

The Best of Washington, D.C.

Ain't nothin' like the real thing, baby. Isn't that what traveling is all about? Cellphone snapshots, tweets, YouTube videos, movies, television scenes, and of course, the written word, go only so far to reveal a place and its people to the interested party. There's simply no substitute for being here on the ground—seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, and breathing it all in, gaining a true and personal understanding of a particular location, connecting with it, and by extension, widening one's frame of reference.

That's what I'm thinking as I stand on the steps of the **Lincoln Memorial**, relishing the moment, and the view, and the possibilities of this monumental day in the nation's capital. "It's often breezy here," I overhear a park ranger say, just as a gust lifts the cap off the head of the T-shirted tourist next to me. I reach for it, and then it's gone. I scan the landscape, across to the **Reflecting Pool** and beyond that to the **World War II Memorial** and then to the **Washington Monument**, presiding on its own hill nearly a mile away. Snaking my way left across the crowded steps, around the Buddhist monk in saffron robes aiming his cellphone camera at the marvelous view, through a throng of German visitors listening intently to their interpreter guide, I am able to spy the **Capitol**, lined up in the distance behind the Washington Monument.

A noisy commotion has broken out on a nearby street, and I observe a stream of black sedans and limos sweeping through an intersection cleared by police. "The President, out on an official visit," says someone behind me. It's my capless tourist, who thanks me for trying to catch his hat. He's from Louisiana, it turns out, which compels me to recommend a favorite restaurant, **Johnny's Half Shell** on Capitol Hill, for authentic tastes of New Orleans' gumbo, but also of our regional cuisine—crab imperial, crab cakes. He in turn enthuses about the free nightly concerts at the **Kennedy Center**; a zydeco band played there the night before, it seems.

"You know, we might be able to see the Kennedy Center from here," I say. And together we stroll to the back platform of the Lincoln Memorial to admire the gorgeous sight of the **Memorial Bridge** and the Potomac River, which swerves gracefully past the Kennedy Center and on to **Georgetown**. A handful of other tourists have migrated to this choice location, including a sunburned British family, whose patriarch is attempting to pose his brood for a family portrait.

In another few minutes my little band of tourists will rejoin the hordes of other sightseers visiting the **National Museum of American History**, boarding a tour bus, standing in line at the Capitol. And by day's end, back at the hotel, they will be regretting that they didn't wear sunscreen, or resolving to rise earlier tomorrow to secure a ticket to tour the **Newseum**.

I wish I could gather them around me before they go. I would tell them that Washington is a place of grand images, but also of remarkable words. They should note them everywhere, starting with the inscription of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, right there in the memorial: "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

I would direct them to make time for visiting my favorite museum, the **Smithsonian American Art Museum**, conjoined with the **National Portrait Gallery**—in my favorite part of town—the Penn Quarter, to view the masterpieces like Howard Finster’s folk art, William H. Johnson’s scenes of African-American life, Louise Nevelson’s sculptures, and portraits of national figures, Pocahontas to George Washington, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) to Katherine Hepburn. I would recommend that they then wander across the street to enjoy a cocktail at the popular wine bar/restaurant **Proof**, which overlooks the museum and the bustling downtown scene. And follow up that experience with dinner there or at the nearby joyful Mexican restaurant **Oyamel**; or its Asian neighbor, the ultra-sexy and newish **Sei**; or at a beloved Washington haunt, the **Tabard Inn**, in Dupont Circle. And top off the night at **Twins Jazz**, on U Street, for sounds of world-class, cool performances by jazz legends, or head up to **Madams Organ**, in Adams Morgan, for hot blues and Latin beats.

Finally, I would say, “Leave room for the chance encounter.” In this city, whose population is as culturally diverse as those who tour here, you may find yourself forging connections with people from halfway around the world, or from your own hometown, and these experiences may prove your fondest memories of the city. As the nation’s capital and the home of our democratic government, Washington, D.C., like no other city, holds a certain place in the world, as it represents all the freedoms and ideals that Americans hold dear. Against the backdrop of the **White House**, the **Capitol**, and the **Supreme Court**; in the corners of our national memorials and museums; within the shared experience of the music and food and theater and shops and parks and sights and sounds of our Washington neighborhoods, a little small talk between strangers creates opportunities for understanding differences. And that’s the real thing, baby.

