

Travel and Adventure: Seattle vacation - Are you Experienced?

by Preston Turegano

SEATTLE - It happened last year when we went to Prague, Vienna and Budapest. It happened the year before when we were on a Baltic cruise, and in 2004 when we ventured to Paris and the Loire Valley for a week.

SEATTLE LANDMARK - The Space Needle, one of Seattle's landmarks, is just a stone's throw from the architecturally mind boggling Experience Music Project. CNS Photo by Preston Turegano. FARMERS MARKET - From produce to homemade bread, Seattle's seven Farmers Markets are local, 'producer-only' markets. CNS Photo by Preston Turegano. PIONEER SQUARE - Pioneer Square is called the 'Heart of old Seattle' and allows visitors to experience Seattle's early history. CNS Photo by Preston Turegano. "It" is constant sunny, warm weather, and we encountered it again when we spent two days in this Pacific Northwest metropolis after a three-day spring cruise from Los Angeles to Vancouver, British Columbia.

As Southern Californians, we thanked many Seattlites (weary of a rainy winter and spring) for the sunny climate. We decided the umbrellas we packed for our recent European jaunts and the minicruise were the talismans that had kept rainy skies away. Had we not brought the umbrellas, it would have poured.

With just two days to spend in such ideal conditions, we decided our first stop once we arrived in the "Emerald City" would be the architecturally mind boggling Experience Music Project (museum) a stone's throw from the Space Needle. Neither of us had spent time in Seattle in more than decade, so EMP would be a first time experience for both of us.

And how's this for more good luck? EMP was just two blocks from the Best Western Executive Inn, where our Quick Shuttle bus from Vancouver's Canada Place cruise ship terminal stopped before proceeding to SeaTac airport. Though we were not staying at the inn, a desk clerk kindly let us store our luggage at the inn while we went to EMP.

Our good luck, which had gone on hiatus in the casino of Princess Cruise's Island Princess, continued.

Experience Music Project is open Mondays and closed on Tuesdays during the fall, winter and spring. (It's open everyday in the summer). Many museums around the world are closed on Mondays as a trade off for being open Sundays. We had reserved our Seattle Tuesday - our only full day in town - for visiting other sites.

EMP was a must for us and should be for other fans of American architect Frank Gehry. Among his most notable other concoctions are Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles; the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, and the "Dancing Building" in Prague. Like Disney Hall and the Guggenheim, the 140,000-square-foot EMP is another waves-of-steel-sheeting/no-true-square-edges structure.

Aside from its architecture, the project is about "the exploration of creativity and innovation in popular music - rock 'n' roll, jazz, soul, gospel, country, blues, hip-hop and punk." The Project opened seven years ago as part of Seattle Center, an arts, entertainment and park complex (including the Space Needle) that came into existence with the 1962 Seattle World's Fair.

EMP was not the "eyesore" an elderly passenger on our cruise had proclaimed. The facility is unique and distinctive, just like the irregularly shaped 3-year-old glass-and-steel Central Library at Fifth Avenue and Spring Street south of Seattle Center.

The interior of the project is just as intriguing as its exterior. Inside, we felt like Jonah swallowed by the whale. EMP's high ceilings are the building's exposed steel structural ribs, or bones.

The project can be experienced self-guided, or by wearing a sound headset that explains exhibits. Consisting of three levels, the facility's upper galleries are dimly lit, apparently to protect displays of original costumes worn by Seattle natives Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain, and other Pacific Northwest musicians/groups such as Quincy Jones, Pearl Jam, Heart, The Kingsmen and the Ventures. Original album covers (and record disks) are prominently displayed as well.

Hendrix, a self-taught guitarist and poster child of the psychedelic culture of the 1960s, died in 1970 at age 27. The Experience Music Project's JBL Theater for videos, films and concerts is named for the musician. The Hendrix Gallery on Level 3 displays Hendrix memorabilia.

Other project spaces beg visitor interaction. On Stage invites you to pick up a guitar and perform in a virtual stadium. Sound Lab lets you know what it's like to play percussion instruments and record your own song, or mix sound like a nightclub deejay. In the Sound and Vision room, well-known artists on recordings talk about pop music and culture.

One of the museum's most impressive exhibits is "Roots and Branches," a 35-foot tornado-shaped sculpture of 600 string instruments - mostly guitars, but at least one cello. Single-named German artist "Trimpin" created the tree. (Picture taking is not allowed.)

Equally awe-inspiring is the Skychurch, a cathedral-size hall with perfect acoustics and a two-story-tall video screen.

Off one side of the Skychurch is the entry to the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame. On two levels, SciFi MuHall is jammed with books, props, costumes and masks from science fiction movies and TV series, including the original Capt. James Kirk command and control chair, and a large model of the queen alien creature Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) fought with a forklift in the film "Aliens."

The day after soaking in the Experience Music Project, we set out to see as much of central Seattle as we could in about 10 hours. Anyone can ride Metro buses for free (between 6 a.m. and 7 p.m.) in a 100-square-block downtown area. Free pocket maps available at most hotels show this "yellow/gold" bus zone. A bus ride is especially beneficial in downtown's hilly areas.

Still, as avid walkers we hiked to Pioneer Square - where the city began in the 1800s. It is now the home of homeless people and seemingly more oriental rugs shops than there are Chinese restaurants in China Town,

seven blocks east of the square. The Seattle Underground tour - a walk through what was once the above ground Pioneer Square area - was fascinating but not for anyone who suffers of claustrophobia.

The Embarcadero seafood eateries and kitschy curio shops still lure hordes of tourists. (For the budget minded, the food in the happy hour - 3 to 7 p.m. - section of Ivar's Acres of Clams restaurant at Pier 54 is half the cost of the menu in the main dining room.)

Just off the north end of the Embarcadero, we entered the Pike Place Public Market through its lower level shops. The thriving market is 100 years old this year. Its food stalls - especially the fresh fish counters - still overwhelm the senses. Of course, Seattle and her incomparable natural scenic beauty and unusual man-made landmarks delightfully overwhelm, too. Rain or shine.

IF YOU GO:

Experience Music Project and Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame

325 Fifth Avenue N

Seattle, WA 98109

\$15 adults; \$12 seniors 65-plus, children 5 to 17, students and military with ID; free for children under 5

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