

Getting around Washington

Driving Your Car: A Really Bad Idea

Traffic Hot Spots

Here's some bad news for anyone considering driving to our nation's capital: Washington is legendary for its traffic congestion. Let's start with the Capital Beltway (I-495 and I-95), which encircles the city through the Virginia and Maryland suburbs: It's guaranteed to be logjammed on weekdays from 7 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. and again from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. Unremitting suburban growth and geography confound the best efforts of traffic engineers to alleviate the congestion.

Inside the Beltway, the situation only gets worse. The few bridges that connect Washington and Virginia across the Potomac River are rush-hour bottlenecks. Interstates 66 and 395 in Virginia have restricted carpool lanes inbound in the morning and outbound in the evening. Inside the District, Rock Creek Parkway becomes one-way during rush hour, and major thoroughfares such as Connecticut Avenue switch the direction of center lanes to match the predominant flow of traffic at different times of day. Downtown, the city's traffic circles can trap unwary motorists and reduce drivers to tears or profanity. Pierre L'Enfant's eighteenth-century grand plan of streets and avenues that intersect in traffic circles is a nightmare for twenty-first-century motorists.

First-time drivers to Washington should map out their routes in advance, avoid arriving and departing during rush hour, and then leave the car parked throughout their stay. Lunch-hour traffic can be equally ferocious, and don't think that weekends are immune from traffic snarls: Washington's popularity as a tourist mecca slows Beltway traffic to a crawl on Saturdays and Sundays in warm weather. If there's any good news about driving in Washington, it's this: After evening rush hour subsides, getting around town by car is pretty easy.



Bronze pylons (left) identify Metro stations; colored stripes at top show the line or lines served by that station.

Metro system and neighborhood maps (below) are located in the mezzanine of each station, as are automated Farecard vending machines (bottom).



Parking

If you ignore our advice about driving in Washington (we repeat: don't) and battle your way downtown by car, you'll find yourself stuck in one of those good news/bad news scenarios. The good news: There are plenty of places to park. The bad news: Virtually all the spaces are in parking garages that charge an arm and a leg. Figure on \$12 a day or \$5 an hour, minimum.

Think you can beat the system by finding street parking? Go ahead and try, but bring a lot of quarters—and plenty of patience. Most metered parking is restricted to two hours—not a long time if you're intent on exploring a museum or attending a business meeting. And D.C. cops are quick to issue tickets for expired meters. Also, a lot of legal spaces turn illegal during afternoon rush hour.

In popular residential neighborhoods such as Georgetown and Adams-Morgan, parking gets even worse at night. Unless you've got a residential parking permit—not likely if you're from out of town—street parking is limited to from two to three hours, depending on the neighborhood. The parking permits are prominently displayed in the cars of area residents.

If you're tempted to park illegally, be warned: D.C. police are grimly efficient at whisking away cars parked in rush-hour zones, and the fines are hefty. If your car is towed, call the D.C. Department of Public Works at (202) 727-1010; if you're not sure if it was towed, call (202) 727-5000. Incredibly, there's free parking along the Mall beginning at 10 a.m. weekdays; the limit is three hours. Needless to say, competition for the spaces is fierce.

Riding the Metro: A Really Good Idea

A Clean, Safe Alternative

It should be clear by now that visitors who would prefer to spend their time doing something productive rather than sit in traffic jams shouldn't drive in or around Washington. Thanks to the Metro, visitors can park their cars and forget them—just remember you need a Metro farecard and cash to exit the parking lots. Five color-coded subway lines connect downtown Washington to the outer reaches of the city and beyond to the Maryland and Virginia suburbs. It's a clean, safe, and efficient system that saves visitors time, money, and shoe leather as it whisks them around town. Visitors to Washington should use the Metro as their primary mode of transportation.

The trains are well maintained and quiet, with carpeting, cushioned seats, and air conditioning. The stations are modern, well lighted, and usually spotless, and they are uniformly constructed with high, arching ceilings paneled with sound-absorbing, lozenge-shaped concrete panels.

The wide-open look of the stations has been criticized as sterile and monotonous, but the design may explain why the Metro has maintained a crime-free reputation: There's no place for bad guys to hide. In addition, the entire system is monitored by closed-circuit TV cameras, and each car is equipped with passenger-to-operator intercoms, as are rail platforms and elevators. And cars and stations are nearly graffiti free.

