

Philly is Looking Good

Especially seen from way up high

Okay, all those tourists have left the Independence Mall area after doin' the summer patriotic thing. And all those Democratic Convention people have packed up their signs and gone home, too. So now the city of Brotherly Love is back to normal and ready to open its doors to visitors during its most beautiful time of the year: fall.

Even in the city you can experience fall thanks to the legacy of William Penn who laid out the grid for Philly with parks and green spaces as a vital part of the design. The city has grown quite a bit since the pacifist Quaker (who actually rarely spent any time in Philly or in the state that bears his name) first oversaw its layout, but Philly's unheralded attribute is that it's manageable in size and a great city for walking.

But if you want to view Philly from a new perspective, consider going skyward. Observation decks are a top tourist draw these days. Most specialize in vertigo inducing, cloud-poking heights as seen in Chicago, New York or the Grand Canyon. Overseas it's Shanghai, London and Dubai that offer dizzying views. So maybe you don't need to reach for the sky that high.

In Philadelphia, for the longest time, a great view meant a visit to City Hall. At a modest 548 feet (including the statue of city founder William Penn atop it), it was the tallest habitable building in the world from 1894 to 1908. It remained the tallest in Pennsylvania until it was surpassed in 1932 by the Gulf Tower in Pittsburgh. It was the tallest in Philadelphia until the construction of One Liberty Place (1984-87) ended the informal gentlemen's agreement that limited the height of buildings in the city.

The building is a behemoth of granite and loaded with architectural details. By all means go for the view, but try to do the tour of the building as well. Escorted trips to the observation deck are a throwback to another day. It reminded me of visiting the Statue of Liberty in New York on a school trip in the sixties.

With little fuss and a bit more rust, it's a charmingly old-fashioned encounter with a building that doesn't care if it's creaky. You are escorted through a maze of stairways by an unscripted volunteer who may remind you of a Seinfeld character. She hands you off to a guard who cheerfully waits up there for you to arrive then rides with you in a very old, very small elevator (think OLD hotel in Paris).

What you lose in slick presentation and nosebleeds is made up for by a ride that lets you see the bones of the building – rust, rivets and all – as you slowly climb higher before arriving in the circular viewing area. Rest assured, you still get a great view. It was not crowded, had no Epcot-like lines and was not expensive. NOTE: the statue of Penn is set for a cleaning and access to the City Hall observation deck may be limited during part of September so check in advance.

But for contrast, I decided to check out the splashier, newer One Liberty



City Hall viewed from S. Broad Street. City founder William Penn is atop the building and below him in the circular area is the observation deck.

Observation Deck that's 57 stories up. And One Liberty is on Market Street — a mere 10-15 minute walk from City Hall. I kind of expected lines, but there were none. The Liberty complex is composed of a 61-story, 945-foot skyscraper called One Liberty Place, a 58-story, 848-foot skyscraper called Two Liberty Place, a two-story shopping mall called the Shops at Liberty Place, and the 14-story Westin Philadelphia Hotel. The Observation Deck opened in late 2015.

When One Liberty Place was completed, it was the tallest skyscraper in Philadelphia knocking Billy Penn off his honorary pedestal. It's operated by the folks that gave us observation decks in the John Hancock Tower in Chicago and the Montparnasse 56 Tower in Paris. What City Hall lacks in innovation is made up by the playful layout and slick tech of One Liberty. There's lots more room in the observation area including space for a huge head of none other than Ben Franklin. And, considering that this building usurped City hall for "tallest" bragging rights, you can get a great view of City Hall from here. The contrast between these two places made visiting them even more enjoyable.

I've often said in travel article that rivers tell a lot about a city. Plus they offer a great vantage point at sea level to see a city. I've walked alongside or boated on the Thames in London and the Seine in Paris. Chicago, Boston, New York – you name it, most cities have a river. Philly happens to have two rivers: the Delaware which is the entryway into the city from the east and the Atlantic Ocean and the

Schuylkill (pronounced skookill) which curves through the western part of the city giving it a beautiful path for walking, biking and sightseeing.

Fortunately Philly has also gotten on the river bandwagon and now offers boat rides, tours and kayaking – even movies—in newly created parks along the river's winding path. Newest addition is the Schuylkill Banks that allow you to walk alongside the river and, at certain points, over the river for another view of the city.