1 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Watch the Supreme Court in Action:** Only in Washington can one watch and listen to the country’s nine foremost legal experts nimbly and intensely dissect the merits of both sides of an argument, whose decisions can affect profoundly both a person and the nation. Think of the Supreme Court justices as a team representing the U.S. Constitution, and only in their chamber do you get to see them play. See p. 170.
- **View Washington Landmarks by Moonlight:** A must. There is nothing as spectacular as seeing the Lincoln Memorial illuminated at night, unless it’s the sight of the White House, the Capitol, or the Washington Monument lit up after dark. Go by bus on Tourmobile or by bike via the Bike the Sites service; both operations offer narrated day- and nighttime tours. See p. 177.
- **Visit Your Senator or Member of Congress:** Take advantage of your constituent status and stop by your senator’s and/or representative’s office on Capitol Hill to offer your two cents on current issues. Pick up passes to the Capitol’s Senate and House chambers and attend a session to observe your elected politicians at work. Make sure you’ve reserved Capitol tour passes online and tour the Capitol. See p. 163.
- **Bicycle past the Potomac River and Around the Tidal Basin:** Rent a bike and ride the paved bike/walking path that extends 11 miles from the Lincoln Memorial to the Maryland border (through Rock Creek Park). Or head the

other direction from the Lincoln Memorial, following the combination of street, sidewalk, and pathway that encircles the cherry tree–rimmed Tidal Basin. The Potomac River, Rock Creek, and spectacular Washington sites are on either

side of you as you make your way. For a really long bike ride, follow the pathway past the Lincoln Memorial, cross the Arlington Memorial Bridge to the trail on the other side, and pedal the 19 miles to Mount Vernon. See p. 231 and 280.

2 THE BEST SPLURGE HOTELS

- **Mandarin Oriental**, 1330 Maryland Ave. SW, near National Mall (☎ 202/554-8588; www.mandarinoriental.com/washington): This is the capital's swankiest hotel. You're away from it all but still within walking distance of Smithsonian museums. Its spa and restaurant are the crème de la crème, and guest-room designs follow the principles of Feng shui to attract good fortune. See p. 85.
- **Four Seasons**, 2800 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Georgetown (☎ 202/342-0444; www.fourseasons.com/washington): It's so nice to be loved, isn't it? And the Four Seasons staff make you feel that way, pampering you relentlessly and greeting you by name, remembering your likes and dislikes. Thanks to its

second multimillion-dollar renovation in 4 years, hotel guest rooms are 50% larger and twice as inviting, suites are redone, and the new restaurant and lounge are now the scene-ist scenes in the city. See p. 109.

- **Willard InterContinental Washington**, 1401 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Penn Quarter (☎ 202/628-9100; www.washington.interconti.com): The Willard provided a temporary home for a president or two and continues to be a major gathering spot for capital power-mongers. This homegrown, but world-class, hotel has a historic bar, a Red Door Spa, a French café, and an enviable location. But if you're going to splurge, do it right and book a suite with a view of Pennsylvania Ave. See p. 92.

3 THE BEST MODERATELY PRICED HOTELS

- **The Dupont**, 1500 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Dupont Circle (☎ 202/483-6000; www.doylecollection.com/dupont): A 2009 change of ownership and renovation has added élan to this property, which already had its location going for it: sitting on Dupont Circle, at the very heart of the fun neighborhood. Rooms are urban chic with wooden blinds on the windows, MP3 docking stations on desks, heated marble floors in bathrooms. Rates start at \$189 for a double and can go up quite a bit from there, but still stay fairly reasonable for all that. See p. 104.
- **Georgetown Suites**, 1111 30th St. NW, Georgetown (☎ 202/298-1600; www.georgetownSuites.com): The suites are large, light-filled, and cheery and the service welcoming in this great-value hotel. All sorts of lodging are available, from studio to penthouse, but all units have a full kitchen. And while hotels throughout the city increase their rates from year to year, Georgetown Suites' rates remain fairly constant, in the range of \$155 for a studio to \$425 for a town house. See p. 111.
- **Hampton Inn Washington, D.C. Convention Center**, 901 6th St. NW,

Penn Quarter (☎ 202/842-2500; www.washingtondc.hamptoninn.com): Close to the convention center and the heart of the Penn Quarter, this hotel, which opened in 2005, still has a fresh feeling

about it. Rates start as low as \$129 on weekends, \$201 weekdays. Included in rates are use of the hotel's exercise room and pool, and the daily hot breakfast. See p. 93.