The Metro (nobody calls it Metrorail, its real name) transports more than half a million passengers a day along 103 miles of track and through 83 stations. Currently, one line extension and three new stations are under construction (with two of them opening in late 2004). It's a world-class engineering marvel.

Trains operate so frequently that carrying a schedule is unnecessary. During peak hours (weekdays 5:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. and 3 p.m. to 8 p.m.), trains enter the stations every three to six minutes. During off-peak hours, the interval increases to an average of 12 minutes; it can go to 20 minutes on weekends. To maintain the intervals throughout the year, the Metro adds and deletes trains to compensate for holidays and peak tourist season. Hours of operation are 5:30 a.m. to midnight Monday through Thursday, and 7 a.m. to 3 a.m. on weekends and holidays.

How to Ride the Metro

Finding the Stations

Many (but, unfortunately, not all) street signs in Washington indicate the direction and number of blocks to the nearest Metro station. Station entrances are identified by brown columns or pylons with an "M" on all four sides and a combination of colored stripes in red, yellow, orange, green, or blue that indicate the line or lines serving that station. Since most stations are underground, users usually descend on escalators to the mezzanine or ticketing part of the station. At above-ground and elevated stations outside of downtown Washington, the mezzanine is most often on the ground level. At the kiosk located there, pick up a system map with quick directions on how to use the Metro.

Purchasing a Farecard

Next comes the tricky part: You must determine your destination and your fare ahead of time because the ticketing system is automated. Walk up to the backlit, color-coded map located in each mezzanine and find the station nearest your ultimate destination. Then look on the bottom of the map, where an alphabetized list of stations reveals both the fare (peak and off-peak) and the estimated travel time to each. Peak fares, usually more expensive, are in effect from 5:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. and from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. weekdays. Unless you're traveling from a suburban station to downtown, or from one suburb to another, one-way fare is



Step 1 (top): To purchase a farecard, insert bills and/or coins.

Step 2 (bottom left): Use toggle switches to add or decrease the farecard's value. Plug in enough cash to buy at least a round-trip ticket (or more, if desired).

Step 3 (bottom right): Press the "Push for Farecard" button; the farecard appears at the "Used Farecard Trade-in" slot.

typically \$1.35 (non-rush hour). A final note: Before you walk away from the map, make a mental note of the last station of the train that you plan to board, even though you're probably not traveling that far. The name of your train's final destination is the name of the train, thus the key to locating the right platform—the one whose trains are going in the right direction. (See photographs starting on page 120.)

Farecard Vending Machines

Those big vending machines lining the walls of the mezzanine don't dispense sodas. Instead, they swallow your money and issue farecards with magnetic stripes that get you in and—this is crucial—out of Metro stations. Once you get your card, hang onto it.

Buying a farecard works like this: Walk up to the farecard vending machine and look for the numeral "1" on the left side at eye level. (We'll call this **Step 1**.) This is where you insert bills and/or coins. If your destination is, say, a \$1.35 fare, and you're making a round-trip, insert \$2.70 into the machine. As the money slides in, look at the middle of the machine for the numeral "2" (**Step 2**), where a digital readout registers the amount you've shoved into the contraption.

Machines that accept paper money invariably screw up, and these machines are no exception. They often spit back bills they don't like, so try smoothing wrinkled bills before inserting them and choose new, unfrayed greenbacks over bills that are worn. Inserting coins is nearly foolproof, but not very practical if you're riding the Metro a lot.

Our advice is to cut down on using these infernal machines as much as possible by plugging in \$5, \$10, or even \$20 at once, which means you're buying a ticket that can last several days or longer. The computerized turnstiles print the remaining value on the farecard after each use, which lets you know when it's time to buy a new one. A major drawback, of course, is the possibility of losing the farecard while it's still worth a few bucks. If you value your time at all, take the risk. Below the digital readout at Step 2 are white "plus" and "minus" buttons that let you adjust the readout to the exact fare you wish to purchase. For example, if your round-trip fare is \$2.70 and you inserted a \$5 bill, toggle the readout from \$5 down to \$2.70 by repeatedly pushing the "minus" button. (If you overshoot, push the "plus" button to increase the value.) Then look to the right side of the machine and the numeral "3" (**Step 3**), and press the button that reads "Press for Farecard." If all goes well (and, in all fairness, it usually does), out pops your farecard and your change—in this case, \$2.30 in change; the machines don't dispense bills. (We *told* you to buy a \$6.50 farecard.)

