



AN INDEPENDENT SPIRIT

The 'city of brotherly love', Philadelphia is the perfect destination for travellers interested in American history. But this vibrant and dynamic city has plenty more to offer, as Bridget Corvus discovered.

"I wouldn't have a clue what to expect," was most people's reaction when I told them I was visiting Philadelphia. And other than the fact it was the birthplace of American Independence and its association with films such as 'Rocky' and 'Philadelphia' neither did I. But while this city founded by William Penn in 1682 exalts American patriotism, having played a pivotal historical role and spawned the American Constitution, it has experienced something of a renaissance in the last decade or so and now offers cultural and lifestyle trappings to match its important heritage. Travelling the short 15-minute ride from the international airport, you glimpse the first evidence of the city's forward-thinking attitude. Large murals dominating the side of buildings in outlying districts depict singers, actors, artists and local people. Part of a programme to combat graffiti and redirect the artists' creative energy, more than 3,000 murals now serve as the largest public art programme in the US and serve to beautify otherwise run-down neighbourhoods. There is no need, however, to beautify the area in which we were staying. The attractive Rittenhouse Square District is brimming with art galleries, designer boutiques, outdoor cafés and elegant restaurants

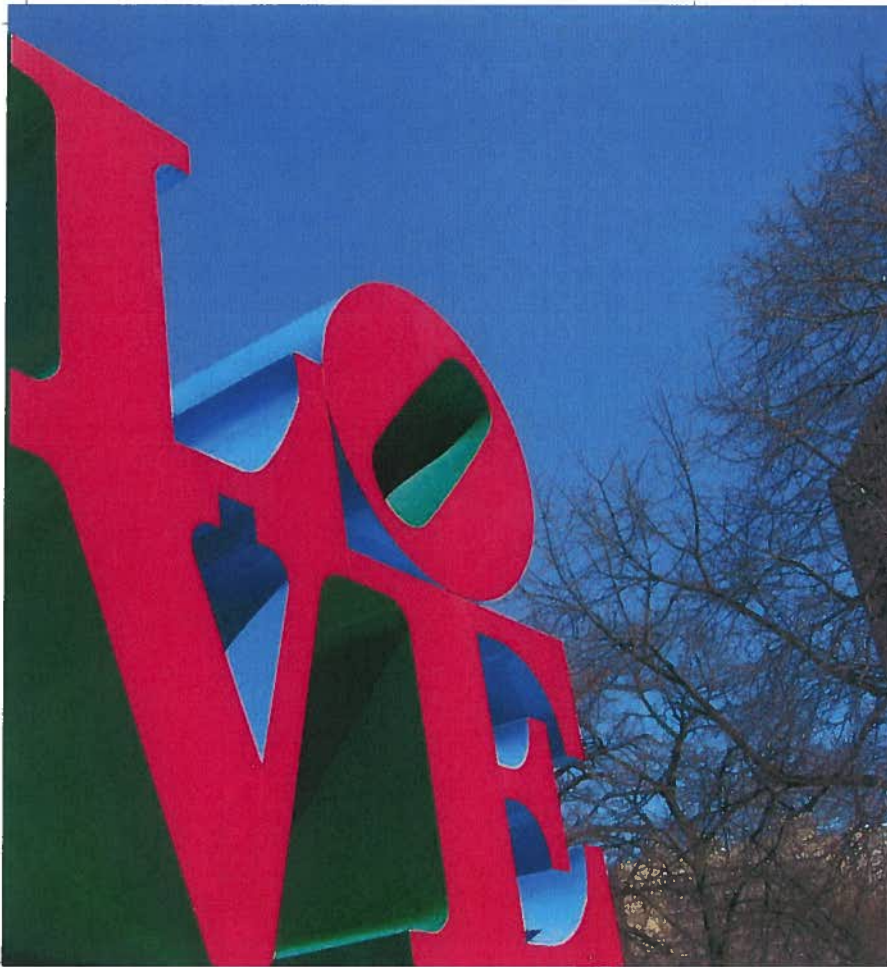
The eponymous Rittenhouse Hotel faces the



