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In Our Own Backyard

On the Horizon Around the Verizon (Center)

By Gina Hagler

Washington is in a constant state of flux. From the news of who's in and who's out politically to the buzz on the hottest place to live, the constant here is that there is no constant. We'd heard that the area around the Verizon Center was hopping, so my kids and I decided to spend our first day of spring break checking it out.

Chinatown

We took the Metro to the Gallery Place-Chinatown stop and headed out the Chinatown exit. The first thing we saw was the colorful Friendship Arch. With vivid colors and Chinese characters in gold, it spans H Street, welcoming visitors to Chinatown. We headed down the red brick walk. Banners with Chinese characters fluttered above the restaurants on the right side of the street. The bank had Chinese characters, as well. We passed stone emblems of dragons inset into the walls and a lighted sign identifying the Metropolitan Police Department Asian Liaison Unit.

Just past the New Big Wong restaurant, we stopped at a gift shop full of T-shirts, silk robes and dresses, shoes, jade jewelry, baseball caps and silk messenger bags. We left with a dress and a bag for my daughter and took a brief detour onto 6th Street to watch dumplings being made in the window of Chinatown Express.

Strolling Around E & F Streets

Standing still has never been our strong point, so we headed to F Street, walking past the Verizon Center. At 10th between E and F streets we got a close look at Ford's Theatre where Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. There was a long line of people waiting to enter, so my antsy kids opted for a quick peek inside the Shakespeare Theatre instead, before making a run through the National Portrait Gallery and Smithsonian American Art Museum at 8th and F streets. We saw portraits of presidents, Native American chieftains and the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington. My fourth-grade daughter has learned about Washington in school and seeing that the portrait was painted in 1796 really made her think about how old the pictures in the museum were, giving her a new perspective.

Snacking

Of course, no exploration would be complete without a snack. We stopped at fro-zen-yo on F Street, between 10th and 11th. This self-serve frozen yogurt shop was just what my seventh-grade son was looking for. We each took a cup and headed down a line of frozen yogurt machines. Customers can have one flavor or a swirl blend. "We change flavors every two weeks," says manager Ashley Newman. "We like to rotate them, but we always keep flavors like Classic Chocolate and French Vanilla. We also always have two sorbets for people who are lactose intolerant."

We helped ourselves to the yogurt and headed for the toppings bar where they had everything from strawberries to Captain Crunch. The treats were weighed at the register (The yogurt costs \$.32 per ounce.) and my daughter helped herself to some free hot fudge topping. We sat in a window seat--in the summer there will also be seating outside the shop--and watched the people passing by. The music is kid-friendly, there's a mix of business people and tourists, and the yogurt is absolutely delicious. We rate this place a must-visit.

Window-Shopping

The old Woodward and Lothrop building is right across from fro-zen-yo. We crossed the street to check out a fire truck that had arrived for a false alarm. As long as we were over there, we window-shopped at H&M



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clothing store on the ground floor. We also looked in the windows at Zara, a store with clothing for children and adults. Madame Tussauds is on the corner and we reminisced about the great time we had there last year before going around the corner to see St. Patrick's Catholic Church, billed as the oldest parish in the federal city.

In our crisscross tour of the area around the Verizon Center we passed restaurants ranging from ella's wood fired pizza to Potbelly to Clyde's to Ruth's Chris Steak House. The shopping ranged from H&M to Jos. A. Bank to the Peruvian Connection over--by Ford's Theater. The International Spy Museum, also down in this area, was right across F Street from the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Architecture

The architecture in the area is striking. There's a mix of buildings dating from the late 1800s to contemporary. The old Woodie's is not the only one now in use. The old Riggs Bank at 9th and H streets is home to a Marriott Courtyard. There's a McCormick and Schmick's in the old Masonic Temple building. The International Spy Museum is in a building dating from 1876. As you walk around, you can see the original names of the buildings in stone above many of the doorways. There's often a date as well. Searching for the oldest building was part of the fun.

The only disappointment of the day was when we discovered City Segway Tours over on 9th and G streets by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. For \$70 and a reservation, you get a three-hour guided tour of the District. The only catch is that children must be at least 16 years old. My kids were itching for a ride on one of those Segways. I have to admit, it was hard for me to walk away, so we settled for watching people warming up for their tour. "It was pretty easy to decide to locate here. The area is just booming with restaurants and things to do in the area," says manager John Voci.

From what we saw he's absolutely right!

Metro: Gallery Place-Chinatown

Map: The best map I found was at Google maps. I clicked until the area was magnified. It showed restaurants and museums.

Websites:

americanart.si.edu
citysegwaytours.com/washington-dc
madametussauds.com
npg.si.edu
fordstheatre.org
saintpatrickdc.org
Shakespearetheatre.org
spymuseum.org
verizoncenter.com

Gina Hagler is a freelance writer who also teaches kids to write. When she's not exploring, she's busy writing her first book, Modeling Ships and Space Craft: The Science and Art of Mastering the Oceans and Sky.