

April 2012

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East Coast twins

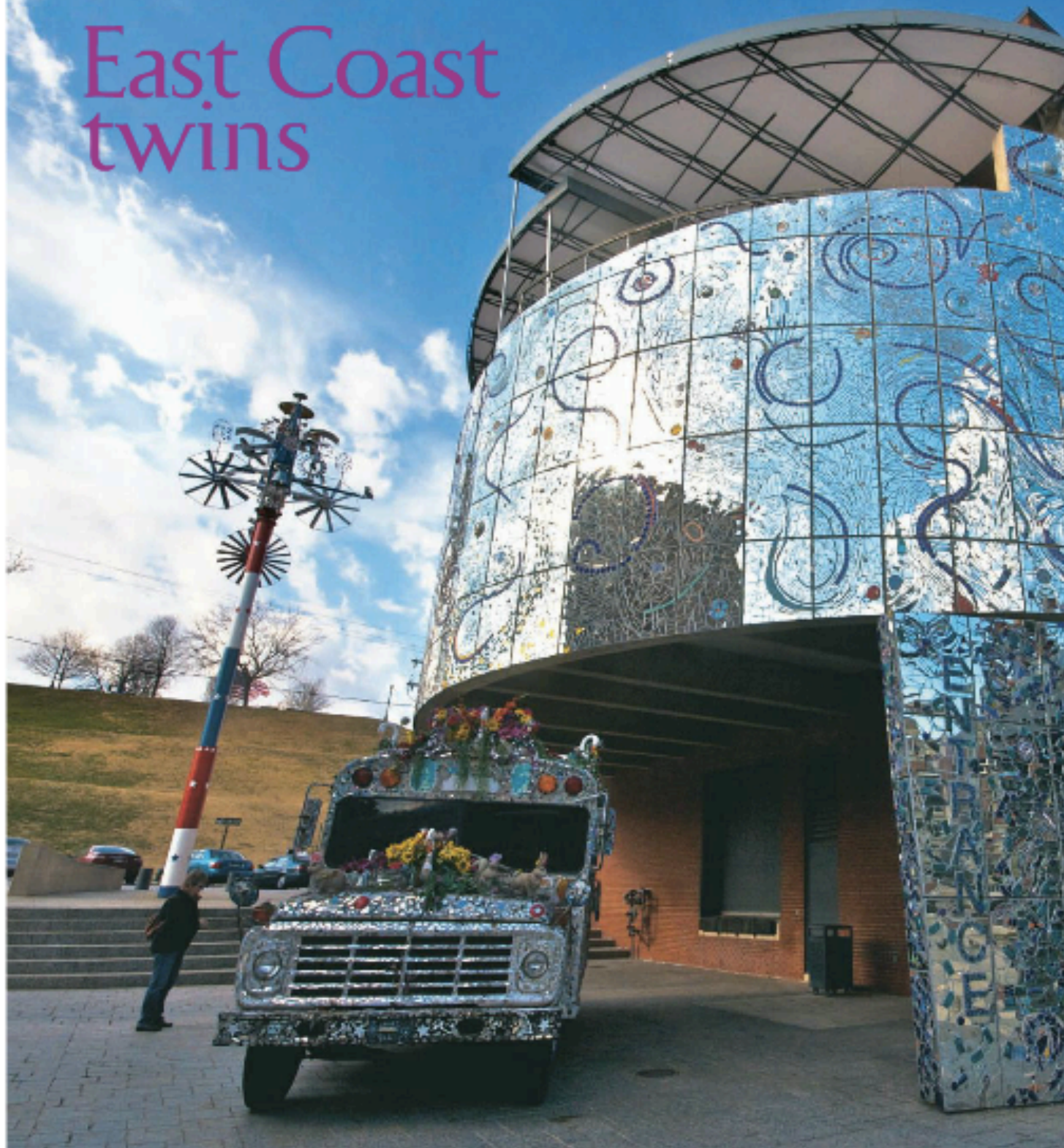




Photo: J. G. Smith

Not similar in any obvious ways, Baltimore and Washington DC offer diverse yet equally eclectic and enriching tourist experiences.

