



By Judith Fein & Photos by Paul Ross
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Harrisburg is a city that's good for the head, the heart, the stomach and the feet. It's the perfect destination for learning, having feel-good experiences, wining, dining and, especially, walking. In fact, if you book a room at a downtown hotel like the Harrisburg Hilton, you can explore Pennsylvania's capitol without ever getting in your car.



Whitaker Center for Science and the Arts

The second floor of the [Hilton Harrisburg](#) connects directly to the indoor Strawberry Arcade, which features a food court, shops, and, the family-friendly [Whitaker Center for Science and the Arts](#). Kids can experience more than 200 interactive exhibits and teens actually look up from their smartphones to walk into a hurricane chamber where they are buffeted by strong gale winds and hurricanes.

Afterwards, the whole family can try tagging on a digital graffiti wall, creating a stop motion film, adding sound effects to a film clip, or moving a ball by activating brain waves. And before you chow down on a hot dog, the Carnival of Health section will inform you that it takes one hour of bike pedaling to burn off the calories. See more [Family Fun](#) ideas in the Hershey Harrisburg Region.

It's a two-minute walk to the main westerly entrance of the majestic [State Capitol Complex](#) where two groups of naked men and women, sculpted in marble, amuse, offend or intrigue visitors. The sculptor, George Grey Barnard, completed the statues in 1911, and, to appease the outrage of some Harrisburg residents, he created marble sheaths to cover offending body parts.



PA Capitol Complex

According to Barnard, the figures represent those who follow the laws of nature, and those who don't. Tourists point to intimate contact between men and women, men and men, and speculate about what the artist may have intended. Barnard is either cringing or smiling in his grave.



Mastodon at PA State Museum

It's a short walk to the [State Museum of Pennsylvania](#), which is part of the Capitol complex. The Mammal Hall is a delightful throwback to the age of museum dioramas. Each exhibit is set in a specific geographical area of Pennsylvania, and highlights a dramatic moment, like a cougar attacking a fawn in a snowy landscape. It's easy to see which are the most popular dioramas, because visitors press their hands and noses against the glass, and leave visible prints.

One of the museum's highlights is a full-mount, articulated mastodon skeleton; it's one of the best preserved in the country. Another is the new Objects of Valor exhibit, which includes P.F. Rothermel's famous painting, executed in 1870, of Pickett's charge at Gettysburg during the Civil War. The huge canvas measures 16 by 32 feet, and, executed shortly after the end of the war, it stunned its viewers with a graphic description of dead and wounded soldiers. In a glass case is the drum that Rothermel used as a model for the painting.

The intimacy of the exhibit makes it appealing, and the objects come with personal stories. A kepi (hat) was penetrated by a bullet which whizzed out the other side and didn't kill the lucky soldier who wore it. Another Pennsylvania man was caught up in the frenzy of the war, and he grabbed his gun and went to join the Union forces; his gun is on display. General Geary, in full military regalia, is preserved forever in a painting, and nearby are all the items he wore in the painting, right down to his black boots.

After art and history, food. Across from the State Museum is [Mangia Qui Ristorante & Suba Tapas Bar](#), which serves one of the best gourmet lunches in town (<http://www.mangiaqui.com>). Rigatoni with grilled sweet Italian sausage (\$12), grilled cheese and tomato soup (\$9), and crab cake Ceasar (\$10) are among the specialties. Even if you're too full or carb-conscious to order dessert, it's hard to resist the multi-colored, chocolate pebbles that are placed in front of you, compliments of the chef. One of the owners does the cooking, and another executed all of the vibrant contemporary paintings that adorn the restaurant walls.



Mangia Qui Ristorante



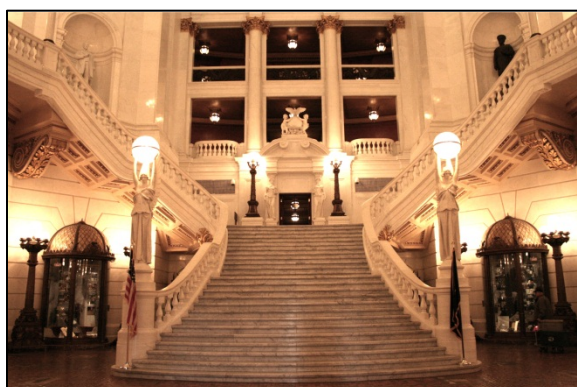
It's a three-block walk from the Capitol complex to the [Broad Street Market](#). Founded in 1860, it's one of the oldest continuously operating markets in the U.S., and offers everything from Balkan fare to seafood to smoked meats and cheeses to Jamaican cuisine. Amish women make and sell fresh pretzels, and you can buy candles that look like apple or peach pie. See more [Farmer's Markets](#) in the Hershey Harrisburg Region.