4 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Central Michel Richard**, 1001 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Penn Quarter (☎ 202/626-0015): The rumor is that D.C.'s favorite Frenchman, Michel Richard, may be closing his bastion of creatively fine French dining, Citronelle at the end of 2009; should you find that Citronelle is still open, by all means, try to book a table there (in the Latham Hotel, 3000 M St. NW, ☎ 202-625-2150). Otherwise head instead to Central, in the Penn Quarter. If the ebullient chef is in the kitchen, you're in for a special treat, since he usually swings out for hellos. But you're in for a treat either way. Richard's French takes on American standards make for pure deliciousness, from mac and cheese to apple pan dowdy. And the lively atmosphere guarantees a wonderfully good time. See p. 129.
- **Komi**, 1509 17th St. NW, Dupont Circle (☎ 202/332-9200): A dinner at Komi restores one, thanks to creative—but not too creative—dishes (grilled asparagus with watercress and feta, squab stuffed with foie gras and figs), polished service, and a remarkably relaxed atmosphere. And then there's the chef, the unassuming Johnny Monis, who somehow has figured this all out at the tender age of 30 or so. See p. 148.
- **CityZen**, 1330 Maryland Ave. SW, in the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, near National Mall (☎ 202/787-6868): Eric Ziebold is the chef here, having previously served at the renowned

French Laundry, in Napa Valley. Washingtonians don't quite know what they've done to deserve the culinary gifts he bestows upon them: North Carolina rainbow trout served with petite red Russian kale and smoked salmon roe emulsion, for example. Bring a full wallet. See p. 120.

- **Bourbon Steak**, in the Four Seasons Hotel, 2800 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Georgetown (☎ 202/944-2026): D.C.'s hottest new restaurant pulls in a stellar crowd nightly. The tiered restaurant allows for romance, partying, and business depending on whether you're seated window-side overlooking the C&O Canal, at tables near the open kitchen, or in the centrally located booths. Beyond the perfectly grilled steak, lobster pot pie, French fries cooked in duck fat, and roasted duck with foie gras are all getting a lot of attention. Be sure to stop for a drink before or after in the Lounge. See p. 153.
- **Restaurant Eve**, 110 S. Pitt St., Old Town Alexandria (☎ 703/706-0450): It's as hard to book a table here as at CityZen in the District. Exotic drinks, entrees such as bouillabaisse and butter-poached halibut with lobster, and service that includes ironing tablecloths between seatings, have drawn people here from all over the area. Birthday or not, order the "birthday cake" for dessert: delicious white cake layered and iced with pink frosting and sprinkles. Yum. See p. 286.

5 THE BEST THINGS TO DO FOR FREE

- **Peruse the Constitution:** Only in Washington and only at the National Archives will you ever be able to read the original documents that so well grounded this nation in liberty. Here, you'll find the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and the Bill of Rights—all on display behind glass. See p. 200.
- **People-Watch at Dupont Circle:** This traffic circle is also a park, an all-weather hangout for mondo-bizarre biker-couriers, chess players, street musicians, and lovers. Sit on a bench and watch the scenes around you. See p. 70.
- **Attend a Millennium Stage Performance at the Kennedy Center:** Every evening at 6pm, the Kennedy Center presents a free 1-hour concert performed by local, up-and-coming, national, or international musicians. This is a winner. After the performance, head through the glass doors to the terrace for a view of the Potomac River. See p. 254.
- **Groove to the Sounds of Live Jazz in the Sculpture Garden:** On summer's Friday evenings at the National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden, you can dip your toes in the fountain pool and chill, as live jazz groups serenade you from 5 to 8pm. The jazz is free; the tapas and wine and beer served in the garden's Pavilion Café are not. See p. 202.
- **Pick a Museum (Just About), Any Museum:** That's the thing about Washington—because this is the U.S. capital, many of its museums are federal institutions, which means admission is free. The National Gallery of Art, the U.S. Botanic Garden, and the Smithsonian's 17 Washington museums, from National Air and Space to the Freer Gallery, are among the many spectacular free places to visit. See chapter 7.

6 THE BEST OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

- **Ice Skate at the National Gallery:** The National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden pool turns into an ice-skating rink in winter. So visit the Gallery, finishing up at the Sculpture Garden, where you can rent skates and twirl around on the ice, admiring sculptures as you go. Treat yourself to hot chocolate and sandwiches at the Pavilion Café in the garden. See p. 232.
- **Attend an Event on the Mall:** Think of the National Mall as the nation's public square, where something is always going on, whether it's a book festival in the fall, the splendid Independence Day celebration every Fourth of July, or soccer, baseball, even cricket games year-round. Pack a picnic and hold your own little party. See p. 29 for a calendar of annual events.
- **View Washington from the Water:** Rent a paddle boat to skim the surface of the Tidal Basin for an hour, or cruise the Potomac River aboard one of several sightseeing vessels to relax from foot-weary travels. The paddle boats give you a remarkable view of the Jefferson Memorial; river cruises offer a pleasant interval for catching a second wind, as they treat you to a marvelous perspective of the city. See chapter 7.
- **Sit at an Outdoor Cafe and Watch the Washington World Go By:** The capital has plenty of places that offer front-row seats, from Capitol Hill's Johnny's Half Shell, with all its Hill traffic (and a bit