Text: Candace Rose Rardon

Minneapolis and St Paul. Dallas and Fort Worth. Raleigh and Durham. Much of the US is dotted with such pairs: twin cities that share everything from airport codes to baseball teams. Over a surprisingly warm weekend this past January, I got to know another set of twins—Baltimore, Maryland, and Washington DC.

Located along the country's eastern coastline in a region referred to as the Mid-Atlantic, these two cities are barely an hour apart by car. They offer visitors the chance to experience the best of both worlds—Baltimore's funky art scene and beautiful harbour, as well as the stirring monuments and neighbourhood markets of Washington DC.

Arriving late on a Friday night, my only qualm was whether one weekend would be enough to see it all.

Visions of grandeur

Although not the state capital—that title belongs to next-door neighbour Annapolis—Baltimore is the largest city in Maryland, with its population slowly nearing three million. The Patapsco River winds its way

▲ Above: The National Cathedral, the sixth largest cathedral in the world, stands tall against the Washington DC skyline.

Left: The mirrored-mosaic facade of the American Visionary Art Museum glitters in the morning sunlight.



▲ Clockwise from above: Rows of brick houses line the historical area of Federal Hill in Baltimore; The Federal Hill Park overlooking the Inner Harbor is the perfect spot to unwind in Baltimore; As night arrives, the city magnificently lights up the Inner Harbor.

right along the city, and it is Baltimore's famous Inner Harbour that has made it a key player in shipping, manufacturing and immigration, over time.

My host in the city was my childhood best friend, Jen. Rather than sleep away our Saturday morning, Jen whisked me out of her apartment to the award-winning American Visionary Art Museum (AVAM). As we entered the building, I was dazzled by the mirrored mosaics covering the museum's exterior, glittering in the morning sunlight like a thousand prisms. I could only imagine what awaited us inside.

The AVAM celebrates artists who are more self-taught than formally trained, guided by their personal creative visions instead of rules or conventions. While wandering through the three-storied building, we marvelled at Mark Swiker's finely carved Styrofoam cups, Wendy Brackman's eight-foot-diameter paper plate mandala, and Gerald Hawkes' sculptures built entirely from matchsticks and glue. After such inspiration, we left the museum thinking anything is possible.

Hiking into history

It was Baltimore's history that drew us to our next destination, Federal Hill. As we walked towards the neighbourhood's eponymous natural landmark, we passed whole blocks of narrow row houses, many of which are listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Climbing the hill's gentle slopes felt like hiking into the past. It was here during the War of 1812 that the Battle of Baltimore took place. As the troops at Fort McHenry fought off the British, Francis Scott Key watched the conflict unfold from aboard a ship and penned the words to what is now the country's national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

As couples jogged past and a family chased after their runaway dog, Jen and I found a bench in the shadows of a giant American Elm, no doubt commemorating the tree's historic significance. With the building block skyline to our left and the placid surface of Inner Harbor stretching out in front of us, it was clear that we had the best seat in the city.

Mighty harbour

But if we were to complete our tour of the city, we couldn't sit still for long. Leaving the summit of Federal Hill behind, we made our way to Harbor East, where a chic, new restaurant seemed to be 'opening soon' on every corner. Down on the water, a long wooden dock extended out into the harbour as fleets of white sailboats tacked in neat zig-zag lines and a faint salty breeze blew through our hair.

The harbour led us along the shoreline as it wrapped around Fell's Point, a vibrant area brimming with shops and cafés, art galleries and gelaterias. The sidewalks were a maze of brightly-painted buildings and outdoor oyster bars, with guitar-playing buskers wooing their crowds with pop songs and folk tunes.

For brunch we decided on Teavolve, won over by specials such as apple-cinnamon stuffed French toast and made-to-order egg sandwiches—not to mention lattes served in mugs so big we could barely wrap our hands around them.

"Baltimore has everything you want in a big city," Jen said on our drive back to her apartment, "without any of the stress."

From monuments to markets

Just as I started to feel at home in Baltimore, it was time to shift scenes. Two friends from university were waiting to catch up in Washington DC, so I rushed to them as quick as I could.

Given its status as the national capital, DC can often be thought of as being only about politics. Indeed, whenever I pictured the city, what always came to mind were images of the white-domed Capitol Building, the Supreme Court's stately columns, and a flurry of men in suits and ties going about the nation's business.

