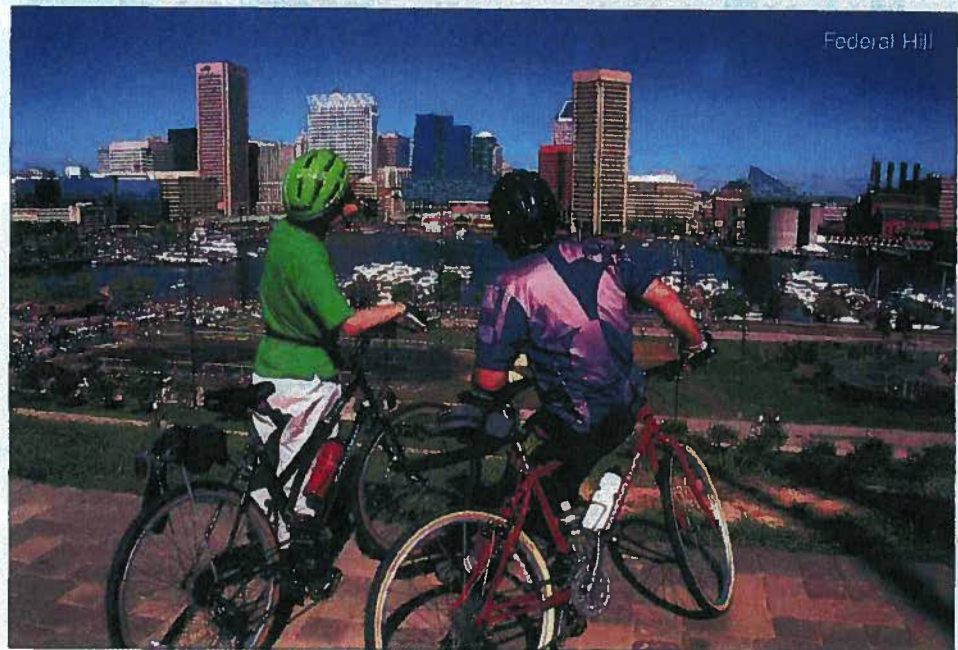


DOING BUSINESS IN BALTIMORE

**CHARM CITY
MAKES WORKING
A PLEASURE**

by **Jim Gladstone**



Good morning, Baltimore!" The giddy opening song of the Broadway and movie musical *Hairspray* (both based on the original 1988 John Waters feature) is a camp, '60s-era wink at the workaday town whose nickname, Charm City, was once larded with irony.

Flash forward to 2009 and it's a new morning in Baltimore. This city not only has a true abundance of charms but, for the first time, is officially reaching out to LGBT travelers with a new gay-focused tourism campaign. Baltimore has also been courting lesbian and gay relocators with good real estate values in old row house neighborhoods ripe for renovation; one memorable city-sponsored advertisement boasted of property "completely stripped and ready for you to have your way with it."

LGBT visitors arriving at **Amtrak's Penn Station** will feel an immediate sense of welcome as they step outside and see the shimmering greeting of *Male/Female*, a towering, 52-foot, aluminum sculpture by Jonathan Borofsky, in which two intersecting silhouettes form a figure of amalgamated gender, lit at night by a shared L.E.D.

heartbeat. From here, it's a quick ten-minute (approximately \$8) cab ride to the heart of downtown. From nearby **Baltimore Washington International Airport** (just ten miles south of the city), a cab to central Baltimore will run about \$35; light rail and shuttle service are also available.

For business travelers and convention-goers as well as leisure travelers, one of Baltimore's best features is its densely packed downtown core, with the **Baltimore Convention Center** and business district immediately adjacent to major tourist attractions, quaint residential neighborhoods, the Oriole's **Camden Yards** stadium, and the **Inner Harbor's** waterside promenades. Unless it's the dead of winter or you've got a series of relatively far-flung sales calls to make, you can probably manage your entire visit to Baltimore on foot, with a supplemental taxi ride on occasion.

So many local residents get around on foot and by bicycle that Baltimore has been named one of America's Top Ten Walking Cities by *Prevention* magazine and the country's fittest city by *Men's Fitness* (that fitness, you'll discover at the city's easygoing gay nightspots, comes

largely without accompanying attitude).

There are over 7,000 hotel rooms within walking distance of the convention center's 300,000 square feet of exhibit halls and 50 meeting rooms. Immediately adjacent, the **Hilton Baltimore Convention Center**, connected via skywalk, has another 60,000 square feet of meeting space. Highly recommended is the recently renovated **Renaissance Harbor Place**, where you should request a harbor-view room on the fourth floor or above for a sparkling nighttime vista of city lights reflected on the water. In addition to a well-equipped fitness center and business center, the Renaissance offers a quiet indoor pool and ample, well-lit worktables in a sunny lounge off the main lobby. For an outpost of corporate operations, the hotel reveals an unexpectedly cheeky sense of humor: crabs are deposited in guests' beds at turndown—bright red paper ones, marked with the next day's weather forecast.