Site Seeing: The Best Washington, D.C., Websites

- **www.bnbaccom.com:** For those who prefer to stay in a private home, guesthouse, inn, or furnished apartment, this service offers more than 30 for you to consider.
- **www.bwiairport.com:** Ground transport, terminal maps, flight status, and airport facilities for Baltimore–Washington International Airport.
- **www.culturaltourismdc.org:** Cultural Tourism DC is a grass-roots, non-profit coalition of more than 200 arts, heritage, community, and cultural organizations collaborating to promote the less-known stories and attractions of Washington. The website lists tours, itineraries, calendars, and plenty of background information about historic and cultural sites that you won't find anywhere else.
- **www.dc.gov:** This is the city of Washington's website, full of details about both federal and local D.C., including history and tourism. Every day, the site lists a calendar of what's going on around town.
- **www.wdcahotels.com:** This nicely designed site recommends hotels suited for families, women, sightseers, or business travelers.
- **www.destinationdc.org:** Destination DC is the new name for the Washington, D.C. Convention and Tourism Corporation. This website leads you through various screens of information on what to see and do in D.C. and provides travel updates on security issues. You have to play around with the site a little to find all the information you need. Start by clicking on "Visiting" and take it from there, for tips on where to stay, dine, shop, and sightsee.
- **www.fly2dc.com:** In addition to its extensive information about airline travel in and out of Washington (and ground transportation from each airport), this site also offers fun articles about restaurants and things to do in D.C. The monthly print magazine version, *Washington Flyer*, is available free at Washington National and Dulles airports.
- **www.house.gov:** This is the site for the U.S. House of Representatives. Find out about the legislative process, what's going on in Congress, and what's going on with your own representatives—the site links you to the individual websites for each of the representatives.
- **www.kennedy-center.org:** Find out what's playing at the Kennedy Center and listen to live broadcasts through the Net.
- **www.metwashairports.com:** Ground transport, terminal maps, flight status, and airport facilities for Washington Dulles International and Ronald Reagan Washington National airports.
- **www.mountvernon.org:** Click on "Visit" for daily attractions at Mount Vernon and a calendar of events, as well as information on dining, shopping, and school programs. For a sneak preview, click on "Virtual Mansion Tour" to see images of the master bedroom, dining room, slave memorial, and the Washingtons' tomb.

- **www.nps.gov:** This National Park Service site includes links to some dozen memorials and monuments. When you click "DC" on the map, a listing of the capital's National Park sites appears, including the National World War II Memorial, Washington Monument, Jefferson Memorial, National Mall, Ford's Theatre, FDR Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, and Vietnam Veterans Memorial.
- **www.opentable.com:** This site allows you to make reservations at some of the capital's finest restaurants.
- **www.senate.gov:** In the U.S. Senate site, click on "Visitors" for an online virtual tour of the Capitol building and information about touring the actual Senate Gallery. It takes a few seconds for the images to download, but it's worth the wait to enjoy the panoramic video tour. Also, find out when the Senate is in session. The site connects you with the websites for each of the senators; you can use this site to e-mail your senator.
- **www.si.edu:** This is the Smithsonian Institution's home page, which provides information about visiting Washington and leads you to the individual websites for each Smithsonian museum.
- **www.visitdc.com:** Capitol Reservations, a 26-year-old company, represents more than 100 hotels in the Washington area, each of which has been screened for cleanliness, safety, and other factors. You can book your room online.
- **www.visitthecapitol.com:** The new Capitol Visitor Center's website posts the history of the Capitol and the center, discusses the art and architecture of the buildings and the legislative work that takes place within, and is the portal to the online reservation system for booking tours of the Capitol.
- **www.washingtonian.com:** The print magazine of the same name posts some of its articles here, including "What's Happening," a monthly guide to what's going on at museums, theaters, and other cultural showplaces around town, and a directory of reviews of Washington restaurants. The magazine really wants you to buy the print edition, though—for sale at bookstores, drugstores, and grocery stores throughout the area.
- **www.washingtonpost.com:** The *Washington Post's* site is an extremely helpful source for up-to-date information on restaurants, attractions, shopping, and nightlife (as well as world news).
- **www.whitehouse.gov:** Click on "Tours & Events" to learn about visiting the White House and about upcoming public events. You'll find all sorts of links here, from a history of the White House, to archived White House documents, to an e-mail page you can use to contact the president or vice president. Twitter, Facebook, and other connections are all here.
- **www.wmata.com:** Timetables, maps, fares, and more for the Metro buses and subways that serve the Washington, D.C., metro area.

of the Capitol); to the Penn Quarter's Café du Parc, which looks down Pennsylvania Avenue to Hank's Oyster Bar,

whose Dupont Circle perch is the perfect spot for watching a passing parade of live entertainment. See chapter 6.