The farther out you get from downtown, the fewer farecard machines line the walls of the mezzanines—which usually isn't a problem at these less busy stations. For balky machines that won't take your money, or for

any problem at all, help is only a few steps away at the kiosk located at each station near the faregate. Inside is a breathing human being who will help. Don't be shy.

One last warning: If the farecard machine accepts \$20 bills, keep in mind that the maximum amount of change the machine can spit out is \$4.95—which means you're stuck buying a farecard with a minimum value of \$15.05.

Talking Fare Machines

Metro has installed talking express farecard vending machines at 46 mezzanines in the system's busiest stations; look for the name *Passes/Farecards* across the top. An optional audio button lets you hear a voice guide you through the steps to purchase farecards, which removes much of the confusion and is a real boon to visually impaired riders.

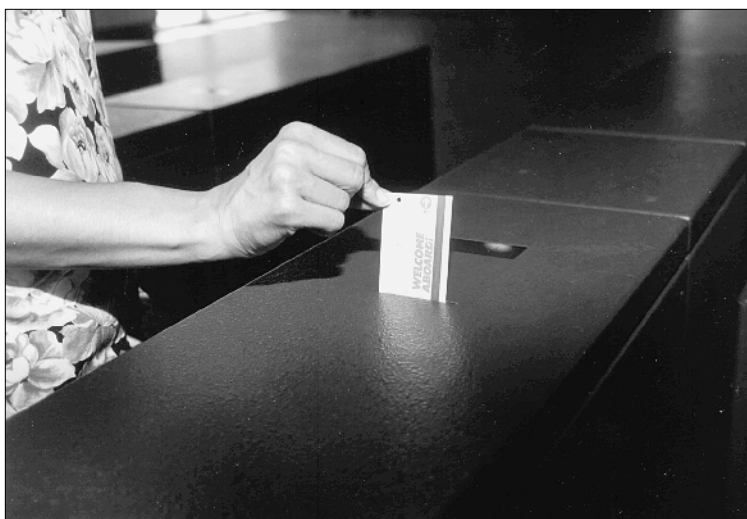
The machines let you buy up to \$200 worth of farecards with a top denomination of \$45. You can also purchase the \$6.50 one-day pass, valid for unlimited rides after 9:30 a.m. weekdays and all day on weekends and holidays (a very good deal that we recommend most visitors take advantage of). Currently, you can charge your farecard purchases to VISA, Discover, and MasterCard. *Note:* Most users will want to press button two, for a single farecard, to begin the card purchase process.

Entering the Station

With your farecard firmly in hand, you are now authorized to enter the Metro station. Hold the card in your right hand with the brown magnetic stripe facing up and on the right. Walk up to one of the waist-high faregates with the green light and white arrow near the kiosk (not the faregates that read "Do Not Enter"—they are for passengers exiting the station) and insert your card into the slot, where it is slurped into the bowels of the Metro. As the gate opens, walk through and grab your card as it is regurgitated from the slot at the top of the gate. All this happens in less than a second. Place the farecard in a safe place; if you lose it, you must pay the maximum fare when you exit.

Finding the Train Platform

Once you're past the faregate, look for signs with arrows and the name of your intended line's end station that point toward the platform where your train will arrive. At an underground station, you will descend on an escalator or stairs to the train platform; at an above-ground station, you will ascend to the platform. You can reconfirm that you're on the correct side of the platform by reading the list of stations printed on the pylon located there and finding your destination. If your destination is listed, you're on the right track; departing trains go in one direction only. Stand in the red-tiled area to wait for the next train.



When entering or exiting, insert the farecard (face up with the magnetic strip on the right) into the slot on the front of the faregate (top).

The farecard reappears at the top of the faregate (bottom); remove it and the faregate opens. On faregates for disabled people, the farecard reappears at the front of the gate.

Note: Remember to hang on to the farecard—you need it to exit the system.

Boarding the Train

As a train approaches a station, lights embedded in the floor along the granite edge of the platform begin flashing. As the train comes out of the tunnel, look for a sign over the front windshield that states the train's destination and line (blue, red, green, orange, or yellow). The destination, but not the color, is also shown on the side of the train. Double-check to make sure the approaching train is the one you want.

If it's the right train, approach the doors, but stand clear to let departing passengers exit the train. Then move smartly; the train stops for only a few seconds, then chimes will indicate that the doors are about to close. If you're rushing to catch a train and hear the chimes, don't attempt to board. Unlike elevator doors, the train doors won't pop open if you lean on them—and they exert a lot of pressure. Wait for the next train.

