

Street-walking (2006)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

The way to learn a city is on foot. In times past when I traveled on business, when they asked me about the interesting city I could describe the airport and the hotel where the meeting was, but the city was almost anonymous.

To make them come to life you strike out walking, right downtown, to see how far you can go, and you look. Downtown will animate and perform for you.

Philadelphia is culture and cobblestones and kitsch. My son lives a block and a half from South Street, that funky, feisty touristy stretch where the action is on weekends, especially at night, but it's just as fascinating when it's waking up in the morning. There's a Philly cheese-steak place in every block, there's the bar on the site where one of the Three Stooges was born, there's lingerie whose purposes I'm not old enough to imagine, and there's the South Street Bagel bakery, open early, with oven-warm "Everything" bagels perfuming the air.

If you go the other direction, up north on Third Street, in ten minutes you're immersed in American history: the Betsy Ross House, Ben Franklin's grave, the first bank in this country, and — shivers up your spine — Independence Square, the bell that rang in freedom, the very room whose walls first heard "When in the course of human events..." Those cobblestones were worn by the feet that fill the history books, those church-yards sheld the bones of those who died for independence, and not a few of those brave British soldiers who sailed so far to prevent it.

Then a quick trainride and Manhattan, one of the most fascinating cities on earth. Walk it; everyone else is in a cab. No, they're in the subway. Actually, they're walking also, and headed right at you, in a phalanx formation like a flying wedge, eight abreast, and you have to decide where to split them apart so you

can get through.

Choose an avenue, one of the north-south streets, each its own personality: elegant Fifth, ethnic Eighth, glitzy Broadway. Listen to the language of the couple behind you, nothing you've ever heard before. Look for the famous, expensive brand-names, each with a whole store named after it. Stop for breakfast at one of a thousand identical corner delis, three dollars for toast, an egg, banana and coffee — be sure to say, "Coffee BLACK" or it will be syrup. Stop for lunch and blow the rest of your spending money. Walk — and gawk — it's the tourist thing to do.

I've walked other cities with a unique feel to them — Seattle, Princeton, Santa Fe, San Francisco. I bet they're all like that, if you learn from your feet.