So what hotel would fill the bill for this kind of trip? The Loews Hotel, in the almost shadow of City Hall, is such a place. If you ever took an art history class, had an interest in modernist architecture or you appreciate preserving historic landmarks, the story behind this hotel will appeal to you.

If you grew up in the 'burbs of Philly like I did, you may have had your first bank account with PSFS (Pennsylvania Savings Fund Society) that gave you a plaid account booklet and a certain sense of élan (that is, if eleven year olds have élan).

PSFS was a savings bank headquartered in Philadelphia, founded in 1816. It was the first savings bank to organize and do business in the U.S. and would develop as one of the largest savings banks in the U.S. and became a Philadelphia institution.

Numerous bank mergers and bank failures later, PSF is long gone, but thankfully the PSFS building remains. And what a building it is. Best described as "elegant, subtly sculpted slab masses....a summation of European Modernism," it has a steel frame with granite, limestone and brick cladding. It's sleek. And the



The view from City Hall (looking at One Liberty!)



The view from One Liberty.

Loews team built on that sleep frame by adding tailored trim that makes the open areas handsome, understated yet vey sophisticated.

Howe & Lescaze built the PSFS building in 1929. The resulting structure, completed in 1932, is today generally considered the first International Modernist skyscraper, and the first International Style building of wide significance in the United States. In 1997, Loews Hotels & Resorts announced in the PSFS boardroom that the PSFS building would be converted into



PSFS building in 1985 – a Philadelphia icon and before it was a Loews Hotel.

travel news continued



Tired of the view way up? Something down to earth is the new Schuylkill Banks that lets you walk along and even over the river.



The Banks by day.



The Lobby Bar at the Loews Hotel.



Luxury living at the Loews. They have a variety of rooms and rates however.



The view from the Loews Hotel.

a Loews Hotel. Conversion into a hotel began in 1998, and the Loews Philadelphia Hotel opened in April 2000.

The hotel takes full advantage of the historical features of the building. The once three-story banking room is now a beautiful banquet space that has preserved the historical features, such as the bank's safe, Cartier clocks, and original marble. Loews Philadelphia today houses 581 luxury rooms and has 33 stories. And be sure to choose a room high up and enjoy the view of city hall to the west and look east toward the Delaware River and Independence Mall.

The Loews Hotel fronts Market Street – Philly's busiest shopping thoroughfare that is going through a much-needed upgrade. Market Street was home to all of the grand dames of shopping when shopping was an experience. All are gone or converted with only the lovely Wanamaker's still open as a store, but now it's Macy's.

Since we're talking architecture here, be sure to visit the store – just a few minutes walk west of Loews where it sits diagonal to City Hall. And, in my opinion, you must catch the organ concerts that are given on the ground floor. The sound is akin to 10 "Phantom of the Opera" organs. Organ Concert are at noon and 5:30 Monday-Saturday.

Dining at Loews is not in the clouds, but rather a down to earth experience at the Bank & Bourbon Restaurant. I love seeing locally sourced seasonal cuisine on menus. So go for the Lancaster County cheeses and poultry as they have wonderful flavor and travel just a few hours from the west in Amish country. To go with their long list of bourbons et. al., you've got to have a steak and they've got one weighing in at 32 oz. if you're adventurous; one at 18 oz.; and one more like my style at 8 oz. My recommendation is you've got to have the mushrooms that may very well come from the "mushroom capital" Kennett Square – also in Philly's western 'burbs. They're flavorful – not like the ones in supermarkets here. Bank & Bourbon offers stylish comfort food that you can't get tired of.

The rooms? We're getting there. You need to walk around the lobby a bit and wind your way to the elevators. You may get a sense of déjà vu especially if you've been to Rockefeller Center since they were built around the same time. Expecting a standard room, we were treated instead to what must be the "crème de la crème room" that's more like a penthouse.

A look at the hotel's web site shows all rooms have great views of the city and come with sleek modernist furniture in bold black and cherry red but balanced by white leather and chrome. It works. And thank you Loews for the breathtaking penthouse that gave us THE best view of the city and a space that would have made the pedometer hit that magical 10,000 steps while walking past windows that show views as far as New York in the distance. Loving architecture as I do – this was great entertainment 24/7. The staff at Loews was friendly and attentive. This is a stylish hotel - on all levels – and in a great location. We'll be back.