If you're tired of the same old road warrior scene, treat yourself to a stay at the gay-owned and operated **Scarborough Fair Bed & Breakfast**, just a few blocks away. Innkeepers Barry Werner and Jeff Finlay are extraordinarily accommodating hosts, proud to be a part of the leafy green Federal Hill community, a neighborhood-of-choice for gay professionals. Scarborough Fair is a quiet, comfortable, six-room retreat in adjoining brick townhouses that date back to 1801, offering free off-street parking if you're traveling by car, free wireless Internet, passes to the **Federal Hill Fitness** gym, and complimentary snacks and beverages throughout the day. In addition to full homecooked breakfasts a grab-and-go option is also available, but it's your loss to miss the likes of Barry's sweet potato biscuits and breakfast bruschetta.

Scarborough Fair guests also receive discount shopping cards for nearby boutiques, including men's clothier **Reason**, featuring a carefully curated selection of pieces from labels including Diesel, Ben Sherman, William Rast, and Original Penguin—and **SoBotanical**, an "aromatherapy bar" where shoppers can work with staff to create skin and body care products with their own customized blends of organic scents and oils.

Barry not only makes dinner reservations at local restaurants for guests, but



also provides clever pre-printed cards featuring walking maps from the hotel to each eatery. For a casual worknight dinner, **Metropolitan Coffeehouse & Wine Bar** is just down the block. Or to crack some crabs and slurp oysters on the half shell in blue-collar Baltimore style, try **Nick's Oyster Bar** in the **Cross Street Market**.

Elsewhere in town, recommended tables for dinner with business colleagues include the slightly-out-of-the-way **Woodberry Kitchen** (worth taking the cab ride), a smart-casual high-ceilinged room with a warm vibe and creative menu with an emphasis on locally grown ingredients. Start with fried asparagus and mustard dip, followed by pork loin with a buckwheat crepe, apples, and butternut cabbage, or braised shortribs accompanied by a mushroom and chard custard.

Meanwhile, **Pazo** is a sexy, bustling, Spanish-Italian hybrid with an epic something-for-everyone menu of large and small plates. Try a tapas portion of pork confit

cannelloni with mushroom cream and roasted walnuts, or the rich grilled eggplant dip with a hint of sesame. Less adventurous? There's Neopolitan pizza and excellent steaks here as well. A couple dozen wines are available by the glass, and decent bottles start for as little as \$17.

In **Mount Vernon**, the longtime heart of Baltimore's gay scene, take your co-workers to **The Brewer's Art**, ranked the second best bar in America by *Esquire*. A manly old townhouse (town-mansion is more like it) that's been converted into a pair of dark, handsome bars and a wood-paneled dining room, Brewer's Art offers its own Belgian-style microbrews, a couple dozen whiskeys (none of which are more than \$12), and a fine array of ports, cognacs, and brandies. Skip the main restaurant menu and stick with the bar food: killer rosemary-garlic fries, smoked tomato and onion mac and cheese, steamed mussels with green curry, and spiced duck turnovers.

Ready for some post-prandial fun? The two biggest gay clubs in town,

Grand Central and **The Hippo**, are just around the corner from each other, making it easy to bar hop. Grand Central is subdivided into a disco complete with a sunken dancefloor, fog machines, and Sunday night wet underwear contests; a pub with pool table and sound levels suitable for conversation; and **Sappho's**, a lesbian-centric space with its own dance floor.

The Hippo is impossible to miss, with a curving deco-style corner facade that points to its origins as a swank nightclub in the 1930s. Transformed to a gay club in 1972, The Hippo is known for its relaxed attitude, mixed race and gender crowd, and its enormous dancefloor surrounded by viewing areas to check out the action.

Also worth checking out are **The Baltimore Eagle**, among the country's friendliest leather bars, and over in Federal Hill, **The Rowan Tree**, a pubby haunt that makes a point of billing itself not as a gay spot, but as "A One of a Kind Bar for One of A Kind People." Barry Werner of Scarborough Fair calls it "the most John Watersy spot in town." (The Baltimore Area Convention and Visitors Association actually offers a Waters-inspired to-do list on their website.)

If you've got an extra day to let yourself just be a tourist, pick up an all-day pass for **Ed Kane's Water Taxi**, which will let you leisurely cruise the harbor, hopping on and off at various attractions, with great

views of the city skyline.

