

Segway-ing through Philly

THERE'S NO BETTER WAY TO DISCOVER THE STREET ARTY SIDE OF PHILADELPHIA THAN BY BEING "BATTERY CHARGED"

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI

He honked at us. We were in the middle of the road, but we refused to give way. We could understand his exasperation: four helmeted tourists on battery-operated two-wheel Segways, hogging an entire lane of a street that cuts through a neighbourhood of Philadelphia. "Hold your lane; you have the right of way," Ben, our tour leader's voice crackled over the receivers strung around our necks.

Yes, we were on an offbeat tour of the fabled city where the US Declaration of Independence was signed. The thrust of our two-hour Segway tour was to explore some of the murals – not graffiti – that adorn the walls of buildings in different neighbourhoods of the city. In the process, the city shared with us its secrets and delightful little nuggets about itself.

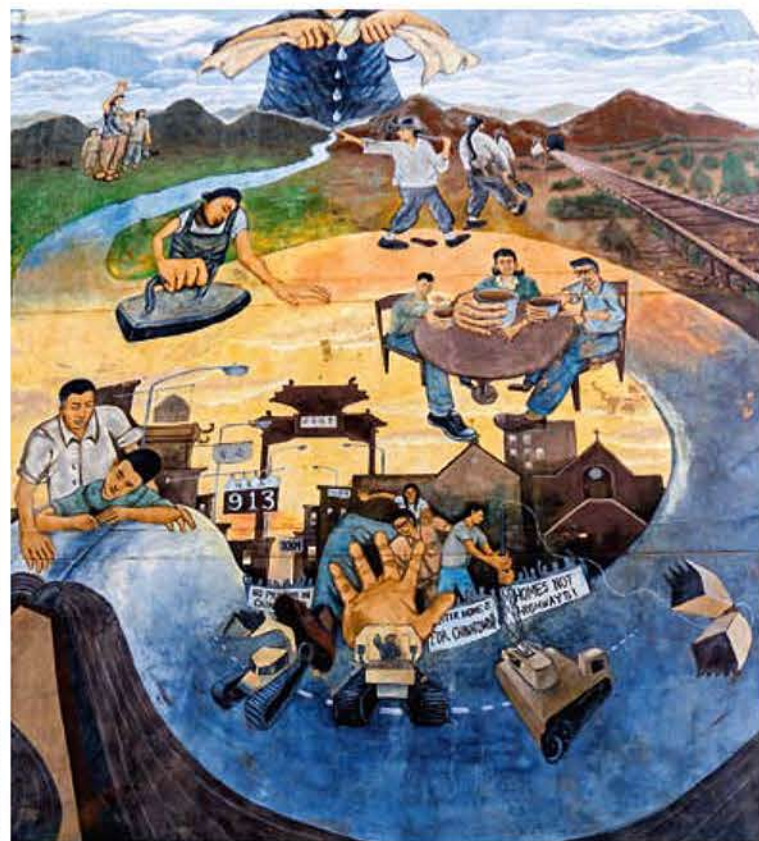
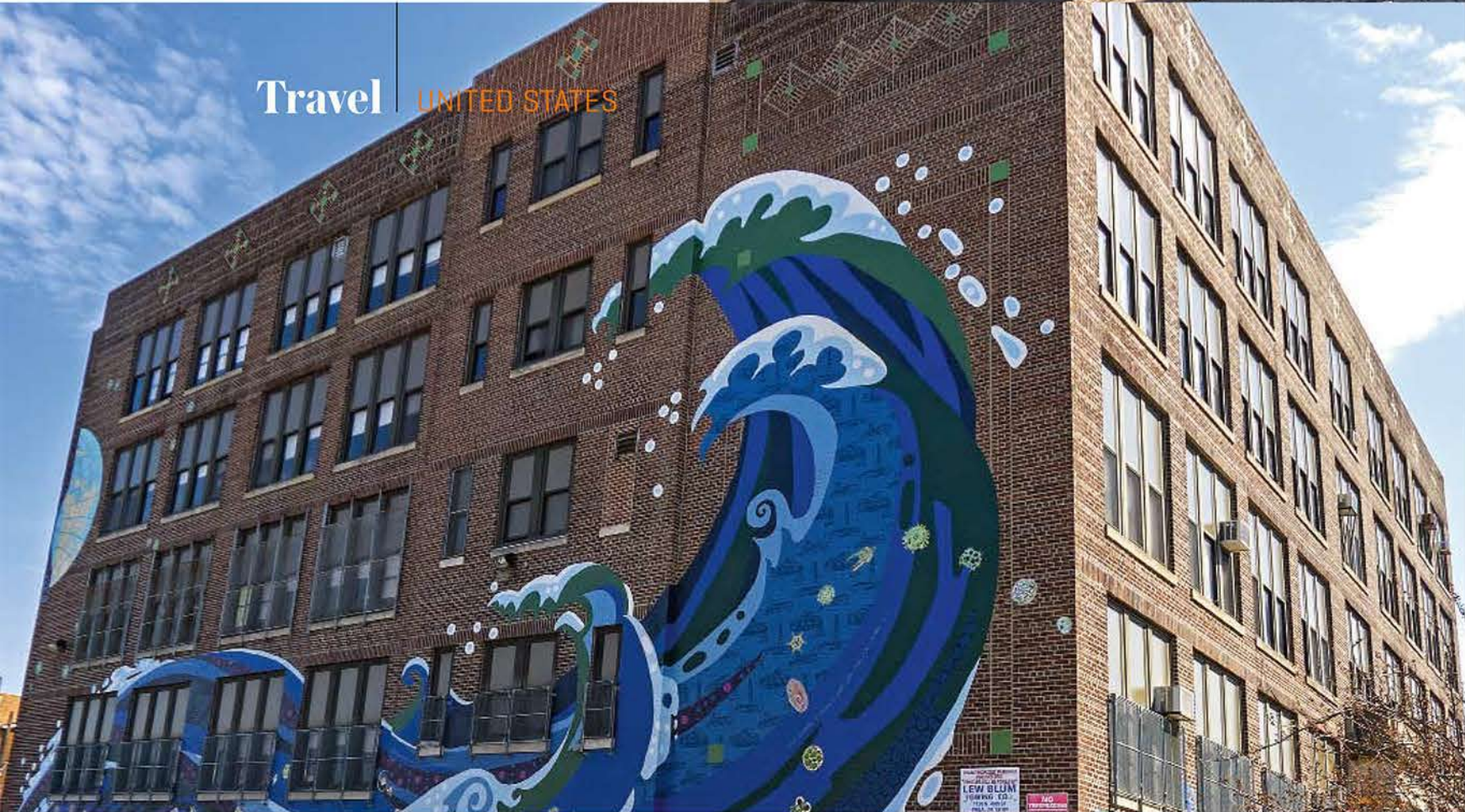
But first... We had to come to terms with the Segway. Riding those contraptions, which comprised of a rod on two wheels with no gas pedals, brakes or steering wheels in open traffic, freaked out two members of our group who opted out of the adventure. We, however, steered ourselves and hopped onto them for practice runs under the watchful eyes of Ben, within the premises of Philly Tour Hub. Lean forward to go forward. Lean back to slow down and stop. Turn the guide stick right to turn right and left to turn left. It's quite simple, he said. And the truth is: it was quite simple. Three runs across an obstacle course and we were ready to hit the road.