Accommodations

Loews Philadelphia has 581 guest-rooms, including 12 suites and 54 Club Rooms. Rates for a weekend night range from \$223-247 for a room with a queen-sized bed. Add \$40 and you've got their bed and breakfast special. It's a great value. For our visit we enjoyed the pool that was on site.

Dining at the hotel: Bank & Bourbon offering a unique barrel aging program for Bourbon, Whiskey and Rye spirits that wonderfully complements their traditional American fare. Serves breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The Loews Philadelphia Hotel completed a \$25 million enhancement project that included the guestrooms, meeting space, expanded lobby and the debut of Bank & Bourbon restaurant in 2014. The hotel opened a new lobby lounge area that is much larger than the original lobby. The lobby offers community tables with charging and electricity stations and free Wi-Fi connectivity. Have cocktails at the bar or order food off the lounge

menu. For rates and packages, visit www.loewshotels-philadelphia.com.

Taking in New Heights

■ **City Hall Visitor Center**, 1 Penn Square, Rm. 121, Philadelphia
Open daily Monday – Friday. Visitor Center: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tower trips: 9:30-4:15, every 15 minutes
Reservations for timed tickets required. Price: Adult \$6; Child \$4. Tour the building – it's fascinating. The exterior features more than 250 sculptures representing people of the world and their continents, as well as allegorical figures—all designed by Alexander Milne Calder. A two-hour guided tour of the building and 15-minute tower tours are offered every weekday. Call (215) 686-2840 or visit phlvisitor-center.com/cityhall.

■ **One Liberty Observation Deck**, 1650 Market St., Philadelphia
Hours: 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.
Phone: (215) 561-3325
General admission starts at \$14 for youth (3-11) and \$19 for Adults (12+).

From high atop the 57th floor of Liberty Place, visitors to the One Liberty Observation Deck will be gobsmacked by the 360° landscapes that stretch for miles while also hearing tidbits of Philadelphia's past and its evolution into a major American city.

Closer to Earth

■ **Schuylkill Banks** – Philly's latest addition is a way to walk and run on track that parallels the Schuylkill River which happens to have a splendid view not just of the city, but Boathouse Row.

■ **Emergence of a Modern Metropolis Tour** run by the Center for Architecture and Design, this year-round, two-hour tour explores the transformation of Philadelphia from an engine of industry to a 21st-century capital of business and culture. It features the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Wanamaker building and the Comcast Center, among other landmarks. (215) 569-3186, philadelphiafca.org

- **Hidden City Tours** – Visitors and locals who want to discover lesser known landmarks and stories choose Hidden City Tours. Itineraries include Life & Death at Mount Moriah Cemetery, David Lynch's Eraserhead, Forgotten Broad Street and Philly Jazz Walking Tour. Schedules and meeting spots are determined tour-by-tour, and most sell out in advance. hiddencityphila.org/events
- **The Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia Architecture Walking Tours** are 90-minute walking tours interpret the past, present and future of the Philadelphia region as expressed through architecture, urban design and social history. Guided tours are available May through October; private tours are available year-round by emailing tours@preservationalliance.com. Call (215) 546-1146 or visit preservationalliance.com

Final Tips

- **Getting around?** Try to avoid the cabs. They're sub-par and they're going to crawl in traffic anyway. Uber has better cars. Philly's subway system could be better, but what's better than spending under \$3 to get from Loews to the Liberty Bell in just a few minutes? Walking is also entirely doable.
- If I'm not **dining** at the Hotel, the Reading Terminal (pronounced Redding) has everything under the sun from Philly classics to well anything: Amish food, Asian Food, Thai, hoagies, scrapple... It'll take you 2 days to really see the place since it's often very crowded.
- And take it from my experience as both a travel writer and a quasi native. Just a block or so north is the Philadelphia Convention Center. Naturally all around it are **hotels**, but their cookie cutter approach and obvious skimping (as well as sub-par neighborhood) are NOT worth saving a few dollars. You've been warned.

Loews offers great value and top-notch service. I am grateful to them for restoring this beautiful building and giving it new life. The hotel is a gem, elegant and with great service and worth a stay.

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