The **Fells Point** neighborhood is an old shipbuilding hub, now home to an eclectic collection of restaurants, bars, and funky vintage shops. The water taxi will also take you to **Fort McHenry**, where the British invasion of 1812 was staved off by American troops, inspiring Francis Scott Key to compose "The Star Spangled Banner."

The most popular museum in town is **The National Aquarium**, and it really is worth a stop, particularly if you can manage to make it on a weekday when crowds are thinner. After a few high-pressured business meetings, you'll be surprised how meditative and therapeutic it is to stand surrounded by circular tanks, watching sharks of the non-human variety glide gracefully around you.

While the aquarium is one of Baltimore's best known attractions, the **American Visionary Art Museum (AVAM)**, is one of the most, unfortunately, underpublicized museum-going experiences in the United States. An invigorating showcase for work created by artists with no formal training (including significant contingents of the institutionalized and socially alienated), a visit to AVAM is joyful and provocative. It's hard to imagine the focus and desire for self-expression that drives someone to build a massive scale model of the Titanic entirely out of matchsticks, or to spend hours manipulating a sewing needle to carve a tiny bust of Elvis Presley out of the graphite of a pencil point. Signage throughout the exhibits is rich with

detail on the artists' personal backgrounds, giving visitors real insight into the psychology behind the works. In many cases, personal pain is converted into exuberant beauty.

AVAM incorporates eight exhibit galleries in the main building and two barn-like outbuildings, one of which includes the giant sculpture of John Waters' one-time muse, Divine. There's also a rough-hewn wooden "meditation chapel" by artist Ben Wilson set beside burbling fountains in an outdoor wildflower garden. Last, but not least, there's Sideshow, a retail operation as peculiar and delightful as the museum itself, operated by Chicago entrepreneur Ted Frankel, a.k.a. Uncle Fun. In addition to inexpensively priced art and art books, you can pick up necessities like Pop Rocks candy, miniature underpants for squirrels, toy robots, and a neon-colored wig or two.

Also a must-do is **Geppi's Entertainment Museum (GEM)**, a giddy, kaleidoscopic time trip through the history of America's favorite pop culture characters. Owned by Baltimore native and longtime community booster Steve Geppi, a one-time comic book store owner who went on to establish one of the world's largest comic distribution companies, GEM's galleries offer much to delight the LGBT visitor, from vintage Barbies, to Adam West/Burt Ward Batman and Robin ephemera, to licensed merchandising kitsch, such as packaging for Pepperidge Farm's Star Wars Cookies.

Through December 6, GEM is also featuring a temporary exhibition of special note for Friends of Dorothy: "Yellow Bricks & Emerald Cities," celebrates the 70th Anniversary of the MGM film version of *The Wizard of Oz*, with a treasure trove of memorabilia, from rare editions of L. Frank Baum's original Oz books, to vintage dolls and toys inspired by the original film, all the way through the Oz renaissance inspired by the contemporary Broadway hit, *Wicked*.

While AVAM and GEM are perhaps the most trafficked oddities in Baltimore's museum scene, they're hardly the only ones. How about **The National Museum of Dentistry**? **The Great Blacks in Wax Museum**? Or **The National Lacrosse Hall of Fame**?

Baltimore may be a more appealing destination than it was back in the 1960s, but eccentricity clearly remains part of its charm. ■



ACCOMMODATIONS

Hilton Baltimore Convention Center, 401 W. Pratt St. Tel: 443-573-8700. Connects directly to convention center via skywalk. \$150-\$250. www1.hilton.com

Pier 5 Hotel, 711 Eastern Avenue. Tel: 410-539-2000. A hip, lounge-like lobby lends a bit of boutique chic to a great waterside location. LGBT weekend packages include passes to The Hippo. \$130-\$270. www.harbormagic.com

Renaissance Harbor Place Hotel, 202 E. Pratt St. Tel: 800-535-1201. Water views, indoor pool, meeting facilities. \$150-\$350. www.renaissanceharborplace.com

Scarborough Fair Bed & Breakfast, 801 S. Charles St. Tel: 877-954-2747. Gay owned and operated, charming Federal Hill neighborhood with lots of boutiques and restaurants. \$200-\$250. www.scarboroughfairbandb.com

Sheraton Inner Harbor Hotel, 300 S. Charles St. Tel: 410-962-8300. Indoor pool, sauna. \$200-\$350. www.starwoodhotels.com

DINING

Brewer's Art, 1106 N. Charles St. Tel: 410-547-9310. Esquire pick for one of America's Top Ten Bars; known locally as "the gayest non-gay bar in town"; great upscale pub fare. www.thebrewersart.com