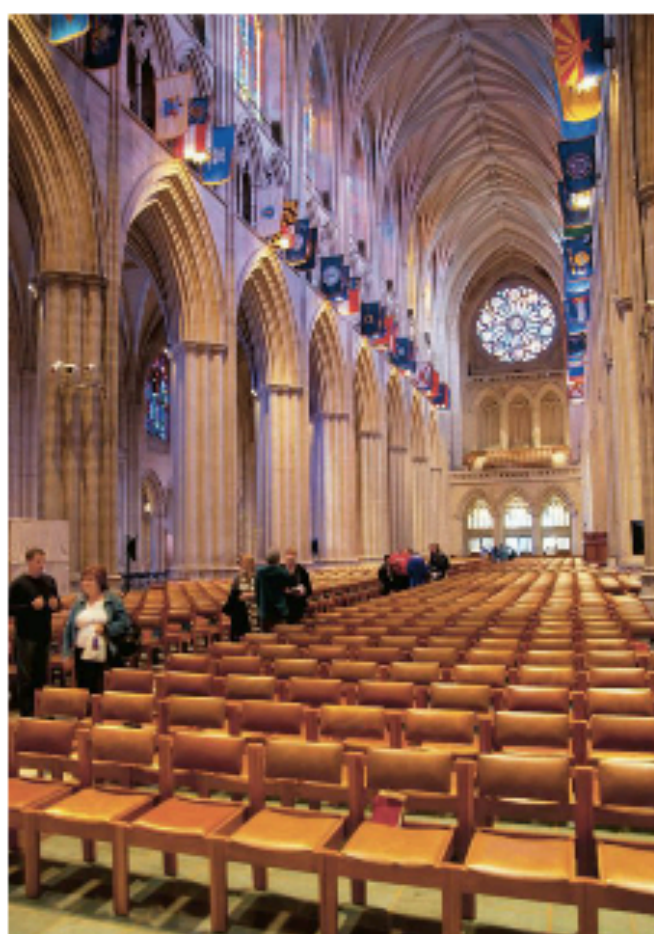
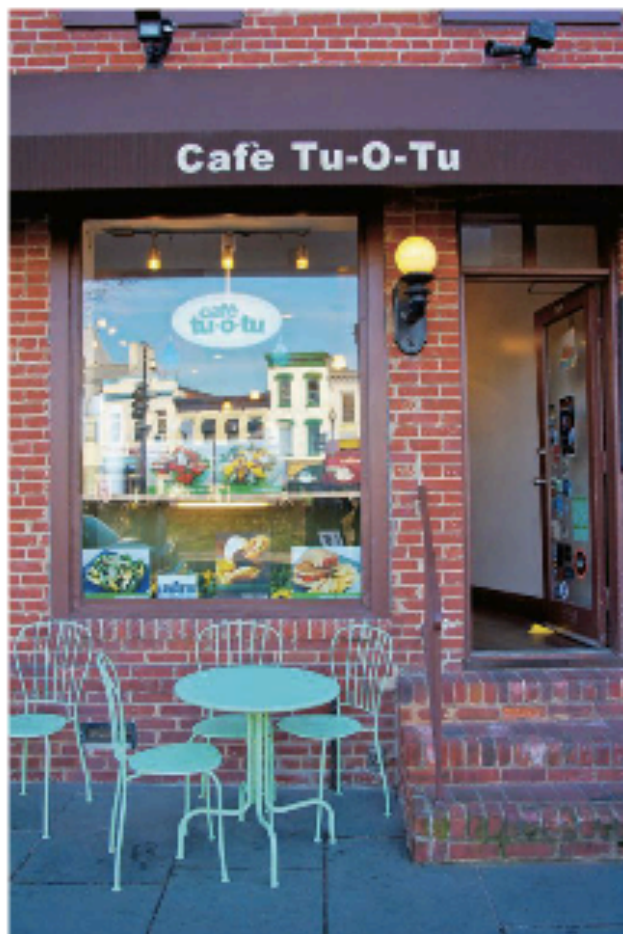
What I hadn't pictured was a lively neighbourhood market, already bustling

