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Takoma Park's eclectic ways of the past and its penchant for civic activism long outlived their roots, which extend farther back than even the counterculture movement of the 1960s. But that's what still gives the place more character than any other Washington suburb, and why it is lovingly called:

The People's Republic of Takoma Park

By Carolee Noury // Photograph by Hilary Schwab



For Benjamin Franklin Gilbert, moving outside the city line in the late 19th century – even if only a matter of yards – to elevated land along the Washington border with Montgomery County as it slopes away from its northern point offered an escape from the malaria-transmitting mosquitoes plaguing lower-lying Washington, D.C. The unintended consequence of his move was that it began to change the way we live in the Washington area.

Gilbert, a developer, founder and future first mayor of Takoma Park, struck his claim and laid out the city where residents would enjoy the fresher air and access to the B&O railroad, essentially making them the national capital's first commuters, working in the city but not living in it. And so the suburbanization of Montgomery County began.

At 2.4 square miles, the city of Takoma Park seemingly packs history in by the square inch. Incorporated in 1890, the name Takoma, a nod to this beneficial elevation, was presumably inspired by Tacoma, Washington. The anglicized word meaning “snowcapped mountain” comes from Lushootseed, which is



“Takoma Park is a diverse community with people from all over the world calling the city home.”

– Mayor Kate Stewart

spoken by American Indian tribes in the Puget Sound region.

The desire for a healthy suburb is a tenet that today’s Takoma Park residents continue to take seriously. It is tied with Baltimore as the most walkable city in Maryland, according to www.walkscore.com. The Sligo Creek Stream Valley Trail offers an asphalt trail for people on the move. The Takoma Park Recreation Center offers dance classes, a gym, self-defense classes and Pilates, among an array of fitness offerings. Six city parks give residents a variety of sports fields, playgrounds and space for outdoor events. The Takoma Park City Guide, published three times per year, offers a handy guide to events, programming and city resources.

The commitment extends to fresh foods. Between the farmers’ markets (Crossroads Farmers’ Market, open Wednesdays from June to November; Takoma Park Farmers’ Market open Sundays year-round) and the Takoma Park Silver Spring Co-op, fresh and local

foods are readily available.

To Gilbert’s delight, the Seventh Day Adventist Church decided to make Takoma Park its headquarters in 1904. The church founded the Washington Sanitarium, the county’s first hospital, which became Washington Adventist Hospital. After more than 100 years in Takoma Park, the landmark hospital is set to leave for a modern facility in White Oak in early 2019.

Until 1997 portions of Takoma Park belonged to both Montgomery and Prince George’s counties. Although they are neighbors just outside the Maryland-DC border, Takoma Park and Takoma, a D.C. neighborhood, are similar but not the same. Those boundaries have never defined the city of 17,000, though. The shared Takoma Metro station is only one example of cross-border connections. Residents venture over the borders to shop, eat and for entertainment. Each year Takoma Park welcomes neighbors to its Folk Festival (September 11, 2016) and a Jazz Festival every June.

But what sets Takoma Park apart is its history of activism. Fifty years ago, Samuel Abdullah Abbott and resident Etta Mae Davis took exception to a plan by the federal government to build a freeway through the city because it would destroy many of the town's iconic and historic Victorian homes. They rallied residents and as the de facto publicity chair for the Emergency Coalition on the Transportation Crisis, Abbott coined the phrase, "White men's roads through black men's bedrooms."

The city beat back the plan, and that is why today Interstate 95 travels around the city on the Capital Beltway rather than through Takoma Park and into Washington, D.C. The action saved over 1,000 homes and apartments and redirected more than \$1 billion toward Metro construction in the D.C. metro area.

Abbott and Davis rallied the troops again in the early 1970s after they discovered a master plan by Montgomery College called for expanding the campus into the city's Block 69, which again would have destroyed homes. Again, they won and both became local heroes. Abbott turned his popularity into a stint as

mayor (1980 to '85) and from that office he continued his activism. He worked to make Takoma Park a Nuclear Free Zone, which led the city to boycott products manufactured by businesses involved in nuclear production or research.

