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Culture shock in Pittsburgh

That city to the east has more than rust rust and football

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Pittsburgh

-- Often it takes an outsider to recognize the extraordinary in a region.

When I mentioned to a friend last month that I was traveling to Pittsburgh, her hometown, to explore the city's Oakland neighborhood, she replied, "You're doing a story on slum student housing?"

Well, no.

The story I planned would focus on Oakland's many cultural attractions and its college town atmosphere, a place where cutting-edge art coexists with cheap beer.

I found what I was looking for. Better yet, I think my friend found something, too: a fresh perspective on a once-familiar place.

Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood is the rough equivalent of Cleveland's University Circle, though more than twice as big. It's home to Carnegie Mellon University, comparable in size to Case Western Reserve University, as well as the University of Pittsburgh, which has a student body two times the size of either.

Pitt's campus (and hospital) dominate the neighborhood, and students plug the sidewalks. It's a miserable place to park a car.

But there's more than used bookstores and slum housing (yes, there is some of that).

The world-class Carnegie museums of art and natural history are located here, as is the elegant Phipps Conservatory, which last week launched a six-month special exhibit featuring the glass works of artist Dale Chihuly.

On Pitt's campus, the towering Cathedral of Learning is breathtaking; its Nationality Rooms, fascinating.

All that, and cheap beer, too.

Start with art

Andrew Carnegie's contributions to this city are vast, perhaps none more so than the complex he founded on Forbes Avenue, four miles east of downtown in 1892. The Carnegie, as it's now known, is home to the flagship branch of the city's Carnegie Library system, Carnegie Music Hall and two renown museums.

A single admission, \$10, gets you into both museums for a day, but there's enough here to fill at least two (with more on the way).

Carnegie, an industrialist and philanthropist, took a different approach with his art museum than did many wealthy patrons of his day. Instead of filling the space with the classics of yesteryear, he proposed lining the galleries with "the old masters of tomorrow."

And while there is plenty to satisfy visitors who favor pre-Impressionist artists, three-quarters of the museum is devoted to post-1850s works, from Whistler, van Gogh and Monet to much more contemporary installations, including three galleries devoted to international art after 1970.

Both Barry Le Va's 20 sheets of glass shattered onsite ("On Corner – On Edge – On Center Shatter") and Jesper Just's oddly compelling video installation ("Bliss and Heaven") set to music by Olivia Newton John left me bewildered.

Bones and fossils

Down the hall, in the Museum of Natural History, much of the collection is millions of years older.

Carnegie's obsession with dinosaurs is well-documented (one species, *Diplodocus carnegii*, discovered in Wyoming in 1899, is even named after him). Much of the museum's well-known dinosaur collection is under wraps while work is completed on a major expansion of the exhibit hall.

"Dinosaurs in Their World," which will showcase 19 of the museum's beasts in scientifically accurate poses, opens in late November.

Until then, dinosaur fanatics can get their fix at "Supporting Cast," a temporary exhibit of smaller dinosaurs; watch real scientists at work in the PaleoLab; and dig for fossils at Bonehunter's Quarry, where goggles and chisels are provided to aspiring paleontologists.

The museum isn't all bones and fossils. The popular Hillman Hall of Minerals and Gems, with more than 1,300 gems and minerals, was closed during my visit, but will reopen in newer, bigger digs next month. In September, the new Wertz Gallery, inside the Hillman, will open with a focus on gems and jewelry.

My clan also enjoyed the walkthrough igloo and stuffed polar bears at the Wyckoff Hall of Arctic Life and exploring the Hopi house at the Alcoa Foundation Hall of American Indians.

The green scene

For exhibits that are still living, head to the Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, a 114-year-old facility that recently more than doubled in size. The garden's new Tropical Forest Conservatory, which opened late last year, features 12,000 square feet of Thai rain forest and a pathway leading you through fig and nutmeg trees, orchids and mangos.

Interactive features include a research field station, where you can ponder why bugs grow so big in the tropics, and a healer's hut, where you'll learn about the powers of herbalists, blowing doctors and shamans.

The geographic theme of the forest will change every two years. Next up, in 2009: the Amazon. Inside the Victorian glasshouse, visitors can tour more than a dozen themed galleries, including the orchid room, the fern room and the Victorian room, with its collection of black and near-black plants. Outside spaces include the Japanese Courtyard Garden, with one of the country's premier bonsai collections, and the Children's Discovery Garden, where kids can explore a maze, treehouse and playful water feature.

Around the world in an afternoon

After a tour of Thailand, take a 10-minute walk to the University of Pittsburgh campus for a quick trip to more than two dozen other countries.

The university's Nationality Rooms offer an extraordinary glimpse into the culture and architecture of 26 countries over thousands of years. An audio tour takes visitors through the rooms on two floors, from France to China, Sweden to Israel.

The English room, done in 16th Century Gothic and Tudor styles, includes a door frame rescued from the bombed House of Commons in 1941. The ornately baroque Austrian room, modeled after Haydn Hall in Schloss Esterhazy, appears ready for royalty.

The rooms were conceived by Pitt chancellor John Bowman, who, in the 1930s, wanted to involve the city's diverse ethnic communities in the development of the interior of his showcase Cathedral of Learning.

The 42-story tower, the second tallest educational building in the world, is worth a visit on its own. Travel to floor 36 for terrific views of the Pittsburgh's skyline and its three rivers.

Dogs and suds

Of course, not every angle of Oakland is as impressive. Consider the popularity of the Original Hot Dog Shop, nicknamed the "Big O," where college kids have been downing hot dogs (cheese dogs, chili dogs, super dogs, kosher dogs, et al.), beer and monstrous portions of twice-fried french fries since 1960.

For food slightly more upscale, try Primanti Bros., where you'll get your fries and coleslaw loaded directly into your sandwich. The practice started in the 1930s, at the restaurant's flagship location in the then-industrial Strip District, where truck drivers wanted a complete meal they could hold in one hand.

There are, of course, a few heart-healthy alternatives along Forbes Avenue, but none as popular with the late-night 25-and-under crowd.

This low-brow grub is the yin to the Carnegie museum's yang. It's the dichotomy of a cultured college town, where a Jackson Pollock painting draws a crowd, but so does a \$6.50 pitcher of Rolling Rock.

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