

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE DECEMBER 9, 2012 | BOSTONGLOBE.COM/TRAVEL

HEART AND SOUL IN PITTSBURGH



CULTURAL DOWNTOWN

Andy Warhol Museum amid galleries, theaters, parks, and projects that pop up.



PHOTOS BY NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



EAST LIBERTY

Union Pig and Chicken (top); items from Vanilla Pastry Studio; Conflict Kitchen; Spoon.

BY NECEE REGIS | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

I love this city. There, I said it. Every five years I make a pilgrimage to my college reunion in nearby Westmoreland County, and every five years I stop here and discover another reason — or three or four — to fall in love again.

You may have heard about Pittsburgh's success story of the 1990s: Steel mills close, waterfront develops, high-tech and research businesses flourish. But after the economic calamities of the past five years, pockets of town were and are suffering. Yet this is Pittsburgh — scrappy, energetic, entrepreneurial — and so I wasn't surprised to learn it's actively reclaiming its abandoned places.

I spent three days exploring two neighborhoods humming with growth and energy: East Liberty (locals call it "Sliberty") and the Downtown Cultural District.

A culturally diverse neighborhood, East Liberty is a combined commercial and residential district that feels as if it's changing by the week. Abandoned 19th-century structures slated for renova-

tion sit adjacent to shiny contemporary developments and towering stone churches. Locals credit the addition of retailers like Whole Foods, Target, Trader Joe's, and Home Depot for the area's revitalization. These mega-stores have encouraged — not squashed — the growth of local, homegrown businesses.

East Liberty is the city's new foodie mecca. James Beard Award-winning chefs and others have flocked here in the past five years, opening high-end bistros, pizza and wine bars, upscale burger joints with boozy milkshakes, a barbecue and fried chicken place, a retro hot dog spot (duck fat-fried, hand-cut french fries, anyone?), a dreamy cupcake bakery, and a take-out restaurant that serves cuisine only from countries in conflict with the United States.

Just how much good eating can be crammed into one weekend in Pittsburgh? A lot, though it helps to walk off calories between meals. Luckily, there are galleries, museums, and shops

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INSIDE

PROVIDENCE

Chill out on ice or in hot-house humidity — in a skating rink or a botanical center. M5



PATRICIA HARRIS



DAVID LYON

AMHERST

MUSEUM quietly celebrates home where the poet Emily Dickinson was born, lived, and wrote. M5



FRANK BINDER

GALÁPAGOS tortoise shells are highly reflective, so the best images are made in total shade or overcast conditions.

ECUADOR

A place like nowhere else for photographing wildlife

By Frank Binder
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS — These islands are among the world's great treasures. With an abundance of wildlife, gorgeous sunrises and sunsets, wild and scenic landscapes, and friendly people they present tremendous opportunities for photographers of all abilities to bring home wonderful images.

The islands were named a national park in 1958 and a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978. In pursuit of

its mission to protect the wildlife and environment, Ecuador's National Park Service restricts the areas that can be visited on each island, designating defined trails and requiring that a naturalist guide accompany visitors.

Because of the geographic dispersion of the islands, the best way to do a photographic tour is to join a ship-based expedition. They range from 5 to 15 days and are offered by many organizations.

LIGHT

The Galápagos are located in the Pacific Ocean 600 miles west of mainland Ecuador and sit astride the equator. The sun rises and falls quickly and as a result great lighting conditions in the morning and evening don't last long. Sunrise and sunset occur at approximately 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. Ninety minutes before sunset and more than 90 minutes before sunset light conditions deteriorate. It's important to ask tour operators

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A unique place for focusing on rare fauna

► GALÁPAGOS

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you're considering when they will land on islands each morning and when they will depart (park regulations prohibit visitors on the islands before sunrise and after sunset).

Overcast skies are infrequent but when they occur, they provide perfect soft light conditions for taking pictures of wildlife.

The period from December to February is a fine time to visit the islands. The seas are calmer and because it's their rainy season (without much rain), overcast conditions are more frequent.

ACCESS TO WILDLIFE

In many places in the world wildlife photography means long lenses, tripods, and long waits for wildlife to appear. That is not the case in the Galápagos (named for the tortoises on some of the islands whose shells resemble an old Spanish saddle, a galápagos), where a visitor will often have to move out of the path of an animal to allow it to pass. Here, hand-held cameras are the norm, and a good-quality tele-zoom coupled with a wide-angle lens are all you need to obtain great images. I used a Nikon D700 full frame DSLR.

Park regulations require that visitors stay 6 feet from the animals. Sometimes complying takes an effort. Young sea lions are very curious and will waddle right up to you and start bleating.

BIRDS

Blue-footed and red-footed boobies with their brightly colored feet, male frigate birds with their outsized red pouches, and swallow-tailed gulls all make exciting shots. The most interesting photos are those where the birds are interacting with each other.



FRANK BINDER

While you may see them on virtually every seashore on the Galápagos Islands, the best place to photograph sea lions — whose adults are active and expressive — is in Gardner Bay on Espanola Island late in the day.

