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Baltimore museum's small, powerful steps

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Walking into Baltimore's National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, I'm patting myself on the back for finding the place. It's not exactly in the happening part of town. I'm also pretty jazzed about checking out what's inside. But before I get to that, a confession: I'm not a fan of big museums. I feel a little pedestrian admitting such a thing in a city that's full of them. I much prefer the smaller ones; the ones with a more narrow focus; the ones that seem to run on a shoestring yet still manage to illuminate their subjects in a compelling manner.

Chicago has many of those, too, but this is a travel section, so let's go back to Baltimore.

With only one day in town I have no idea what to do, so I follow the road into downtown Baltimore, which takes me right into the Inner Harbor, the city's crown jewel of tourist attractions: shops, restaurants, blah, blah, blah, all tucked into a picturesque waterfront. Staffed with accessible volunteers and stacks of brochures, the bright and airy visitors' information center is more helpful than I ever give such places credit.

THE NATIONAL GREAT BLACKS IN WAX MUSEUM

1601-03 E. North Ave.

Baltimore, Md., 21213

(410) 563-3404

www.greatblacksinwax.org

ADMISSION: \$8-00-\$9.00; group rates also available.

HOURS: 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; noon-6 p.m. Sunday; closed Mondays, except during February, July and August, Martin Luther King Day and most holidays.

Behind the main desk, in a cozy theater, a 10-minute film gives me an abbreviated tour of the city, highlighting the biggies (Inner Harbor, National Aquarium), the favorites (Camden Yards, Babe Ruth Birthplace) and the quirky (National Museum of Dentistry, anyone?) -- plus what's new in town. I tell a volunteer everything I want to see and that time efficiency is key. He kindly maps it out for me and I set out on foot.

After visiting three museums and a gravesite (see sidebar), I huff and puff in the blazing heat back to the garage to retrieve my car -- because getting a cab in Baltimore is ridiculously impossible!

All is worth it, however, for I am en route to a wax museum. Who doesn't love a wax museum? The visitors center video portion on the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum was a jaunty little segment that caught my eye and steered me toward the northeast end of town.

Passing through some run-down neighborhoods, the Johns Hopkins campus and then more run-down neighborhoods, I start rethinking the journey when, voila, North Avenue appears before me and I am confident I'll find it. I park on a desolate side street because there is no lot at this no-frills attraction. It looks like an old fire station, and in fact, it is. It's cool, but then it's not, because there's nothing around it that says "community." Everything is in disrepair, vandalized or empty.

(Further research tells me the museum's owner is in the midst of an ambitious fund-raising campaign, with plans to expand the museum and revitalize the neighborhood.)

I assume that once inside the museum, I will be uplifted and entertained. After all, the country music wax museum I visited in Nashville way back when was a hoot and a half. I anticipate seeing celebrities like Oprah, Bill Cosby, Sidney Poitier, Billie Holiday, Stevie Wonder, et al. Is my ignorance showing? There's no Oprah, no Stevie, no Cosby. Not that I can remember anyway. This museum is a visual, in-your-face history lesson like none I've ever seen.

Reading about the slave trade in schoolbooks is one thing; stepping onto a slave ship is another. That's the first thing I do when entering the museum, and it's one of the two things I will remember most about this excursion.

A long, slow, moaning whisper -- "*Remember...*" -- repeats in a sustained loop, a mantra that sets the tone for the rest of the visit. The wax figures here are life-size Africans, crammed together in tiny spaces, shackled, branded, beaten and raped. Some rebel, and are punished. "*Remember...*" The emotional impact is akin to what I felt as a grammar-school kid watching "Roots," but it's much more profound here.

Unnerved I exit the ship and continue through the main exhibit hall, which features smaller sections on the Colonial era, the black church, the Underground Railroad, slave revolts, abolition and women's rights. There's Crispus Attucks, John Brown, Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth -- all faces I recognize from history books.

At the end of the hall, there's a door with a note on it, handwritten, on an 8 1/2-by-11-inch sheet of paper. It's a warning that anyone under 12 should not proceed down the stairs to see the lynching exhibit. I'm well past 12, so I descend. Unlike the slave ship, this exhibit attempts to prepare me for the horrors I am about to see. Old newspaper clippings line the walls; I read about Ida B. Wells, an anti-lynching crusader with strong ties to Chicago. The ceilings are low, and the short hallway leads to a small room, where I am stopped in my tracks at the sight of Mary Turner and her husband, Hayes. They are both hung, appendages cut off, Mary's unborn child ripped from her womb. It is imprinted on my psyche.

Quietly moving on, I make my way to the upper level of the museum, where I see Eubie Blake sitting at a piano, surrounded by other famous Marylanders: Clarence Mitchell (state senator), Pauline Wells Lewis (singer), Reggie Lewis (basketball player) and hey, there's Billie Holiday! This is the brighter side of black history, and it continues.

The final leg showcases pride, progress and promise for the future. There are writers, athletes, scientists, educators, entertainers, civil rights leaders and statesmen. Not exactly the "celebrities" I had at first anticipated, but highly informative and, yes, uplifting.

I spent the previous day walking through the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., a beautiful facility with gobs of square footage, exquisitely designed exhibits, extraordinary collections of photographs, videos and live testimonials on tape -- state-of-the-art everything, not to mention the number of employees milling about the place.

Great Blacks in Wax is small, dark, cold; signs are handwritten and the only employee I saw was the woman who sold me my admission ticket. It all seems pitiful in comparison, but do not let it discourage you from making the trek. The experience here made as deep an impact as the Holocaust Museum. I learned more in a couple of hours than in all my years of history class; definitely a day to *remember...*

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