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# Washington Is My Home

An introduction to this guide

IT'S THE PRESIDENT, MAYBE. OR IT COULD BE A VISITING MINISTER OR A queen or even a sultan. The tell-tale signs of an approaching motorcade bearing a VIP appear suddenly. Metropolitan police squad cars arrive, blocking all traffic onto the motorcade route. In the distance, sirens scream and grow louder as they approach. First comes a roaring phalanx of motorcycle cops, a dozen of them, waving jay walkers back onto the curb. Moving swiftly, a pursuing parade of black limousines and Secret Service-toting SUVs—12 or 15 vehicles—sweeps past, warning lights flashing. Small flags on one or two limos whip in frenzy. Finally, a big white city ambulance brings up the rear, racing to keep up. The ambulance is the key; it almost always means the President is on the move. And then, in 30 seconds, the show is over—at least on the block where you are standing.

These motorcades, brief eruptions of noise and action, are a Washington fact of life. They happen every day; you will probably witness one. Some are not quite so intrusive; lesser dignitaries don't receive as much protection. To a delayed motorist, they are a nuisance. But they are one reason I've made Washington my home for most of my work life. They bespeak the excitement of living in the nation's capital, where national and world leaders make the decisions affecting not only Americans but nearly everyone on the globe. Not always the right decisions, let me add, but important ones good or bad.

Many of us in the city suffer from Potomac Fever, a recognized malady of the mind and heart. We come here to take a job, and then we are infected. We can't leave; so much is going on all the time we fear we would be bored anywhere else. My wife Sandy and I took jobs in the city in our 20s, she from Michigan and I from Nebraska by way of California. We expect to remain for the rest of our lives.

So what keeps us here?

For one, it's the thrill we get from being in a place where things happen. My wife is an executive with an insurance lobbying association; I was a writer and editor with the *Washington Post*. As such we have worked on the fringes of important happenings, and we became addicted. It affects lots of senators and representatives who never go home either. But this is only part of our love affair with Washington.

We remain because it's a beautiful place, perhaps the loveliest city in America, and getting more beautiful every year. The National Mall, site of so many elegant marble monuments and memorials, is a unique treasure. You don't have to step into any of its museums to experience its spirit-boosting beauty. This is a city of parks, grand and small, and of flowering trees and shrubs and lush green lawns. In spring, a kaleidoscope of blooms carpets the city. Come summer, a thick

canopy of shade trees shields us from some of the sun's hot sting. And when the leaves turn in fall, they treat us to a grand foliage display.

Washington is a diverse community—multiracial, cosmopolitan, and tolerant. Well, maybe not quite so diverse; we vote almost solidly Democratic year after year. Republicans claim the White House and both branches of the federal legislature from time to time; Democrats have a lock on the District Building, our City Hall. You are likely to see foreign visitors, students, or temporary residents in the dress of their homeland—often along Embassy Row. This, too, is part of the city's charm.

Sandy and I do not keep a TV set. Who has time to watch? There are so many after-hour things to do in Washington, and so many are free: ever-changing museum shows, chamber concerts, lectures, poetry readings, political demonstrations, volunteer opportunities, and more. Live theater is a really big deal, often premiering works of America's up-and-coming playwrights. The National Symphony Orchestra is one of the country's best; so is the Washington National Opera, headed by renowned tenor Plácido Domingo. The cafe and club scenes are hot.

## SIGHTS YOU GOTTA SEE

**The grand view of the National Mall from the west steps of the U.S. Capitol** as you begin an escorted tour of the Capitol. It's my favorite view in the city, a more impressive sight than the rather unfocused vista from atop the Washington Monument. See p. 139.

**The Lincoln Memorial** is Washington's most famous and arguably most cherished memorial (p. 99). Visit the museum to learn about the major civil rights events that have taken place on its steps—among them the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Find a seat on those very steps and enjoy the sweeping view from the opposite end of the National Mall—second only to the view from the Capitol.

**Ginevra de' Benci in the National Gallery of Art** is the only painting in the United States by Leonardo da Vinci. A small gem, it's the portrait of a lovely young woman of 15th-century Florence. After seeing it, indulge in the museum's other riches, including its Impressionist galleries. See p. 104.

**The Washington National Cathedral.** A Gothic masterpiece, it looks like something out of 14th-century England. The sixth largest cathedral in the world, it boasts something none of the larger ones do. High on the front facade is the sculpted head of Darth Vader, the *Star Wars* villain, who does service as one of the cathedral's very functional gargoyles. See p. 131.

**The Korean War Veterans Memorial** is overshadowed by the nearby Vietnam Veterans Memorial. But in a more graphic way, it makes a similarly compelling statement about the tragedy of war. The Vietnam memorial is an artistic masterpiece—a simple, eloquent tribute to the dead; the Korean memorial, also honoring the war dead, is a punch in the gut. See p. 110.

## THINGS YOU GOTTA DO

**Sit in on a session of Congress**, either the Senate or the House, and see America's legislators in action. Sometimes little is happening on the floor; occasionally fireworks go off. See p. 94.

**Indulge your spirit of adventure at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum.** There's no comparable museum of space flight anywhere else. Be sure to touch the **Moon Rock**, a piece of the moon brought back by the astronauts. See p. 105.