Midtown Scholar

Across the street is [Midtown Scholar Bookstore & Cafe](#), which was once the first desegregated movie theatre in central Pennsylvania. It houses the largest collection of used books between New York and Chicago; they number in the millions. The 15,000- square-foot store is furnished with architectural salvage treasures like a bell, antique railings and stained glass panels. And while you browse and read, you can sample pastries from the bakery, entertain your kids in the children's space, or contemplate a special purchase in the new Robinson's Rare Books and Fine Print Room.

By this time, it will be mid-afternoon, and time to head back to the Capitol for a free tour. If you've visited Rome and the Capitol dome looks familiar, it's because it was inspired by St. Peter's Basilica. The architectural style of the building is Renaissance revival, and many tourists consider it the most beautiful Capitol building in the United States.



The Grand Staircase in the PA Capitol

The grand staircase is modeled after the steps in the Paris Opera House. The Senate room is a dazzling work of art in green and golden hues with marble from Ireland, velvet drapery from France, stained glass in the style of Tiffany, and paintings by a woman ahead of her time named Violet Oakley. During a period in our history when she wasn't even allowed to vote, she depicted the end of wars, slavery, and the enslavement of women.

In the State Supreme and Superior Court room, which is in the Greco-Roman style, 43 of Oakley's paintings adorn the walls. The guide may tell you to look carefully at the painting of Penn the lawgiver; hidden in it is a self-portrait by the remarkable artist.



The Senate room in the PA Capitol

The House of Representatives is the largest room in the building, and everything is on a grand scale. The smallest of the chandeliers weighs as much as a small hippo and the large ones equal the poundage of a good-sized African elephant.



Inside Café 1500

For dinner, expect to be wowed by the food at the spanking new [Café 1500](#) (1500 N. 6th Street; 717-233-2200). This new Mediterranean-inspired venture is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The design concept of Café 1500 is a modern American bistro that is trendy and chic, with gray cement floors, exposed ducts, Art Deco elements and surprising striped columns.

If Café 1500 offers a wine-pairing dinner with local wines, sign up at once. You'll be surprised by the quality of the Chambourcin (it's like Harrisburg's Zinfandel) or the sweet Reisling by the [Vineyard at Hershey](#). See more [Breweries & Wineries](#) in the Hershey Harrisburg Region.



Bricco bar area

Another fine Mediterranean restaurant is [Bricco](#) (www.briccopa.com), a collaboration between the Olewine School of Culinary Arts at Harrisburg Area Community College and the [Harrisburg Hotel Corporation](#). Bricco is open for lunch and dinner, and the waitperson who comes to your table may have started out washing dishes in the kitchen and may end up as a celebrated chef.

If you are looking for a restaurant where you can express your Inner Romantic, this is the place. Order cocktails or toast with wine by the glass or the bottle, and then start out with a creamy tomato soup with parmesan and croutons; smoked and roasted beets and gorgonzola; or a thick, satisfying crab bisque. Next, you can savor the refined earthiness of sage pappardelle duck ragout with pancetta and parmesan, or plump crab cakes. The meats are cured in-house, the bread is baked on the premises, and if you want gluten-free pizza, you're in luck. [Chef Jason Viscount](#) is a Pennsylvania native whose dad owned restaurants, and he recalls living in the basement of one of them when he grew up. He has a passion for locally sourced foods in season, and he changes the menu every month. See more ideas on [Where To Eat](#) in the Hershey Harrisburg Region.

After dinner, take a relaxing stroll to [Harrisburg City Island](#) by crossing over the illuminated walking bridge, once a railroad bridge that spans the Susquehanna River. The bridge makes a perfect location for a photo-op or to grab a shot of the city skyline at night.



Walking Bridge to City Island



Harrisburg City Island Complex

During the spring and summer seasons, visit [Susquehanna Outfitters](#) on the island for bike, boat & kayak rentals; catch a [Harrisburg Senators](#) minor league baseball game at [Metro Bank Park](#); see the entire 63-acre island on a small-gauge Civil War-era steam train, or cruise the scenic city skyline from the water aboard the historic [Pride of the Susquehanna](#) riverboat.

For breakfast, try something really local, downhome, friendly, cozy, and astonishingly cheap: two eggs, grits or home fries, coffee or tea for \$3.75. If you want to splurge, omelets are under six dollars. The Greek owner used to be a body builder, and his [Flamingo Grill](#), at 317 Market Street (one and a half blocks from the Hilton), has changed very little in the 55 years it's been open.





On the opposite end of the spectrum, Sunday brunch at [Char's Restaurant at Tracy Mansion](http://www.charsrestaurant.com) is not to be missed (www.charsrestaurant.com). It's a 20-minute walk to the remodeled art nouveau Tracy mansion, which is situated on the scenic banks of the Susquehanna River. Char, a restaurateur who was beloved by locals, recently relocated to the mansion, where her expanded, gorgeous restaurant immediately attracted every foodie in the region. The restaurant is 100 percent wind powered, and a geothermal system is designed to consume less energy. For design enthusiasts, one of the rooms is the Galley, where all the art glass and sculptures are for sale.

