

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Best of Washington, D.C.

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Discovering the best restaurants and hotels
  - ▶ Enjoying the best attractions
  - ▶ Taking advantage of the best free shows
  - ▶ Finding the best stuff for kids
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Washington, D.C., is much more than just the home of the United States government. D.C. offers hotel choices that range from the ultra-ritzy to the ultra-cheap; restaurants that feature many of the world's ethnic cuisines; and rich cultural, historical, scientific, and educational museums and monuments.

One of Washington's best selling points is that many of these top attractions are free. Unlike in London, Paris, Rome, or other major capitals, you don't have to open your wallet before you can open the doors to most of the popular museums, galleries, and other sights. You don't even have to open doors to enjoy another pleasant sight — Washington's impressive landscape.

The car-free National Mall — lawns, gardens, ponds, and walkways — stretches from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol and is bordered by many of the Smithsonian's facilities. The cherry trees along the tidal basin are spectacular in the spring.

Whether you're interested in touring the brick and cobblestone streets of Georgetown or enjoying the Latin-influenced nightlife in Adams-Morgan, this chapter shows you the best Washington, D.C., has to offer.

You can find the details on each location or activity later in this guide. Throughout the book, look for the "Best of the Best" icon to highlight my very top picks.



## The Best Hotels

For more information on the hotels listed, see Chapter 9.

- ✓ **Best power palaces:** If you've got money, connections, or both — or just want to act like you do — try staying at one of these spots where lobbyists and government officials hang their hats, or just hang out. You can't beat the location of the opulent **Willard InterContinental**, which has both the White House and D.C.'s city hall in its sights. That's why the powerful and those who seek to influence them have been staying here since the middle of the 19th century. Across Lafayette Square from the White House, the **Hay-Adams** is another favorite among the rich and the politically connected. Less expensive, but close to the Congressional action, the **Capitol Hill Suites** counts U.S. representatives among its long-term residents. Short-term tourist guests get dining privileges at the Republican Party's nearby Capitol Hill Club.
- ✓ **Best charming hotels:** Amidst all of Washington's wealth and pretensions, some accommodations become distinct by daring to be true to themselves. The **Tabard Inn** exudes character and charm in three adjacent town houses on a tree-lined street near Dupont Circle. It also offers especially low prices in some rooms for guests willing to share a bathroom down the hall. Exuding upscale character and charm, **The Jefferson** is quiet and elegant and keeps its guests coming back for its personalized service. The **Morrison-Clark Historic Inn and Restaurant** scatters period antiques throughout two 1864 Victorian Mansions that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- ✓ **Best B&Bs:** The **D.C. Guest House** is a 19th-century mansion, renovated to the eclectic taste of its owners who lavish warm attention on their guests. Equally striking is the 19th-century **Swann House**. This luxurious mansion feels just like it must have when its wealthy occupants lived the lush life in the early 20th century. For the budget-minded, the **Kalorama Guest House at Woodley Park** offers clean, comfortable, and relatively spacious rooms starting at \$55 single and \$60 double. The afternoon sherry hour offers a touch of elegance.
- ✓ **Best suites:** Suites with cooking facilities — and sometimes separate sleeping quarters — are wonderful for families looking to save money on meals and to enjoy a little privacy. You get lots of choices at **Georgetown Suites**, from a one-room studio to more luxurious town house and penthouse accommodations. **One Washington Circle** also offers a variety of floor plans, from “guest quarters” with sleeping and sitting areas in one large room to “grand state-rooms” with separate bedroom, dining area, living area, and one and a half bathrooms. Most have kitchens and balconies. Business travelers and families are attracted to **The River Inn** because of spacious studios, large one-bedroom suites, and occasional super-duper deals that drop the \$300-plus rack rates to less than \$120.

- ✔ **Best hotels with international appeal:** Because it stands not far from the State Department, World Bank, Kennedy Center, and George Washington University, the **State Plaza** attracts diplomats and other international travelers bound for those government, artistic, and educational venues. The location of Irish-owned **Jurys Normandy Inn** — near diplomatic facilities in the exclusive Kalamazoo neighborhood — makes it a popular spot for diplomats and other international visitors as well. The French own the **Sofitel Lafayette Square** and are quite proud of serving up *art de vivre* — “the art of French living” — in the hotel’s restaurant food, bar drinks, gift shop gifts, room décor, and even the staff’s uniforms.
- ✔ **Best budget digs:** Youthful idealists in Washington on a shoestring and other budget-minded visitors find **Hostelling International** to be a simple but adequate place to spend the night, with rock-bottom prices for dormitory-style rooms. For families and cost-conscious touring groups, the centrally located **Hotel Harrington** provides large rooms and suites starting at \$99. The low-cost **Red Roof Inn** chain operates an urban version of its roadside motels near the Verizon Center, Convention Center, Chinatown, and many attractions of the fast-growing Penn Quarter entertainment and arts neighborhood.