pleasant park at the area's core. One of the most luxurious hotels in downtown Philadelphia, the Rittenhouse has welcomed many famous names over its threshold, including rock stars, actors and world leaders. And nothing, it would appear, is too much to ask of the helpful staff offering a five diamond service. But with its spacious, comfortable rooms, signature fine-dining Lacroix Restaurant, large and excellently equipped Adolf Brecker Spa and Salon and even in-house chocolatier creating sweet delights for

your enjoyment, there's little you need ask for. Venturing out it is easy to navigate your way around the city. Built on a grid-system, each neighbourhood is distinctive with its own character, architecture and attractions. While you can make use of the Philadelphia Trolley Works or Big Bus for hop-on hop-off guided tours to gain your bearings and interesting insights and anecdotes of the city's history, it's worth exploring on foot.

A quick trip to the top of the bell tower in City Hall (open weekdays) will give you a stunning



bird's eye view of the city (although be sure to pick a clear, sunny day!). From here you can view the Benjamin Franklin Parkway running the length of the Museum District. Dotted with public art, as you stroll along this wide boulevard you can stop off at many of the city's acclaimed institutions: The Franklin Institute Science Museum (until September hosting an exclusive Galileo exhibition displaying one of the astronomer's original telescopes); The Rodin Museum housing the largest collection of the sculptor's work; and at its crown the internationally famous works of art in the impressive Philadelphia Museum of Art. I didn't choose to run up the 99 steps in imitation of Sylvester Stallone in 'Rocky', but many do. A short walk north-east to the abandoned, dank and eerie corridors of the Eastern State Penitentiary, once temporary home to Al Capone and with an audio tour narrated by actor Steve Buscemi, offers a fascinating insight into this 19th century prison considered ground-breaking in its approach to inmate rehabilitation. To the other side of the city and bordering the Delaware River is the Independence National Historical Park where you can learn more of the monumental events that led to the foundation of America. See the room in Independence Hall where the Declaration of

Fact file

- Bridget flew to Philadelphia with US Airways. From 12 May, US Airways will operate a new route to Philadelphia from Birmingham on a seasonal daily service. www.usairways.com.
- She stayed at The Rittenhouse, Condominium Residences & Hotel, 210 West Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, 19103. Telephone 215 546 9000 www.rittenhousehotel.com. Rates vary.

Independence was signed; queue up for your chance to stand alongside the Liberty Bell or be moved by the impassioned multimedia production or interactive exhibits at the high-tech National Constitution Centre. Those immortal opening words: "We the people..." remain with you. Strolling through the genteel residential streets in the neighbouring Historic Waterfront District, with its colonial architecture and cobblestone walkways, you can enjoy tours around some of the historic properties, while just a few more minutes takes you to the contrasting sights, smells and sounds of the bohemian South Street. With its offbeat boutiques, alternative art galleries and urban, edgy feel if you're feeling peckish, this is also the place to indulge in a Philadelphia cheesesteak at the famed 'Jim's'. In my eyes it remains a moot point as to why the locals have spent the last 75 years 'perfecting' and exalting this sandwich of shaved beef topped with onions and liquid cheese. But I'd recommended you

don't try and wash one down with a 'root beer' – effectively cola with a dash of TCP! Luckily, there is much more to enjoy on the dining front, with an explosion of restaurants in recent years being helped in great part by the efforts of theatre man turned restaurateur, Steven Starr who owns 12 highly regarded restaurants in the city, each with a different theme and cuisine. Gastronomes would not be disappointed. Retail junkies can also enjoy the mix of designer boutiques, vintage stores and shopping malls, with a trip to Macy's also promising a brief musical interlude. Home to the world's largest playing pipe organ (four times the size of that in Westminster Abbey, to put it into perspective) twice daily the resident organist plays this tremendous instrument for the enjoyment of shoppers. It's a surreal experience. And here I have barely scratched the surface of what Philadelphia has to offer. Named by National Geographic Traveller as 'America's next great city', it's easy to see why.