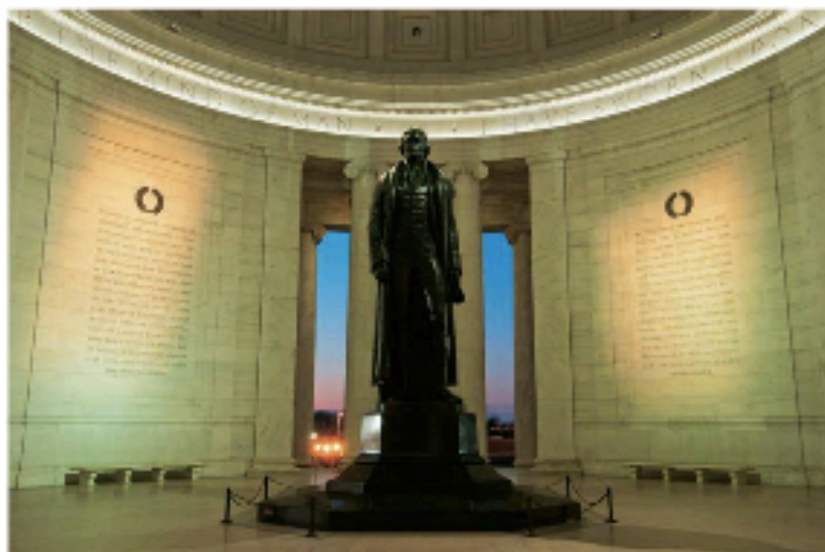
when we arrived on Sunday morning. While we'd spent the previous night exploring monuments—from the lakeside Jefferson Memorial to the Washington Monument—unmissable as it pierces the sky like an arrow—it was DC's Eastern Market that surprised me most.

In the South Hall of the market, we warmed ourselves with coffee and freshly baked cranberry scones, while other merchants sold seafood, cheese and different kinds of ravioli. Coffee in hand, we moved to the outdoor market, where I debated between Afghani tea boxes, Iraqi carpets and Turkish pillows as the perfect souvenir. It was the market's incredible diversity that showed me this new side to the city—a side that isn't always commemorated on the backs of dollar bills.



► Clockwise from the right: Piercing the sky, the Washington Monument commemorates the country's 34th president, George Washington; The grandeur of the National Cathedral's intricately-designed interiors are simply breathtaking; Named after the city's area code, 202, this cafe is located in a historic neighbourhood in DC.





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▲ Above: The interiors of the Washington Monument are as splendid as the exterior is simple. Below: The buzzing Eastern Market in Washington DC sells a number of eclectic souvenirs from all over the world.

Capitol heights

There was only one last thing left to do before my weekend with the East Coast twin cities could come to an end—a visit to the National Cathedral. Ranked as the sixth largest cathedral in the world, it was hard to believe that construction was only finished in 1950. What, with the intricate details of its rose windows and flying buttresses so closely resembling more historic European churches.

We were early for the evensong service, so one of the ushers motioned for us to

follow him into the lift. Stepping out on the top floor of the central tower, we were greeted by the afternoon sun casting diamond-shaped shadows on the wall—and by unbelievable views of the city. My face pressed against the tower's highest windows, I looked out over the valley, spotting the Washington Monument—now nothing more than a thin needle on the horizon—and knew that somewhere not too far north was Baltimore. Twins have a way of staying close, after all.

Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways has daily flights via Orlando to New York and Newark from Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai. You can get onward flights from there to either Baltimore or Washington D.C. The two cities themselves are well connected by train and bus, especially during the week when the MARC commuter rail service connects Baltimore's Penn Station straight to Union Station in DC.

Accommodation

For the best locations in Baltimore, check out Harbor Magic Hotels, which offer three unique experiences—the Pier 5 Hotel, the Waterfront Inn at Renaissance's Wharf, and the Admiral Fell Inn at Fell's Point. For more details, visit www.harbormagic.com.

In DC, the luxurious St. Regis hotel is practically set in the White House's backyard. Visit www.stregishotels.com/stregisdc for more details.

For more information log on to American Visionary Art Museum—www.avamem.org

Fell's Point—www.fellspoint.com

Eastern Market—

www.easternmarket-dc.org

Washington National Cathedral—

www.nationalcathedral.org



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