The brunch offerings range from \$9-\$21 and include specialties like Crab Imperial with poached eggs; a spicy Arabic shakshuka; seafood frittata; eggs Benedict with corned beef. If you can't make it for bunch, not to worry: the cocktail lounge opens at 4 p.m. for finger foods and desserts, and dinner is served every day except Sunday. Eating at Char's is not just a meal; it's an experience.



The National Civil War Museum at night

Whether or not you are a Civil War buff, it's worth a visit to [The National Civil War Museum](http://www.nationalcivilwar.org) in Reservoir Park, the highest point in Harrisburg. It's too far to walk, but the Hilton provides a free shuttle to get there. Besides some highly evocative artifacts—like wooden slave shoes, collars, bracelets and a replica of the life mask of Lincoln, which was made a few months before his death—the most unusual exhibit is “Meet Mr. Lincoln.”

An actor who portrays Lincoln is projected in front of you, and you can touch a screen and ask questions of the President. The actor gives reflective answers, and also adds a dollop of colorful Lincolnesque stories.



“Meet Mr. Lincoln” exhibit

Just before exiting the museum, stop to watch the film of the last bivouac; a final reunion of the Blues and Grays 75 years after they shot at each other on the battlefield at Gettysburg. Only a few thousand of them were still alive, and they shook hands, broke bread together, and cupped their ears to hear the address by FDR.



Simon-Cameron Mansion

If history or architecture is your thing, [Sheldon Munn](http://www.harrisburgtours.com), owner of [Harrisburg Tours, Talks and Walks](http://www.harrisburgtours.com) does walking tours of Harrisburg highlights. In the event that your tootsies are tired, he can drive with you in your car ([ww.harrisburgtours.com](http://www.harrisburgtours.com)). For about \$25 an hour, he'll point out the Second Empire French influence on local buildings (check out the turrets on the three-story houses), teach you about ribbon bricking (finely done brickwork), or take you to Shipoke, also called Gritty Town, to learn about the floods and comebacks of the charming, historic area.

Harrisburg also prides itself on its growing art scene. Along the river is the [Art Association of Harrisburg](http://www.artassocofhbg.com) (www.artassocofhbg.com) located in a former governor's mansion. It's the city's oldest art school and gallery where you can buy art at very reasonable prices, attend lectures, and pick up a flier that will guide you through a walking tour of the Harrisburg galleries.



Harrisburg Art Association

The staff members are like cultural concierges, and they'll happily tell you which galleries are open, and where you would most likely find your taste in art. If you have children who are interested in fantasy art, there is a free class for ages 10 to 18 on Saturdays from 1-3 and Sundays from 2-4.

See more [Arts & Cultural](#) opportunities in the Hershey Harrisburg Region.

Wondering where the watering holes are? If you walk out of the Hilton and turn right, you'll embark on four blocks of bars, clubs and eateries referred to as [Restaurant Row](#), where you can compare notes with locals about Harrisburg highlights. See more [nightlife](#) offerings for the Hershey Harrisburg Region.

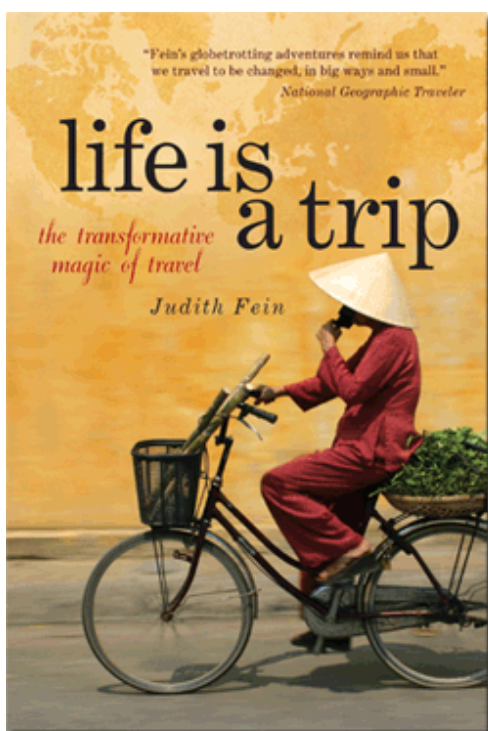
Cheers!

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About the Author:



Judith Fein is an award-winning travel journalist who has contributed to more than 100 international publications. She is the author of **LIFE IS A TRIP: The Transformative Magic of Travel**, and THE SPOON FROM MINKOWITZ: A Bittersweet Roots Journey to Ancestral Lands. She is the editor and co-founder of the popular Web site YourLifeisaTrip.com which features more than 70 writers. Her personal Web site with photojournalist husband Paul Ross is www.GlobalAdventure.us.



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