Try to find a pair of the gulls, focusing your lens on them until you get the right moment.

Many of the birds, particularly the masked boobies, have bright white plumage, which makes it mandatory to check your highlights or your histogram to ensure you have the proper exposure. In an area with high numbers of these birds, I set my EV compensation down one stop so that I don't blow out the highlights of some interesting bird interactions.

IGUANAS

There are two primary types of iguanas here, land and marine. You will see the golden-colored land iguanas mostly inland and probably alone. They have spectacular color and markings. For the best images shoot from a low level in the golden light periods or with overcast light. You may also see the iguanas traveling down a trail, which would be a great opportunity to get movement into your image.

The color of marine iguanas varies

by season and island. Unlike land iguanas, marine iguanas will frequently be in large groups and because these are the world's only sea-going iguanas, you will find them mostly by the seashore.

Try to place them in the foreground of a wide-angle shot that shows them in their environment. Get a low-angled head shot and capture their prehistoric look. Find a group of them on an outcropping and isolate them from the background with a small lens opening. The possi-

bilities for being creative with images of these reptiles are endless.

TORTOISES

Reaching 500 pounds and 5 feet in length, the Galápagos tortoises are the largest species of tortoises on the planet. The species are different from island to island. Hunting, habitat clearance for agriculture, and the introduction of nonnative animals caused tortoise numbers to decline from 250,000 in the 16th century to around 3,000 in the 1970s. Conservation efforts have raised that number to 19,000 tortoises today.

Most of the areas where tortoises live in the wild are off-limits to visitors. The tortoises you see are likely to be at ecotourism farms or the Charles Darwin Research Station on Isabella Island. The farm tortoises are kept within large forested areas that visitors are allowed to enter. They are slow-moving and getting good images is not difficult. Their shells are highly reflective so the best images are those taken in total shade or overcast conditions. Photographing them while they are eating can yield terrific results.

SEA LIONS

The adults are active and expressive and the pups are incredibly cute. While you will see them on virtually every seashore on the islands, the best place to photograph them is in Gardner Bay on Espanola Island late in the day. The day I was there we counted 339 sea lions on a pristine white sand beach. I photographed pups with mothers, braying males, adults snapping at each other while jockeying to get the best positions, and wide-angle shots with animals in the foreground.

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Reclaiming spaces with smart ideas

► PITTSBURGH

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worth exploring when not on a culinary binge.

At the busy intersection of South Highland Avenue and Penn Circle South, near the Goodwill clothing store, the upscale restaurant Spoon and adjacent BRGR Bar (as in "burger bar") are owned by executive chef Brian Pekarckik, Pittsburgh magazine's 2012 chef of the year. Part bar, part lounge, and sophisticated dining destination, Spoon offers a seasonally changing menu prepared from locally sourced Pennsylvania farmers' products and artisanal purveyors. Grilled pork tenderloin with chipotle braised cheek, and Gorgonzola cheese soufflé drew raves at my table, though equally irresistible were sides of duck fat whipped potatoes and chive cream cheese biscuits.

For those who just want a burger — OK, a handcrafted burger of Angus chuck, New York strip, sirloin, and ribeye — head for BRGR Bar. The drink menu features local and craft beers, a burger-friendly wine list, and alcohol-spiked milkshakes. Turkey and salmon burgers are also available.

Stand in front of BRGR and look across the street, and up, to find Dinette, a sleek, contemporary space housed in a modern multi-use development. Since it serves a casual menu of starters and pizza, you might mistake this eatery for an ordinary pizza joint. You would be wrong. Chef Sonja Finn, nominated as a James Beard Award semifinalist "Rising Star Chef of the Year" in 2009 and 2010, slings sophisticated thin-crust pizzas with a changing list of toppings, such as salt-cured anchovies and jalapenos, soppressata with fontina, and — our table's favorite — spicy spinach with fried egg.

Call him crazy, but award-winning chef Kevin Sousa opened two eateries in two months this year: Union Pig and Chicken, and Station Street Hotdogs.

"When I started looking for a space in East Liberty, this side of Penn Avenue was a ghost town," said Sousa, who also operates the modernist-cuisine restaurant Salt of the Earth (NACl).

At Union Pig and Chicken, the menu is all about barbecue (pork, chicken, brisket), ribs, and fried chicken, with sides of cornbread, mac and cheese, slaw, and baked beans served on metal trays. The smoker is out in the parking lot. Bourbon, corn whiskey, and rye dominate the cocktail menu. The decor is simple — cowboy chic — with rough-hewn wood walls, lightbulbs dangling from the ceiling, and a red and white checked mural



PHOTOS BY NEECE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

BRGR Bar (center) and its upscale neighbor, Spoon (right), are owned by chef of the year Brian Pekarckik; chef Sonja Finn's Dinette (below left) is nearby. The storefront Conflict Kitchen has become home-based.



that mimics the placemats. Fourteen-foot-long knotty pine tables and benches encourage community chatter.