However, we were still a little nervous when we found ourselves surrounded by traffic. The thrill of holding our own with cars whizzing past was pretty unique. It was not long before we started to bond with the Segway. Like a well-trained stallion, it responded to the slightest nudge. We rode down bicycle lanes whenever we came across any; trundled down footpaths; hogged entire traffic lanes...

Once the Segway felt like an extension of our bodies, we could focus on the arty side of the adventure. Indeed, the city of Philadelphia is one big sprawling open-air art gallery with over 4,000 murals on display. We pulled up in front of the first exhibit which was, fittingly, a painting of the city's iconic skyline.



WHEELING AROUND: Delighted tourists make the most of an arty tour



ploding colours and images. Even dustbins looked attractive with a lick of colour.

"Many of these murals are modern masterpieces!" Ben seemed to have read our minds. Sadly, he added, they are not in museums or art galleries, and do not have the protection that is accorded to heritage structures. So if a building or neighbourhood is being redeveloped (like the one to our right), some paintings are sacrificed at the altar of progress.

We 'Segwayed' past a smaller parking lot where the walls around paid tribute to the city's sporting heroes: baseball, American football, ice hockey and basketball stars. Across the road, a mural spoke of a lost world. The artist had returned briefly to his childhood island in the Caribbean only to discover that the natural beauty he had grown up with had been swallowed up by rampant development. So he transplanted the memories of his youth – fields blooming with wild flowers – on a wall of his neighbourhood in his adopted city.

As we rolled into Chinatown, the history of its origins unravelled on a large mural near the entrance: the first migrants worked in laundries and were involved in the construction of the railroads... Suddenly, the area we were cruising through looked familiar. Yes, that was the house of Betsy Rose, the lady who fashioned the first US star-spangled flag.

We were coming to the end of the Mural Tour circuit. We rolled our machines into a back alley behind the offices of Philly Tour Hub, removed our helmets and looked on as Ben plugged the Segways into electric sockets so that they would be recharged and ready to whisk the next batch of visitors on a magic mural ride. W

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STREET-SIDE WONDERS: The photo gallery on these two pages showcase the varied and exotic murals that adorn the walls of buildings in different neighbourhoods in the city of Philadelphia. These photos were taken by the authors while on a Segway tour

Not so long ago, Ben informed us, large sections of the city's walls and buildings were scarred with ugly stabs of graffiti. All that started to change in 1984, when Jane Golden, a local artist, came into the picture. She appealed to graffiti artists not to discard their brushes and spray paint cans but to use them more creatively and channel their latent talent in more meaningful ways.

Slowly, Philadelphia started to shed its ugly duckling image and a beautiful swan took wings across the city. Then, in 1997, the movement got the city fathers' backing with the establishment of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program. The first of its kind, the programme, which drew and recruited talent from across the social and economic strata of the city, launched public art into an entirely new stratosphere of expression.

And we would only be nibbling at the fringes of this movement on our two-hour Segway Mural Tour through a few neighbourhoods of the city. Colourful murals served as backdrops to swings and slides in children's playgrounds. A tidal wave surged across a primary school building. A wall of self-portraits paid tribute to local artists. Walls around parking lots provided canvasses for ex-

FACT FILE:

A number of Middle Eastern airlines operate direct flights to Philadelphia. Other carriers do so from their hubs in Turkey, Europe and the US.

Trains and buses connect the city to most cities around the country.

By way of accommodation, there are options to suit every budget.

In addition to Segway Mural Tours, Philly Tour Hub offers visitors a number of different ways of exploring the city.

Contact: Brand USA at www.thebrandusa.com and Philly Tour Hub at www.phillytourhub.com

