

Lifting Pittsburgh's steel curtain



KEITH SRAKOCIC/AP FILE PHOTO

Home to the Andy Warhol Museum, above, Pittsburgh has a thriving arts community and was named "America's most livable city" by The Economist. G-20 summiteers will find cultural cred, natural wonders and one of the 'best views in America'

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PITTSBURGH—You can tell who the locals are on Pittsburgh's Duquesne Incline.

As the antique funicular slowly ascends Mount Washington, the locals look impatiently at their watches; for them, the restored 1870s cable car is just a means of getting around. For the tourists aboard, however, the Duquesne offers the best view in town: more than 300 metres below lies what *USA Weekend Magazine* described as one of the most beautiful views in America: Pittsburgh's downtown core.

Flashes explode and elbows collide as riders try to get the best shot. A teenager, who only had eyes for his iPod, pushes to the front to get a better look and emits a quiet "cool, man."

Known as the Golden Triangle, Pittsburgh's downtown is shaped by one of Nature's miracles: the joining of three rivers, the Monongahela, the Allegheny and the Ohio.

This famous confluence is not only remarkable in its own right, the rivers also frame a striking collection of skyscrapers, which are circled by dozens of bridges, many painted gold.

Alight at night, the bridges look like medieval buttresses holding a bursting metropolis afloat. Not what you'd expect for a town known more for its steel than for its star quality.

The Economist recently ranked the city the most livable in the United States, citing its cultural amenities, low-crime rate and infrastructure. And at the end of this month, the city will host the G-20 economic summit for which it's currently in full facelift-mode.

Though the city does have some popular tourist treasures, its true charm lies in its lesser known finds, finds that often reflect the city's blue collar roots as much as its burgeoning reputation as a cultural mecca.

A case in point is Pittsburgh's South Side. The area's East Carson St. is reputed to have the longest stretch of bars in the U.S., but locals come as much to admire the neighbourhood's stunning collection of more than 15 blocks of original Victorian homes.

Architectural tours take place alongside boisterous boys cruising in cars for pretty girls; likely many will end up in Dee's Café, a bar as popular for its low prices as for its interesting "dive-chic" ambience.

But to experience a truly unique bar, head to Pittsburgh's recently revitalized Lawrenceville neighbourhood to the Church Brew Works, a pub housed in a former church. The place is always crowded with those willing to wait in line to worship at the altar of ale.

The award-winning micro-brewery features beer tanks where an altar once stood and much of the original church remains intact. For something a little less irreverent, head to another Lawrenceville hot spot, Piccolo Forno restaurant.

Expect to line up with the locals for authentic Italian cuisine at ridiculously affordable prices, this place is as popular for its menu as for its BYOB policy.

The most talkative members of the city may well be found at the National Aviary, one of Pittsburgh's least known but most worthwhile, sites.

With more than 800 birds, it's North American's largest aviary. At the outdoor Flightzone presentation, eagles, vultures and owls perform spectacular aerial dynamics inches above the audience.

The most amazing feat, however, is reserved for the end of the show at which time a long line forms of people raring to make donations; all money is handed directly to Minnie, an American crow, who takes it gently in her beak and places it into the donation box.

"You'd never see me this enthusiastic to donate to a museum," says Sylvia Turner as she hands money to all three of her sons.

And museums are something Pittsburgh excels at. One of the most unique is the Andy Warhol Museum; with more than 12,000 of his works, it represents the largest single-artist collection in the world.

For the true art aficionado, the often overlooked Frick Art and Historical Centre is the true gem. Housed in the former estate of legendary art collector Henry Clay Frick, the museum's highlight (historically, if not artistically) is Frick's first recorded art purchase, "A River Landscape," by George Hetzel.

This seminal work forms the foundation of one of the world's largest private art collections.

And if that's not enough to give Pittsburgh cultural cred, just a little more than an hour away lies one of the world's most famous architectural icons, Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpiece, Fallingwater.