Inside, take a seat or, if you're a first-time Metro user, study the system map located near the doors. The trains all have real operators who announce the next station over a PA system and give information for transferring to other lines (sometimes you can even hear them over the din). It's better to study the map and read the signs mounted on the cavernous station walls at each stop.

Exiting the Station

As the train enters your station, move toward the doors. When you step off the train, look for stairs or escalators on the platform and walk toward them. Some stations have two or more exits, but the signs on the walls of the stations aren't always clear about where each exit goes. If you know which exit you want (for example, at the Smithsonian station most tourists want the Mall exit, not Independence Avenue), look for that sign and follow the arrow.

At the top of the escalator or stairs, walk toward the mezzanine area, get your farecard ready, and repeat the same procedure you used to enter the Metro system (card in right hand, magnetic stripe up and on the right, insert in slot). If you bought exact fare, you won't get your card back, but the gate will open and a little sign will flash "Exact Fare." You're on your way. If your farecard still has money left on it, it pops up as the gate opens and the sign flashes "Take Farecard." Do same; exit station.

If your farecard doesn't have enough value to cover your trip, the gate won't open and the card will pop back out. You need to take it to an "Exitfare" machine somewhere just behind you. (Invariably ten people are lined up behind you when this happens, creating the equivalent of a minor Beltway backup.) The reddish-colored Exitfare machines look like their brothers, the farecard machines. Insert your card and immediately the digital readout displays the exact amount of moolah it needs so you can exit the station. (Don't make my mistake: The machine asked for 40

cents and I stuck a \$5 bill into it. I got \$4.60 in change back.) Plug in the coins; the farecard reappears; grab it; insert same into the faregate, which swallows it and sets you free.

Changing from One Line to Another

Sooner or later—probably sooner—you will need to transfer from one Metro line to another. Metro Center is the Big Enchilada of the transfer stations, where the red, orange, and blue lines converge in downtown Washington. Other transfer stations tourists are likely to hit are Gallery Place–Chinatown (red, yellow, and green); L’Enfant Plaza (yellow, blue, orange, green); Rosslyn (orange and blue); and Pentagon (yellow and blue).

To transfer, you don’t use your farecard. Simply exit your train, take the escalator to the correct platform, and reboard. Try to listen to the PA system as your train enters the station: The driver recites where the different lines are located in the approaching station (for example, “Transfer to the red line on the lower level”). If you can’t hear the driver’s instructions, look for the color-coded pylons with arrows that point toward the platforms, and look for the one with your destination listed on it.

The Gallery Place–Chinatown station is especially complicated. Frequently, you’re routed down and up escalators to reach your platform. Keep your eyes up for signs overhead that state reassuring messages such as “Red Line–Wheaton Straight Ahead.”

Metro Foibles and How to Cope

Boarding the Wrong Train

Unless you’re concerned about being ten minutes or so late for your meeting with the president, boarding a train going in the wrong direction isn’t a big problem. Simply get off at the next station, and if the platform is located between the tracks, go to the other side of the platform to wait for the next train running in the opposite direction, and board it. If both sets of tracks run down the center of the station, take the escalator or stairs and cross the tracks to the other side, where you can catch the next train going the other way.

If you realize you’ve boarded the wrong *color* train (say, the orange train to Vienna, Virginia, instead of the blue train to Van Dorn Street), just get off at the next station, stay on the same platform, and take the next blue line train.

What to Do with Farecards Worth 50 Cents

After a few days in Washington, you may start accumulating farecards that don’t have enough value for even a one-way trip. Don’t throw them away! Instead, next time you’re using the Metro go up to a farecard vending machine in the mezzanine and insert the old farecard into the slot on



When the value of a farecard drops below \$1, trade it in for a new one at a farecard machine (top).

Emergency intercoms (bottom) are located on all station platforms.



the right side of the machine where it says “Trade In Used Farecard.” Its value will be displayed on the digital readout at Step 2. Feed the machine money at Step 1, futz with the “plus” and “minus” buttons, and press the white “Push for Farecard” button to get a new card that includes the value on your old card.

If, Like Joe, You’re Color Blind

Joe’s heart sank the first time he tried to figure out Washington’s Metro system: Like a few other men, he is afflicted with red-green color blindness. To his eyes, the Metro’s red and green lines look nearly identical in color, and the orange line looks a lot redder than it ought to. The only lines on the system map he could distinguish by color were the blue and yellow ones.