"I've been in Pittsburgh nine years and it's changed so much, especially this part of town," said Jessica Keyser, general manager. "Three or four years ago there was nothing here."

Station Street Hotdogs specializes in — no surprise — dogs: house dogs, Hawaii dogs (with pineapple salsa), chili cheese dogs (with arsenal cheese curds), banh mi dogs (pork liver with pickled vegetables) and more, made with 100 percent beef natural casing or vegan. This glass-enclosed eatery with red vinyl stools looks out to the parking lot, recalling an era of lunch counter simplicity.

Conflict Kitchen, a take-out style storefront serving food from countries with which the United States is in conflict, opened in 2010. It has featured — one country at a time for a number of months — Iranian, Afghan, and Venezuelan cuisine. A project of Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski, it aims to engage the public in the culture, politics, and issues at stake within each country, through food as well as a series of events, performances, and discussions. Since my visit, it has closed in the East Liberty location and is looking to secure a larger restaurant, with seat-

ing, downtown. But don't despair: Conflict Kitchen has been functioning as a Cuban paladar (home-based restaurant) in the home of a local family. Check website for dates and book a spot for a five-course Cuban meal accompanied by lively political and cultural conversation.

Also noteworthy: Vanilla Pastry Studio, serving the fluffiest cupcakes, and Zeke's Coffee, a small batch roaster (one pound at a time) serving iced or hot coffee strong enough to propel you through the day.

In the Downtown Cultural District, empty storefronts inspired the city to initiate a program of pop-up spaces, and encouraged local businesses to apply.

Since last January, 11 projects were chosen out of 90 applicants, with more on the way, including Awesome Books, Boutique 208 (artist co-op), an ice cream shop — Dream Cream Ice Cream — that funnels money to 12 dreamers a month (to finance their personal projects, or dreams), Robot Repair (art installation), and something called The Society for the Advancement of Miniature Curiosa.

"The pop-up project aims to get empty retail spaces filled. It's a great venue for each artist," said Marcy Bates, a co-op member of Boutique

208, adding they have already extended their lease and plan to stay in the neighborhood.

The 14-square-block district, a project of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, also has dozens of art galleries, seven world-class theaters, eight public parks and art installations, and is adjacent to the Allegheny River, where a brief stroll over the lemony-yellow 7th Street Bridge will take you to the Andy Warhol Museum.

The spirit of reclamation is active in the corporate world as well. On bustling Liberty Avenue PNC Bank employs an on-call archeologist to catalog artifacts it finds while building a new corporate tower, continuing a reclamation project (PNC Legacy Collection) of more than 26,000 artifacts found during a previous excavation. Some of those objects are on display — with audio tour — free and open to the public in the nearby Fairmont Hotel.

The bank is also building a separate exhibition hall — dubbed The Lantern Building — to display more objects from the collection, including glass bottles, porcelain dolls, ceramic plate fragments, and other items that reflect Pittsburgh's early history. I hope it's ready for my next reunion.

Neece Regis can be contacted at neece@gis@gmail.com.

If you go . . .

Where to stay

The Inn on Negley
703 South Negley Ave.
412-661-0631
www.innonnegley.com
Elegantly restored late-19th-century home with eight guest rooms. Located in Shadyside within walking distance of East Liberty restaurants. \$180-\$240.

Fairmont Pittsburgh
510 Market St.
412-773-8800
www.fairmont.com
Steps from the Downtown Cultural District, 185 rooms housed in Three PNC Plaza. From \$249.

Where to eat

Spoon
134 South Highland Ave.
412-362-6001
www.spoonpgh.com
Entrees \$19-\$32.

BRGR Bar
5997 Penn Circle South
412-362-2333
www.brgrpgh.com
Burgers \$7-\$12.

Dinette
5996 Penn Circle South
412-362-0202
www.dinette-pgh.com
Pizzas \$13-\$16.

Conflict Kitchen
Private home pop-up dining.
www.conflictkitchen.org
Dinner: \$40 suggested donation.

Station Street Hotdogs
6290 Broad St.
412-365-2121
www.stationstreetpgh.com
Hot dogs \$4-\$8.

Union Pig and Chicken
220 North Highland Ave.
412-363-7675
www.unionpgh.com
Entrees \$7-\$20.

Vanilla Pastry Studio
6014 Penn Circle South
412-361-2306
www.vanillapastry.com
Cupcakes \$2.25.

Dream Cream Ice Cream
539 Liberty Ave.
www.dreamcreamicecream.com
Cones and cups \$3.25-\$5.

What to do

Andy Warhol Museum
117 Sandusky St.
412-237-8300
www.warhol.org
\$20

Pittsburgh Cultural Trust
www.trustarts.org

Find out about theaters, galleries, museums, restaurants, and public arts in the Cultural District.

Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership
www.downtownpittsburgh.com/about-pdp/pdp-initiatives/project-pop-up
Learn what new projects are popping up in the Cultural District.