**Circle the White House** to see it from the front and back. Although you've seen the White House on the evening news, this is your chance for a close-up look. My guess is that it will appear more impressive than you imagined. See p. 85.

**Browse the chic boutiques and stroll the streets of historic Georgetown.** Busy throughout the week, the sidewalks spill over with traffic on Saturday and Sunday. It becomes almost a party scene, where locals show up to see and be seen. This is the preferred neighborhood of Washington's wealthier Cabinet members, senators (John Kerry of Massachusetts), representatives, and prominent journalists, such as the *Washington Post's* Ben Bradlee and Sally Quinn. Keep an eye out for them. See p. 219 for shopping, p. 191 for a walking tour.

## DINING FOR EVERY TASTE

Sample the new trend in Washington dining—called “small plates,” *tapas* (from Spain) or *mezze* (of North African/Mediterranean origin). No matter the name, they are indeed a selection of small, very tasty dishes. Depending on your appetite, each diner orders two or three and shares. The best of these restaurants is **Zaytinya** (p. 67) which plucks recipes and ingredients from across the Mediterranean.

Go **ethnic** at the city's wonderful array of restaurants and cafes featuring cuisines from around the world. The savory stews of Ethiopia are served up on 18th Street in Adams Morgan, often dubbed “Little Ethiopia,” and in the developing U Street Corridor. Try one of these African feasts at either **Dukem** (p. 74) or **Etete** (p. 73). You'll also find world class German, Malaysian, Indian, Belgian, Turkish, and other foods, allowing your tongue to tour the planet, so to speak, without ever leaving Washington, D.C.

Sample home-cooked **soul food** in the church cafeteria in a primarily African-American neighborhood. For more than four decades, the **Saint's Paradise Cafeteria** (p. 80) has been serving up ultra-tasty, budget-priced plates of fried chicken, beef short ribs, pigs' feet, chitterlings, and corn bread every day of the week.

## UNCOMMON LODGINGS

Many visitors put off their dream trips to Washington, D.C. for the simple reason that they don't think they can afford to go. The cost of accommodation usually takes the blame. Yet the reality is that the least expensive places to stay often

yield the most exciting visits. Many D.C. residents maintain spare basement apartments or rooms expressly for the purpose of renting them to visitors. Many are located in the same areas where the most popular hotels are found, but they usually cost much less. To learn all about these “alternative accommodations,” go to p. 27.

If you want a more traditional option, try the hip, high-style **The Akwaaba Bed and Breakfast**. It'll be a big change after a history-filled day of sightseeing on the Mall. A fine example of the city's bed-and-breakfast inns, it features some of the largest and most attractive rooms to be found in the city. See p. 39.

Occupying a three-story red brick mansion, the 10-room **Embassy Circle Guest House** gives you a taste of luxurious living in one of the city's swankiest neighborhoods, but at an affordable price. Surrounded by embassies, and once owned by the government of Taiwan, it's a fine example of a type of lodging that may be unique to the city. See p. 38.

Even more affordable, but still quite cute, the Victorian **Kalorama Guest House** puts you in the heart of funky Adams Morgan, with its fun (and usually quite good) restaurants, bars, and clubs. You'll sleep surrounded by antiques, with the sepia-toned portraits of someone's relatives gazing down at you from the walls. See p. 33.

## Statistical Washington

Founded in 1791, Washington covers 68 square miles. They were carved out of land donated to the federal government by the state of Maryland. The current official population numbers 582,049, according to the 2005 census. That census showed a heartening increase of 31,528 residents after a 56-year decline in population. In 1950, the population peaked at 802,178. The city is located in the heart of a Metropolitan area with a population, including Washington's, of 5.42 million.

The name Washington, of course, is to honor President George Washington. District of Columbia is a nod to Christopher Columbus. The “District” in the name refers to Washington's status as a Federal district, a unique designation created especially for the seat of government. It is not a state, so it is not entitled to two U.S. senators nor the one representative its population might otherwise claim.

The primary industry is the Federal government, followed by tourism. Trade associations, scrambling to influence national legislation, are another important industry. Washington is home to more of these lobbying organizations than any other U.S. city.

## FINEST “OTHER” EXPERIENCES

Be a spectator or participant at a **demonstration or protest** on the National Mall. You can remain silent and undemonstrative, but if a march occurs while you are in town, see what it's about. You don't have to agree with the speakers; just listen for a while. If you're really gung ho about changing the world, you could attend a seminar for would-be activists. See p. 147.

Tour the **Mall by moonlight**, when the monuments and memorials are lighted and seem to possess a magical glow. National Park Service rangers are on duty nightly until midnight, but consider one of several escorted tour options—among them by bicycle or Segway. See p. 139.

Attend a concert or lecture at a **foreign embassy**. It's a great way to see the interior of some of the capital's elegant embassies, and you might get to shake hands with the ambassador. At the very least, you will learn something new about a foreign land and culture. See p. 153.

Join the legions of congressional aides preparing for the balls they might attend as part of their jobs at a festive **dance class**. It's a swell way to break the ice with locals and learn about some of the very old fashioned rituals of D.C. See p. 144.