The solution is to fixate on the names of the stations at the ends of the lines. That way, the red line becomes the “Wheaton/Shady Grove” line, while the green line is the “U Street–Cardozo/Anacostia” line. It’s harder at first, but you’ll end up with a distinct advantage over those who blindly follow colored signs: Knowing a line’s end station is helpful when you’ve got to make a split-second decision on whether or not to board a train that’s almost ready to depart the station. For instance, if you enter the Dupont Circle Metro and want to go to Union Station, you need to board the red line train heading toward Wheaton—not Shady Grove. So, sooner or later, you’ll get familiar with the end stations anyway.

Discounts and Special Deals

Children Up to two children under age five can ride free when accompanied by a paying passenger.

Senior Citizens and People with Disabilities Reduced fares are available for qualified senior citizens; call (202) 637-7000 for more information. People with disabilities can call (202) 962-1245 for information on reduced fares. A new service called “Metro Mobility Link” supplies people with disabilities with specialized information about Metro stations, including general features of each station, the location of Braille signs, whether the station has a center or side platform, and other disabled-accessible features. The number is (202) 962-6464.

The Metro is a tourist attraction in its own right, featuring the Western Hemisphere’s longest escalator: the 230-foot, mezzanine-to-platform-level behemoth at the Wheaton Metro in suburban Maryland. If that’s a little out of the way, the Dupont Circle Metro’s escalator is nearly as long. If escalators terrify you or you are wheelchair-bound, all stations are equipped with elevators. But it’s a good idea to check at a station kiosk and confirm that the elevator at your destination station is in operation. To find the elevator, look for the wheelchair symbol near the station entrance.

Fare Discounts If you plan on using the Metro more than once or twice a day, call Metrorail at (202) 637-7000 to find out what discounts are in effect during your visit. A high-value farecard of \$20 or more garners a 10 percent bonus. A Metrorail One-Day Pass lets you ride from 9:30 a.m. till midnight for \$6.50 weekdays, and all day on weekends and holidays; it's the way to go if you plan to ride the subway to several locations in one day. Commuters can save money by purchasing passes that let them ride anywhere, anytime, for two weeks. Discount passes are available at the Metro Center sales office and from the new talking farecard machines installed in busier Metro Stations. Discount passes are also sold at many Safeway, Giant, and SuperFresh grocery stores.

Free Information For a free visitor information kit that includes a Metro system map, specific information on getting to Smithsonian museums and other attractions, and information on driving to suburban Metro stations, call this number: (202) 637-7000. The computer literate can get up-to-the-minute Metro information on the Internet at **www.wmata.com**. You can also purchase tickets in \$10, \$15, and \$20 increments.

A Note about Metrobus

Washington's extensive bus system, known as Metrobus, serves Georgetown, downtown, and the suburbs. Racks recently installed on metro buses as part of the new Bike-on-Bus program further increase commuter flexibility. There is no additional charge for passengers with bicycles. However, with 400 routes and more than 1,500 buses, Metrobus is an extremely complicated system to figure out how to use. As a result, we feel that visitors to Washington should leave Metrobus to the commuters and stick to the Metro. For the few places that the Metro doesn't reach—notably Georgetown and Adams-Morgan—we recommend taking a cab.

Bus Transfers

If, despite our advice, you plan to transfer from the Metro to a Metrobus in D.C. or Virginia, get a free transfer before you board the Metro train from the machine located next to the escalator in the mezzanine of the station that you entered. You also need to pick up a bus transfer at the White Flint, Twinbrook, and New Carrollton suburban stations to qualify for reduced parking fees on weekdays; look for signs in the station.

Taxis

Washington taxis are plentiful and relatively cheap. They're also strange. Instead of a metered fare system, fares are figured on a map that splits the city into 5 zones and 27 subzones; the base fare for one zone is \$5. A zone map and fare chart are posted in all legal cabs but probably won't mean

much to first-time visitors—or most residents, for that matter. If you're concerned about getting ripped off, request a receipt before you start the ride. That way the driver knows he's got no defense in an overcharging claim.

The cab system has other quirks. Drivers can pick up other fares as long as the original passenger isn't taken more than five blocks out of the way of the original destination. That's good news if you're the second or third rider and it's raining; it's not so hot if you're the original passenger and trying to catch a train.