Metropolitan Coffeehouse & Wine Bar, 902 S. Charles St. Tel: 410-234-0235. Casual after-work spot in Federal Hill. Free wireless Internet. www.metrobalto.com

Nick's Oysters, 1065 S. Charles St. Tel: 410-685-2020. Beer and fresh seafood in a no-nonsense historic market setting. Amazing Maryland crabcakes without tourist trap prices. www.nicksoysterbar.com

Pazo, 1425 Aliceanna St. Tel: 410-534-7296. Tapas in a swank, candle-lit, two-tiered room. Great for socializing with colleagues. www.pazorestaurant.com

Woodberry Kitchen, 2010 Clipper Park Rd. Fresh Chesapeake Bay ingredients, innovatively prepared in a stunning, off-the-beaten-path setting. Tel: 410-464-8000. www.woodberrykitchen.com

SIGHTS & ATTRACTIONS

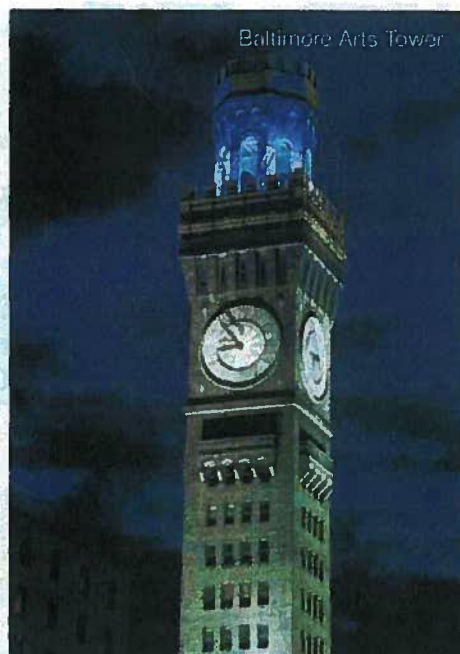
American Visionary Art Museum, 800 Key Highway. Tel: 410-244-1900. www.avam.org

Ed Kane's Water Taxi, stops throughout the Inner Harbor, tickets available onboard. Tel: 800-658-8947. www.thewatertaxi.com

Federal Hill neighborhood. Gay-friendly area within minutes walk of the convention center; named "Best Shopping Area" by *Baltimore Magazine*. This is the neighborhood where you'll find **Whimsy/Reason** (1033 S. Charles St. Tel: 410-234-0204, www.whimsyreason.com), **SoBotanical** (1130 S. Charles St. Tel: 410-234-0333, www.sobotanical.com), and **Federal Hill Fitness** (39 E. Cross St. Tel: 410-752-3004. www.fhfitness.com)

Fells Point neighborhood. Historic shipbuilding area, with lots of boutiques, bars, and restaurants. www.fellspoint.us

Geppi's Entertainment Museum, 301 W. Camden



St. Tel: 410-625-7060. www.geppismuseum.com

Mount Vernon neighborhood. The longtime central gayborhood of Baltimore has art museums, antique shops, theaters, and the orchestra hall along with bars and clubs. www.mvcd.org

National Aquarium in Baltimore, 501 E. Pratt St. Tel: 410-576-3800. www.aqua.org

GLBT NIGHTLIFE

Baltimore Eagle, 2202 N. Charles St. Tel: 443-524-3333. Touted as the "number one cruise bar in Baltimore," this non-stop party is known for its blackout and BDSM nights. www.thebaltimoreeagle.com

Grand Central, 1001 N. Charles St. Tel: 410-752-7133. All aboard for your one stop GLBT entertainment spot—two-floor disco, lounge, and pub. www.centralstationpub.com

The Hippo, 1 W. Eager St. Tel: 410-547-0069. There's nothing fat about this 35-year-old mega club where hot DJs keep the place dancing all night. www.clubhippo.com

The Rowan Tree, 1633 S. Charles St. Tel: 410-468-0550. Under this tree, enjoy "cocktails for the casual sophisticate" along with a warm pub atmosphere complete with a pool table. www.therowantree.net

INFORMATION

Baltimore Area Convention and Visitors Association. Leisure and business travel planning resources with dedicated LGBT section and John Waters' Baltimore tip sheet (see the Arts & Leisure section). www.baltimore.org

Baltimore Convention Center, 1 W. Pratt St. Tel: 410-649-7000. www.bccenter.org

Baltimore Gay Life. Local LGBT newspaper, with event and nightlife listings in print and online. www.baltimoregaylife.com

Gay and Lesbian Community Center of Baltimore, 241 W. Chase St. Tel: 410-837-5445. www.glccb.org