"Takoma Park is a diverse community with people from all over the world calling the city home," says current Mayor Kate Stewart. "We have a long and rich history of civic activism. We have pioneered many environmental programs from the early days of recycling to tree protection acts to being the first city in the country to ban cosmetic use of pesticides. Even the school children in Takoma Park participate in civic and environmental activism. It was a group of elementary school students who spearheaded an effort to pass a ban on all polystyrene foodservice items.

"Another thing that sets our city apart," she says, "is that we place a priority on affordable housing and have rent stabilization to help ensure we are able to keep a mix of housing options for residents with different levels of income. As with many communities in the

Takoma Park: Itinerary

WHAT TO DO

In a city with an active arts and music scene, two farmers' markets and plenty of locally owned businesses, wandering aimlessly would be a reasonable itinerary. If you prefer having a plan, with six parks to choose from, the City's Department of Recreation website (www.takomaparkmd.gov/government/recreation) is an excellent place to begin. Volunteer-run **ArtSpring** offers the chance to see and purchase local art. The **Thomas-Siegler House and Garden**, the oldest home in Takoma Park, offers a closer look at the city's history. The garden is open to the public from dawn to dusk. The **Little Loft** is a neighborhood art space where children can make their own creations. For adults, **The Still Point** is the area's leading organic beauty boutique and a spa that provides eco-friendly health, beauty and wellness services.

WHERE TO SHOP

Takoma Park Main Street has a variety of boutiques and trendy shops. **Amano**, **Bespoke Not Broke** and **Pollysue's Vintage Shop** offer affordable and "gently worn" men's and women's clothing. **The Green Commuter** can help you reduce your commuting carbon

footprint with bicycles and electric bicycles. You can find eclectic gifts at **The Magic Carpet**. The aptly named **TableTopDC** sells nicknacks and things for tabletops and elsewhere in your home. If you're in need of beads, **S&A Beads** has them loose, strung, in jewelry and just about any other way you might need them. And **Things From Egypt** contains a collection of handmade Egyptian clothing, scarves, carpets, ceramics and accessories.

WHERE TO EAT

Takoma Park offers a variety of cuisines to choose from, with many vegan-friendly menus. **Kin Da's Thai**, **Tiffin the Indian Kitchen**, and **Middle Eastern Cuisine and Olive Lounge** all earn high marks from diners. **Mark's Kitchen**, open since 1990, has a menu chockfull of Asian and American choices (vegan and gluten free options abound). **Natra's Tea House** offers free WiFi and rave-worthy teas. For dessert enthusiasts, **Capital City Cheesecake Café and Bakery** is a mandatory stop – if cheesecake doesn't tempt you, delicious pies and pastries are available, too.

area we are continually looking at the issue of housing and how we can do the best job to meet the needs of all our residents.”

Stewart says the city council unanimously supported a resolution to welcome Syrian refugees in 2015 and has also taken action to oppose “incendiary rhetoric” employed by politicians to incite fear as a tactic “to turn away victims of terrorism.” The antidote, she says, is “approaching issues such as this with compassion and empathy.”

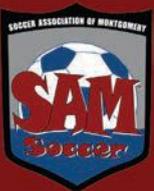
That spirit is what attracted Lorig Charkoudian to the city in 2006. “The reputation of the progressive and funky ‘People’s Republic’ lured me,” she says. Charkoudian cites the Crossroads Farmers’ Market’s decision to double federal nutrition benefits (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Women, Infants and Children program) and their status as the first farmers’ market to do so. “This increases access to fresh, healthy produce for low-income individuals.”

In another innovative move, Takoma Park extends

voting eligibility to residents age 16 and older. Residents who live in Takoma Park, but are not U.S. citizens are also eligible to vote in city elections. “A core value in our community is the belief that all people have a right to personal dignity and to be treated with fairness and justice and not with hatred and bigotry,” says Stewart.

This sentiment helps to create a welcoming and tight-knit community. “My children can walk to and from school, the library and the parks and see people they know who care about them along the way. They have friends they go to school with and play sports with children from many cultural and ethnic backgrounds,” says Charkoudian.

As time goes on, Stewart expects Takoma Park’s principles to persist. “The area is changing quickly. We have many new families moving to the city as well as residents who have lived here for decades and wanting to stay in their own homes as they grow older. Making sure we remain a diverse and inclusive city and true to our values while we adapt and respond to change is my hope for the future of the city.” 



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