembly – with its lush views, provides plenty of space for after-dark grooving and shaking. Cool art collection too. Rooms from \$286. (One Logan Square, +1 215 965 1500; curiocollection.com)

EAT

PAN-ASIAN **Sampan** is cool, dark, and full of flavour. In the heart of lively Midtown, the open-kitchen hotspot exemplifies much of what makes this neighbourhood a popular choice for a fun night out. While the cocktails are distinctive and refined, the crowd is warm and welcoming, even on a Sunday night, when the place hummed to a vibey crowd, table-hopping and mingling. (104 South 15th Street, +1 215 752 3501; sampanphilly.com)

LIVELY The epitome of buzzy, **Mission Taqueria** is a natty spot for social drinks and satisfying eats. Spikily flavourful Mexican standards reign, but make it a mission to acquaint your taste buds with their ceviches too. Drinks are also infused with a south of the border flavour – try the Green Juice margarita (this writer loved the deliciously smoky, mezcal version), delicious but, a heads up, it's also strong stuff. (1536 Sansom Street, +1 215 383 1200; missiontaqueria.com)

FRENCH If you aren't exactly gagging for Gallic grub, the menu at French spot **Parc** is varied enough that you should certainly find something to pique your appetite. Their excellent seafood, for instance, is definitely worth trying, with plenty of shellfish to tempt – the king crab legs were knock-out fresh and delicious, as was the cockle-warming moules et frites and impressively curated wine list. (277 South 18th Street, +1 215 545 2262; parc-restaurant.com)

AUTHENTIC Featured on Netflix's *Ugly Delicious* as one of the United States' stand-out Mexican food experiences, **South Philly Barbacoa/El Compadre** is worth making the transatlantic pilgrimage. Run by a likeable husband-and-wife team, this place is as honest and authentic a restaurant as you'll find. The traditional slow-cooked, barbacoa-style lamb tacos are simply exceptional. Busy, daily, from 7am. (1149 South 9th Street, +1 215 694 3797; southphillybarbacoa.com)

DRINK

Art in the Age is a home bar supply and tasting room where ogling and sipping the finest spirits known to humanity (possibly) is the order of the day. Sidle up to the bar where experts create perfect cocktails and whiskies while gently educating a curious clientele. After supping, shop in the store for beautifully branded spirits and home bar accessories. (16 North 3rd Street, +1 215 922 2600; artintheage.com)