



Tacoma's art scene continues to surprise

A visitor finds much to admire about Tacoma. Glass artist Dale Chihuly's mark on the town is indisputable, and the food is fine.

By Howard Baldwin

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There's a scene in the movie *Total Recall* in which a mechanical head turns into an incendiary device. Just before it explodes, the head yells, "Get ready for a surprise!"

Surprise, indeed. After years of both living in and visiting Seattle, I was surprised to find myself not wanting to leave its sister city to the south, Tacoma.

Thank native son Dale Chihuly, an exhibit of whose glass artistry has been circling the country. Having seen the exhibit at the new DeYoung in San Francisco, and read in *Sunset* about several installations of his work in public places in Tacoma, friends and I headed to Pacific Avenue, where we found much more Chihuly glass.

We parked at the Washington State History Museum and headed to the Bridge of Glass. Walking under the ceiling piled deep with glasswork is like walking into an underwater wonderland of color. Viewing exhibits like these (which replicates one at the DeYoung) makes me wonder at Chihuly's unbelievably prolific output.

From there we headed into the old Union Station (now the U.S. courthouse) to see the Chihuly installations there. As a Silicon Valley native, one of the things that fascinates me about Chihuly's work is not just its vivid color, but also the engineering feat they represent. I still can't figure out how the beautiful autumn leaves adorning the window are attached — can you just lift them out of their holders?

There was more Chihuly glass at the Tacoma Art Museum, tucked away in two different cases, but the exhibit "Oasis: Western Dreams of the Ottoman Empire from the Dahesh Museum of Art" (showing through January 4, 2009) was a delightful trip into the Middle East through the eyes of western artists. It made me want to go back to Morocco.

The cashier at the Tacoma Art Museum told us that because we were there midweek, we could buy all-in-one tickets for \$18 (adults; \$16 for seniors and \$14 for children 6-18) that would admit us to the Museum of Glass and the Washington State History Museum as well. We headed to the latter for the exhibition "The West the Railroads Made." Given the obvious advantage of rail transportation over steamboat traffic, I was embarrassed to learn that in choosing one over the other, Chicago and St. Louis sealed their respective fates. An educational experience all around.

But Pacific Avenue is not just museums. For lunch we ventured across the street to A Renaissance Cafe for sandwiches and salad, including an Italian sub sandwich to die for and a chocolate chip cookie thrown in unexpectedly along with the tortilla chips. And the coffee wasn't bad either. No need for Starbucks here. For dessert, it was just steps to Hello, Cupcake, just one of the latest fad of cupcake shops where I regularly forgive the bakers for slathering on too much frosting because the cupcakes themselves are so dreamy.

After lunch, we split up, some of us heading to more Chihuly at the Museum of Glass, while I went back to the history museum to sample the Washington state history exhibit. Before long, we reluctantly had to head back north to pick up schoolkids, long before we were ready to leave. As my Seattle-born host said, "Tacoma! Who knew it could be so much fun?"

Howard Baldwin is a former Seattle resident who will never say anything negative about Tacoma again.

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