

Welcome to H Street: The DC You Haven't Met Yet

The Atlas District is Washington, DC's newest destination for arts and entertainment

By Kara Watkins

Let's be honest. When most of us visit Washington, DC, we work through an ambitious checklist of national monuments and Smithsonians: Tour the Capitol (check). See Julia Child's kitchen (check). Pose for photos in front of the White House (check). And then we head home, satisfied we've done DC. But have we, really?

If you're willing to venture beyond the Mall, Chinatown, or the Zoo, you'll find national treasures (OK, *local* treasures) tucked away in neighborhoods left untouched the tour-by-numbers crowd.

You'll find one of these treat-filled areas in the city's northeast quadrant, behind Union Station. The Atlas District, formerly known as Swampoodle, stretches roughly 12 blocks along H Street, NE.

After the city's 1968 riots — sparked by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. — rolled down H Street, much of the then-thriving commercial district lay in ruins and the area foundered for decades. Now undergoing a revival, the neighborhood is filling up with hip restaurants, unique pubs and music clubs, cutting-edge galleries, and stunning theater venues ready to reward those who go the extra mile (literally) to reach them.

The Grande Dame of H Street

One of the few buildings on H to survive the riots, the Atlas Theater closed its doors in 1976 and stood neglected until 2001, when motivated residents led the charge to

restore the theater to its original Art Deco glory — setting the stage for the community’s comeback. No wonder, then, the neighborhood was renamed in its honor.

Today, the Atlas’s 60,000 sq ft complex is home to the Atlas Performing Arts Center, and hosts film series, arts festivals, and performances produced by more than a dozen local arts organizations, including Capital City Symphony, Opera Lafayette, Theater Alliance, and the Joy of Motion Dance Center.

Right now is the perfect time to check out the Atlas. Its popular “Jazz at the Atlas” series runs through December, and features legendary vibraphonist Teddy Charles and alto saxophonist Miguel Zenon. In February, Atlas merges arts and cultures with INTERSECTIONS, an interactive 12-day arts festival developed to create dialogue and connections between more than 600 of Washington’s most talented performers.

www.atlasarts.org

A Destination for the Culturally Curious

While a night out at the Atlas is reason enough to visit H Street — hop in a cab and come early (or stay late) and explore — there’s something for everyone.

Art lovers know there’s no better way to get acquainted with a neighborhood than through its galleries. The Atlas District has two well worth an introduction. In 2007 Leigh Conner moved **Conner Contemporary Art** from Dupont Circle to the ground floor of a former auto shop on Florida Avenue (north of H), in part because she liked the area’s vibe. “It’s a laidback neighborhood where the culturally curious can experience the real DC,” she says — not unlike the Greenwich Village she remembers from the 1970s.

Conner takes advantage of the gallery’s 7,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor space to show large-scale, ambitious, experimental pieces by up-and-coming artists. And as a driving force behind the city’s (E)merge Art Fair, she hopes to see DC become known as

a center for contemporary art. Stop by the gallery to browse the current exhibition (through December 17) of Patricia Piccinini's sculptures and Victoria F. Gaitán's photography. Open Tuesday – Saturday, 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. www.connercontemporary.com

Dedicated to 21st-century design, **Industry Gallery** occupies the floor above Conner, and showcases work by industrial (furniture) designers, such as London-based Tom Price. Owner Craig Appelbaum encourages artists — many of whom have never before shown in the U.S. — to use the gallery's 4,000 sq ft as their laboratory, letting the space inspire their installations. Through December, Kyoto-based artist/designer Mariyo Yagi transforms the gallery into a magical Japanese forest. www.industrygallerydc.com

Eat Street

No need to go hungry on H Street; the Atlas District is developing a reputation for top-notch cuisine, and a loyal foodie following.

If the Atlas is the grande dame of H Street, the **Argonaut Tavern** is its patriarch. Known as the grandfather of H Street's hip eateries, the nautical themed pub stands guard at the far eastern edge of the Atlas District. Locals come here for reliably good food (fish tacos, burgers, freshly made pastas), friendly service, and to catch up with neighbors. Lunch Wednesday – Friday; Dinner nightly; weekend brunch. www.argonautdc.com

What does **H Street Country Club** have to offer besides award-winning margaritas and authentic Mexican fare? Good, clean fun — with a twist. Skee-ball, anyone? Break out the Clearasil; the Club is taking you back to junior high, with arcade games on the ground floor and a whimsical mini-golf course upstairs. Open daily from 5 p.m.; Families welcome before 9 p.m. www.hstreetcountryclub.com

Three words to best describe **Granville Moore's**? Cozy. Belgian. Throwdown. With executive chef Teddy Folkman serving upscale pub fare — including the *moules fromage*

bleu (mussels with bleu cheese) that sent Bobby Flay home, defeated — along with an enchanting selection of Belgian beer, this bustling gastropub has locals scrambling to fill seats at its precious few tables. Open for dinner and late night; weekend brunch.

www.granvillemoores.com.

A cheery bistro, **Liberty Tree** is putting down roots on H Street. Owner Scott Hamilton and executive chef Graig Glufling bring New England to DC with a menu stocked with fresh seafood classics, salads and sandwiches, and brick oven pizza. Local favorites: melt-in-your-mouth onion straws, the deliciously traditional lobster roll, and the Godfather pizza topped with spicy meatballs. Lunch and dinner daily; weekend brunch.

www.libertytreedc.com

Late-Night Fun

So you're in the mood for something a little . . . different? The proudly off-kilter, carnival-themed **Red Palace** has you covered, with its walls crammed with sideshow oddities (can you spot the unicorn?) and a steady rotation of unique acts such as Sticky Buns — a Baltimore-based burlesque troupe whose frolicking, riotous show is guaranteed to thrill and amaze. www.redpalacedc.com

For the past five years, those hip to the DC music scene have made a beeline to H Street's mortuary-turned-nightclub, the **Rock and Roll Hotel**, to see local and nationally known musical acts. Just don't arrive expecting to check in — those are bouncers, not bellhops — though you can rent out the rock-themed rooms on the second floor for private parties. www.rockandrollhoteldc.com

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[BOX] Where to Stay

The newly renovated Kellogg Conference Hotel on the campus of historic Gallaudet University offers deluxe DC accommodations at affordable prices. With the Atlas District and Union Station just a few blocks away and Capitol Hill and the National Mall within easy reach, the Kellogg Conference Hotel is ready to welcome you to the neighborhood. www.kelloggconferencehotel.com

[Box] DC Travel Tips

A few tips to make navigating from point A to B in DC more enjoyable and economical:

- If the weather's fine, grab a bike from one of Capital Bikeshare's 110 stations across DC and pedal your way through the city. It's a fun way to take in the sites and burn some extra calories too. You'll pay \$5 for a daily membership, plus a small usage fee per each half-hour of ride time. www.capitalbikeshare.com
- To earn your black belt in Metro riding: 1) At the ticket machines, skip the single-fare card and buy a convenient, money-saving one-day or seven-day pass. 2) Travel outside rush hours — weekdays until 9:30 a.m. and 3 – 7 p.m. — you'll enjoy less crowded train cars and lower fares. 3) On the escalators: stand on the right, walk on the left — the locals will thank you. www.wmata.com
- Got \$1? For a cheap city tour, hop on a bright red Circulator Bus at Union Station and ride down K Street to the heart of Georgetown. Buses depart every 10 minutes from the Union Station parking garage (mezzanine level). www.dccirculator.com

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