## The Best Restaurants

For more information on the restaurants listed here, see Chapter 10.

- ✔ **Best power palaces:** So you want to watch James Carville and Mary Matalin duke it out over dinner? Grab a table at the **Palm**, where the famous feast on steak and lobster. Senators and Supreme Court justices hang out at **The Monocle** on Capitol Hill. Located near the White House, the **Occidental** attracts presidential aides, journalists, and lobbyists. Check out the photos of the powerful and the famous who have been dining on this site for the last 100 years.
- ✔ **Best for big spenders:** Pretend you’re a member of Congress, for whom (other people’s) money is no object, and sample the best Washington food that lots of money can buy. Entrees start at \$29 and the tasting menus are \$110 to \$145 at **Le Paradou**, an exquisite contemporary French restaurant that opened in mid-2004. Also exquisite and French (or “French/Californian,” as Chef Michel Richard terms it) is **Michel Richard Citronelle**, where fixed-price meals range from \$85 to \$150 and a seat at the chef’s table starts at \$275. Chef Roberto Donna’s private dining room at **Galileo**, which he calls **Laboratorio**, charges atmospheric prices for spectacular Italian food. All of which makes **CityZen**’s New American tasting menus seem like bargains at \$75 for three courses and \$90 for five — plus wine, of course.

Galileo closed for renovations in 2006 and was scheduled to reopen by fall 2007.



- ✔ **Best for fighting the deficit:** In all-American tradition, **Luna Grill & Diner** offers old-fashioned blue-plate specials and new age green-plate specials for vegetarians. **Booeymonger**, a local deli chain, is open from breakfast to late in the city, till not quite so late in the suburbs. Another local chain, **Firehook Bakery**, offers inventive sandwiches on its own breads and pours D.C.'s best coffee, locally roasted Quartermaine.
- ✔ **Best for debating foreign policy:** It's dreadfully undiplomatic to pick out a handful of best international restaurants from the zillions that do business in this very international town. But, here goes: **Montmartre** really tastes and feels like France, as does **Cafe La Ruche** for a lot fewer francs. Chef Vikram Sunderam terms **Rasika's** cuisine "modern Indian." It's superb and probably unlike any other Indian dishes you've come across in the past. Authentic Italian cooking comes from the kitchen at **Obelisk**, a small cafe near Dupont Circle that offers a fixed-price menu with a few wonderful selections each evening. **City Lights of China** serves up good Chinese food in attractive surroundings, while the surroundings at **Eat First** are as plain as its name but the food is a joy. For a fun night out with a group, go sit on the floor and eat with your fingers at Moroccan **Marrakesh**.
- ✔ **Best for inexpensive international fare:** You get real Neapolitan pizza at **Pizzeria Paradiso** and **2 Amys**. To nibble your way through small plates of various nationalities, try **Zaytinya** for Mediterranean *meze* or **Jaleo** for Spanish tapas.
- ✔ **Best for romancing your number-one constituent:** In cold weather, reserve the table nearest the fire in **Sea Catch's** front dining room, where the walls are made of stone and wood paneling and floor-to-ceiling windows overlook the C&O Canal. Fireside tables also beckon in **1789 Restaurant**, which occupies a 19th-century, Federalist-style home in Georgetown. In warm weather, dine on the balcony overlooking the C&O Canal.
- ✔ **Best for prevoters:** Kids as well as grownups cast ballots for **2 Amys** and **Pizzeria Paradiso**. Not only is the food kid-friendly, but these places are cheerful and noisy. The Tex-Mex **Austin Grill** restaurants also are gaily noisy, and — downtown and in the suburbs — gaily decorated. The **Old Ebbitt Grill** draws White House staff and pleases adult palates, but the large menu also includes much of interest to children — burgers and finger-food appetizers, for example. And kids' wandering attention can be directed to the hunting trophies and other odd stuff that's scattered throughout this large restaurant/pub.

## The Best Attractions

For more information on the attractions listed here, see Chapter 11 unless otherwise indicated.

