

Travel Outlook

Philadelphia's complex has an eye on the future



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Travel

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Philadelphia is a city steeped in U.S. history and reminders of the Revolutionary War.

However, it's also a city with an eye to the future. Visitors from outside the U.S. are likely to be intrigued by its futuristic sights and unique pleasures.

On May 4, the Pennsylvania metropolis's newest attraction will open its doors: The \$85-million Futures Centre and Omniverse Theatre.

Under construction for the past two years, the new buildings form an addition to a science museum called the Franklin Institute, built in 1933 but, because of the Depression, never completed to the full extent of its original concept.

The 90,000-square-foot Futures Centre will offer imaginative applications of technology that exists today - not fantasies and dreams from the realm of science fiction.

Its purpose, says director Joel Bloom, is to get people to think of the future as a matter of choice, not chance. At the Choices Forum Exhibit, each of the 150 seats will be fitted with an individual computer keypad on which visitors can indicate their opinion on controversial questions of technology and public policy, after the various options and their consequences have been pointed out.

IMAX THEATRE

"We know that our competition is Disney and the Philadelphia Phillies," says Bloom, "so we have built plenty of entertainment into the Futures Centre."

The most striking entertainment will be on the giant domed screen of the new Omniverse Theatre adjoining the Futures Centre. (Imax Systems Corp. of Oakville, Ont., developed the Omnimax technology of producing and projecting films 10 times larger than the conventional format of commercial films. The first such specially built theatre is the one at Ontario Place in Toronto.)

The Imax screen is a hemispherical dome of perforated aluminum, 23 metres across. The sound system, with 80 speakers, allows sound sources to be placed anywhere in the 350-seat theatre.

When the Omniverse Theatre opens next month, its premiere program will consist of two brand-new productions: Philadelphia Anthem, a seven-minute curtain-raiser full of larger-than-life scenes of Philadelphia and Chester County, and a feature-length production, To The Limit, in which mountain-climbers, athletes, ballet dancers and other exceptional individuals demonstrate the possibilities of human performance.

BEN FRANKLIN

On May 5, the day after the opening of the Futures Centre at the Franklin Institute, the Philadelphia Museum of Art will inaugurate a special exhibition, Images of Benjamin Franklin, running to Sept. 16.

It will feature more than 150 portraits of Franklin (1706-1790), a prolific inventor, statesman and, altogether, the most famous citizen in the history of the City of Brotherly Love.

Several other special exhibitions based on Benjamin Franklin's accomplishments will be staged in Philadelphia this year, to mark the 200th anniversary of his death. (Details from the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1515 Market St., Philadelphia, Pa., 19102.)

No celebrations, however, will recall one of Franklin's few failures - an expedition in the winter of 1776 to Lower Canada with three companions to try to persuade the French-Canadian population to join the American Revolution. "The trip through ice and snow turned out to be harrowing and fruitless," according to one of Franklin's biographers. "He returned exhausted and tormented with boils."

(The journey is considerably easier today. Midway Airlines recently inaugurated frequent daily service to Philadelphia from Montreal and Toronto.)

For those interested in exploring Philadelphia's rich history, a good place to begin is the Visitors Orientation Centre at Third and

Chestnut Streets. Within walking distance downtown are most of the major historic sites - Carpenters Hall, Old City Hall, Independence Hall (where the Declaration of Independence was first read publicly on July 8, 1776) and the Liberty Bell Pavilion.

TRAVEL NOTEBOOK

Here are notes on news of current interest to travellers:

- British Airways is offering a discount of up to \$50 per person on

its overseas vacation packages for departures up until Oct. 31, providing that they are booked and paid for by April 15. The company's supersonic Concorde is scheduled to fly once a week this summer between Toronto and London.

The famous San Antonio (Texas) Fiesta, now 99 years old, will be held April 20 to 29. A highlight is the Battle of Flowers parade on the afternoon of April 27.

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