To eliminate the possibility of a ride in a poorly maintained cab or one driven by a recent immigrant who is as unfamiliar with the city as you are, stick to the major cab companies. Some of the independents are illegal yet still carry the markings and roof light of a seemingly legitimate cab. One way to spot a fly-by-night taxi is to check for hubcaps. If there aren't any, pass that one by.

Major D.C. Taxi Companies

<i>Capitol</i>	(202) 546-2400
<i>Diamond</i>	(202) 387-6200
<i>Yellow Cab</i>	(703) 522-2222

People with Special Needs

Washington is one of the most accessible cities in the world for folks with disabilities. With the equal-opportunity federal government as the major employer in the area, Washington provides a good job market for disabled people. As a result, the service sector—bus drivers, waiters, ticket sellers, retail clerks, cab drivers, tour guides, and so on—are somewhat more attuned to the needs of people with disabilities than service-sector employees in other cities. It doesn't hurt that a number of organizations that lobby for handicapped people are headquartered in Washington.

The Metro, for example, was designed to meet federal standards for accessibility. As a result, the stations and trains provide optimal services to a wide array of people with special requirements. Elevators provide access to the mezzanine, or ticketing areas platform, and street level; call the Metro's 24-hour elevator hot line at (202) 962-1825 to check if the elevators at the stations you plan to use are operating.

The edge of the train platform is built with a 14-inch, smooth, light gray, granite strip that's different in texture from the rest of the station's flooring so that visually impaired passengers can detect the platform edge with a foot or cane. Flashing lights embedded in the granite strip alert hearing-impaired passengers that a train is entering the station. Handicapped-only parking spaces are placed close to station entrances.

While purchasing a farecard is a strictly visual process (unless the station is equipped with the talking vending machines), visually impaired passengers can go to the nearby kiosk for assistance. Priority seating for senior citizens and passengers with disabilities is located next to doors in all cars.

Visitors with disabilities who possess a transit ID from their home city can pick up a courtesy Metro ID that provides substantial fare discounts; the ID is good for a month. Go to Metro Headquarters, 600 Fifth Street, NW, from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. weekdays to pick one up; call (202) 962-1245 for more information. If you want to ride the Metro to get there, the nearest station is Gallery Place. For a free guide with information on Metro's rail and bus system for the elderly and physically disabled, call (202) 637-1328. "Metro Mobility Link" is a help line for people with disabilities. Call (202) 962-6464 for basic as well as more specialized information on Metro stations.

The Smithsonian and the National Park Service, agencies that run the lion's share of popular sights in Washington, offer top-notch services to folks with disabilities. Designated handicapped parking spaces are located along Jefferson Drive on the Mall. Museums are equipped with entrance ramps, barrier-free exhibits, elevator service to all floors, and accessible rest rooms and water fountains. Visually impaired visitors can pick up large-print brochures, audio tours, and raised-line drawings of museum artifacts at many Smithsonian museums. The National Air and Space Museum offers special tours that let visitors touch models and artifacts; call (202) 357-2700 for information.

Hearing-impaired visitors to the National Air and Space Museum can arrange tours with an interpreter by calling (202) 357-2700. Public telephones in the museum are equipped with amplification, and the briefing room is equipped with audio loop. For a copy of the Smithsonian's "A Guide for Disabled Visitors," call (202) 357-2700 or (202) 357-1729 (TDD).

The Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials and the Washington Monument are equipped to accommodate disabled visitors. Most sight-seeing attractions have elevators for seniors and others who want to avoid a lot of stair climbing. The White House, for example, has a special entrance on Pennsylvania Avenue for visitors arriving in wheelchairs, and White House guides usually allow visually handicapped visitors to touch some of the items described on tours.

Tourmobile offers a special van equipped with a wheelchair and scooter lift for disabled visitors. The van visits all the regular sites on the tour; in fact, visitors can usually specify what sites they want to see in any order and the van will wait until they are finished touring. The service is the same price as the standard Tourmobile rate, \$20 for adults and \$10

for children. Call (202) 554-7020 at least a day in advance to reserve a van. Information available at **www.tourmobile.com**.

In spite of all the services available to disabled visitors, it's still a good idea to call ahead to any facility you plan to visit and confirm that services are in place and that the particular exhibit or gallery you wish to see is still available.

Foreign visitors to Washington who would like a tour conducted in their native language can contact the Guide Service of Washington. See "The Guide Service of Washington" on page 159.