- ✔ **Best memorial:** For me, the **Thomas Jefferson Memorial** wins hands-down because of its idyllic setting on the Tidal Basin, its gorgeous views of cherry trees and other Washington landmarks, its suggestion of Tom's home of Monticello, and the inspiring words engraved around the rotunda. It also helps that Jefferson is my favorite founding father. The **Abraham Lincoln Memorial** is a close runner-up, however, for similar reasons. The view from the top of the memorial's steps is a breathtaking sweep of the entire National Mall to the Capitol dome, Lincoln's words are engraved on the walls, and this was the site of many historical events, including Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream" speech.
- ✔ **Best art galleries:** The **National Gallery of Art** is one of the world's great art museums, and it keeps getting better. But the top spot in Washington at this moment has to go to the **American Art Museum** and the **National Portrait Gallery**, which share the Old Patent Office Building in Penn Quarter. Reopened in mid-2006 after a six-year renovation, the galleries' art and venue both will wow you.
- ✔ **Best places for art that moves:** Hands down, this award has to go to the **John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts**, which is home to the National Symphony, Washington Opera, Washington Ballet, Washington Performing Arts Society, and many traveling shows, both classical and popular. See Chapter 15 for more information.
- ✔ **Best spot to be emotionally moved:** Somewhere there may be someone who was untouched by a visit to the **U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum**, but I have yet to meet him. More than a reminder of Nazi atrocities, this museum also conducts memorable programs about genocide. At **Arlington National Cemetery**, the endless rows of plain white grave markers tug at your heart, silently proclaiming the sacrifice of America's military men and women. Many famous Americans have more elaborate memorials here, including presidents Kennedy and Taft. Emotions at the **Vietnam Veterans Memorial** flow from the controversial nature of that war and the constant presence of veterans and friends and relatives of the dead, who search out specific names on the black granite wall. The simplicity of young Chinese-American architect Maya Lin's design became a prototype for many later memorials erected around the country.
- ✔ **Best government building:** The surroundings are a mess as I write because of construction of an underground visitor center and ugly, stop-gap security barricades, but the **Capitol** remains Washington's preeminent building. The dome is the number-one symbol of American democracy. And the interior is a fascinating mix of the American democratic spirit and ornate old European decoration. With some luck, the construction will be done during the shelf-life of this book, but don't bet your tax refund on it.

## The Best Free Shows

For more info on the performing arts events listed, see Chapter 15.

- ✓ **Best free classical music:** For the best music ever written, performed by a world-class orchestra, for free, under the stars, you just can't top the **National Symphony's** free summer concerts at the Carter Barron Amphitheater in Rock Creek Park and on the Capitol's west lawn.
- ✓ **Best free play:** You can equal the National Symphony's excellence (see preceding entry) with the best plays ever written and performed by a world-class troupe, for free, under the stars. That would be the **Shakespeare Theatre's** no-charge summer performances, also at Carter Barron.
- ✓ **Best free military music:** The Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force bands present **military concerts** — where else? — at Carter Barron and outside the Capitol.
- ✓ **Best free who-knows-what:** In the **Kennedy Center's** Grand Foyer, the Millennium Stage presents free performances every single day at 6 p.m. Performers range from storytellers to headliners such as Bobby McFerrin or the Pointer Sisters, although most are not well known.

## The Best Stuff for Kids

For more information on the attractions listed, see Chapter 11.

- ✓ **Best animals:** With 2,400 animals on 163 acres of land, the **National Zoological Park** — better known as the National Zoo — can keep kids hopping till they run out of juice. If you get here during 2007, you may be able to see Tai Shan, the first giant panda cub born and surviving in D.C., before he's sent off to his parents' native digs in China.
- ✓ **Best things to touch that you wouldn't think you'd want to touch:** Children squeal with delight and parents feel a bit squeamish at the **National Museum of Natural History's** insect zoo. Pet a tarantula. Hold a giant hissing cockroach. Crawl around in a model termite mound.
- ✓ **Best printed products:** You wouldn't think the **National Postal Museum** would be a big hit with the small set, but the little museum's interactive exhibits have made it a children's favorite. Kids also like to tour the **Bureau of Engraving and Printing**, where stamps, currency, government bonds, and White House invitations are made. Part of the reason is the jovial tour guides, whose red neckties are decorated with images of dollars.
- ✓ **Best flying objects:** Because kids love things that go zoom, the **National Air and Space Museum** is must-see D.C. for families. Luckily, for parents, big folks find this place fascinating as well.