

Rock 'n' roll tour of America



Clockwise from top left: Gorgeous Chesapeake Bay attracts a big sailing community to bayside Baltimore; a community street festival in Baltimore attracts performers of every age; rocking roller derby girls aren't afraid to hit hard; the Du Burns Arena is a sell-out for Baltimore's monthly Friday night roller derby.

links

read all about it: For all Baltimore gigs, arts, and other events, weekly street press is a font of information, www.citypaper.com

charm and bruises: Watch the bumps and thumps of the Charm City Roller Derby League, with a great soundtrack and hilarious crowd atmosphere thrown in, www.charmcityrollergirls.com

take me out: Catch a ballgame at gorgeous Camden Yards, home of the Orioles – but be warned, if you're not wearing orange, you'll be the only one! www.orioles.com

star-spangled city: Plan your trip to take in all the history and attractions of Baltimore, www.baltimore.org

Blog with Mary Bolling at <http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/rocknrolltour/>

THE sun is shining on a blue-sky day in Maryland.

The grass on Fort McHenry is lush, the bay is sparkling, the shrieks of 100 school excursion students are bearable and I am being serenaded.

But the musical interlude could hardly be considered romantic – well, unless I was an American flag.

This is Baltimore and one song alone has put it on the musical map – *The Star Spangled Banner*.

This is a song which, on face value, celebrates the fact a flag which flew at night is still there the next day.

But, as it turns out, the Baltimore back story is considerably more interesting.

I've had the unofficial tour of Fort McHenry, a star-shaped stronghold that successfully defended the city from British capture in the War of 1812.

During the bombardment of the fort in 1814, American amateur poet Francis Scott Key was being held captive on a British ship in nearby Chesapeake Bay and spent a night watching cannon-fire rain down on his countrymen.

Baltimore has charm, musical credibility and a gritty underbelly, discovers **Mary Bolling**

But in spite of the attack on McHenry and nearby Fort Covington, the then-American flag (with 15 stars and 15 stripes) continued to fly the next day and Key was moved to compose a tribute.

Almost 200 years later, Baltimore still holds itself the patriotic owner of the modern-day American anthem, as tour guide James belts out stanza after stanza.

Fascinatingly, the original poem was teamed with the melody of *The Anacreontic Song* to become the anthem – before the new lyrics, the tune had been a popular drinking ditty.

And actually, as far as Baltimore's concerned, the song may have come full circle.

Determined to see some baseball in the States, I headed to the gorgeous Camden Yards (the stands afford a great view of the bay beyond), home to local heroes the Orioles, affectionately known as the "Os".

There, the playing of the national anthem has a weird addition.

While it's just the melody that blares out over the standing, hand-on-heart crowd, public participation kicks in for a single note, as the whole stadium shouts the "O" of "Oh, say does that star spangled banner yet wave", in a deafening piece of encouragement to the local lads.

Apparently, drunken loyalty to a baseball team outweighs respect for the national anthem.

But the cheeky attitude is just part of Baltimore's rough-and-ready appeal.

Once known as "Mobtown", for its seedy underworld connections, more recently the city has become famed as the setting for American TV drama *The Wire*.

A gritty, Underbelly-esque portrayal of corruption across Baltimore society, it's hardly a tourism lobby's dream – though the local writer did get the mayor's permission to put the city into fictional shadows.

In real-life, Baltimore does have the highest murder rate of any large American city, a fact local newspapers revel in, featuring a daily body count.

The less-than-desirable reputation of Baltimore prompted City Hall to dub her "Charm City" in a bid to win tourists, while another promotion campaign saw "Greatest City in America" branded on all Baltimore's bus stops.

And believe me, the charm is there.

Judging by the boat-lined harbour which sparkles from a distance (though looks like Coke mixed with Fanta up close), the sweet cobblestoned streets of busy bayside Fells Point, the explosion of endless green parks and the streets after streets of colourful, quirky architecture, Baltimore has a long history of charming its residents and anyone else who stumbles through.

Another winning Maryland moniker, "The Land of Pleasant Living", lives on through the label of locally founded budget beer, National Bohemian, or "Natty Boh".

The one-eyed, moustachioed face of the company logo can still be

spotted, neon and Nylex-clock-like, above the city. The brewing of Natty Boh, sadly, has since moved to North Carolina.

But in the face of pleasant living and charm, there are certainly some locals who would rather the rough history live on.

Take the Charm City Roller Girls, a four-team league of hard-playing ladies, whose dedication to the full-contact sport is frequently at the expense of their health.

Roller derby, an American invention, has been gaining popularity since the turn of the century and most US cities have at least one team and plenty of fans clamouring for ringside seats.

With rock 'n' roll names such as Frenzy Lohan, Joy Collision and Jillie Idol, the Baltimore girls play for teams including the Mobtown Mods and the Night Terrors and the bouts feature a roaring rock soundtrack.

All said, Baltimore is a pretty city where music and drinking, violence, patriotism and disrespect, all sit squarely in the centre of local culture. No wonder I love this place.

Next week: Brooklyn in summer sees city dwellers go crazy

YOUR SAY

Have you been to Baltimore? Share your experience with readers. Email shstravel@heraldsun.com.au