7 THE BEST NEIGHBORHOODS FOR GETTING LOST

- **Go Behind the Scenes in Georgetown:** The truth is, you *want* to get lost in Georgetown because it's the side streets that hold the history and centuries-old houses of this one-time Colonial tobacco port. And not to worry, Georgetown is so compact, you're never very far from the main drags of M Street and Wisconsin Avenue. For a back-streets tour of Georgetown, see p. 234.
- **Spend the Day in Alexandria:** Just a short distance (by Metro, car, boat, or bike) from the District is George Washington's Virginia hometown. On and off the beaten track are quaint cobblestone

streets, charming boutiques and antiques stores, 18th-century houses and other historic attractions, and fine restaurants. See p. 275.

- **Stroll Embassy Row:** Explore the neighborhood of Dupont Circle to view smaller embassies, then head northwest on Massachusetts Avenue to admire the larger ones. You'll walk along gorgeous tree-shaded streets lined with Beaux Arts mansions, many built by fabulously wealthy magnates during the Gilded Age. See p. 261 for information about how to see the interiors of some of these embassies.

8 THE BEST PLACES TO HANG WITH THE LOCALS

- **Shop at Eastern Market:** Capitol Hill is home to more than government buildings; it's a community of old town houses, antiques shops, and the veritable institution Eastern Market. (Although a fire in spring 2007 destroyed much of the historic interior, the market should be up and running by the time you read this.) Here, the locals barter and shop every Saturday and Sunday for fresh produce, baked goods, and flea-market bargains. See p. 242.
- **Pub- and Club-It in D.C.'s Hot Spots:** Join Washington's footloose and fancy-free any night of the week, but especially Thursday through Saturday, along U Street between 9th and 16th streets; in Adams-Morgan; and in the Penn Quarter as they start out or end up (mostly end up—clubs and bars are open late in

these neighborhoods). See chapter 9 for bar and club suggestions.

- **Go for a Jog on the National Mall:** Lace up your running shoes and race down the Mall at your own pace, dodging tourists and admiring famous sites as you go. Your fellow runners will be buff military staff who've zoomed over from the Pentagon, speed-walking members of Congress, and a cross section of downtown workers doing their best to stave off the telltale pencil pusher's paunch. Distance from the foot of the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial: 2 miles. See p. 176.
- **Take Tea at the Top of Washington National Cathedral:** Join a certain segment of Washington society (mostly women friends and moms and daughters) for tea and a tour. Tuesday and

Wednesday afternoons at 1:30pm you can tour the world's sixth-largest cathedral, then indulge in tea, scones, and lemon tarts served on the seventh floor

of the West tower, whose arched windows overlook the city and beyond to Sugarloaf Mountain in Maryland. See p. 217.

9 THE BEST OFFBEAT EXPERIENCES

- **Listen to “Obama Mia” and “Help Me Fake It to the Right”:** The Capitol Steps, a musical political satire troupe, performs these and other irreverent original tunes in skits that skewer politicians on both sides of the aisle. You can see them every weekend at the Ronald Reagan Building. See p. 258.
- **Salsa Up a Storm:** At Habana Village in Adams-Morgan, Lucky Bar near Dupont Circle, and other clubs and bars, you can take salsa and tango lessons, and then put your steps to the test on the dance floor. See p. 263.
- **Explore Washington from a Different Angle:** Sign up for a tour of Washington

that follows a certain theme, such as Civil War landmarks, theater trails, places where Dickens stopped, or scandal-laced sites, to name just a few. Several companies offer offbeat kinds of tours. See p. 228.

- **Sample Offbeat but World-Class Cuisine:** At the minibar inside Café Atlantico, chef José Andrés concocts whimsical little tastes—like foie gras in a cocoon of cotton candy. Thirty or more tastes make an unforgettable meal for 12 lucky people (2 seatings of 6 people each—or, if Andrés has tripled the capacity, as planned, 36 people) per night. See p. 128.