

Welcome to Washington, DC

The USA's capital teems with iconic monuments, vast museums and the corridors of power where visionaries and demagogues roam.

Museums & Monuments

Thanks, James Smithson, you eccentric antimonarchist Englishman. That \$508,318 gift you willed to the USA back in 1826 to create a 'diffusion of knowledge' paid off big time. There's nothing quite like the Smithsonian Institution, a collection of 19 behemoth, artifact-stuffed museums, many lined up in a row along the Mall. The National Air and Space Museum, Museum of Natural History, Museum of American History, Museums of Asian Art – all here, all free, always.

Alongside the museums, Washington's monuments bear tribute to both the beauty and the horror of years past. They're potent symbols of the American narrative, from the awe-inspiring Lincoln Memorial to the powerful Vietnam Veterans Memorial to the controversial Martin Luther King Jr Memorial.

Arts & Culture

Washington is the showcase of American arts, home to such prestigious venues as the National Theatre, the Kennedy Center and the Folger Shakespeare Theatre. Jazz music has a storied history here. In the early 20th century, locals such as Duke Ellington climbed on stages along U St NW, where atmospheric clubs still operate.

Political Life

The president, Congress and the Supreme Court are here, the three pillars of US government. In their orbit float the Pentagon, State Department, World Bank and embassies from most corners of the globe. If you hadn't got the idea, *power* is why Washington exerts such a palpable buzz.

As a visitor, there's a thrill in seeing the action up close – to walk inside the White House, to sit in the Capitol chamber while senators argue about Arctic drilling, and to drink in a bar alongside congress-people likely determining your newest tax hike over their single-malt Scotch.

History

A lot of history is concentrated within DC's relatively small confines. In a single day, you could gawp at the Declaration of Independence, the real, live parchment with John Hancock's, er, John Hancock scrawled across it at the National Archives; stand where Martin Luther King Jr gave his 'I Have a Dream' speech on the Lincoln Memorial's steps; prowling around the Water-gate building that got Nixon into trouble; see the flag that inspired the 'Star Spangled Banner' at the National Museum of American History; and be an arm's length from where Lincoln was assassinated in Ford's Theatre.



Why I Love Washington, DC

By Karla Zimmerman, Author

It begins with the Mall. How cool is it to have a walkable strip of museums where you can see nuclear missiles, cursed diamonds and exquisite Asian ceramics in a peacock-themed room – for free? Further down the path the notes and photos people leave at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial will break your heart, and the Lincoln Memorial just kills with its grandness and sweeping view. H St wins my affection for its pie-and-beer mix. Most of all, I love how Ben's Chili Bowl makes you feel like a local even if you're not.

For more about our authors, see p344.