

Adventure to Washington, D.C.: Planning a Trip to Our Nations Capitol

by Michelle Clark, PassPorter Guest Contributor

One of my lifetime goals was to visit our nation's Capitol. I knew a trip to Washington would involve several of my favorite interests: history, photography, and architecture. After months planning our trek to D.C., we tackled the following decisions:

When to go to Washington D.C.? The time of year you plan to visit Washington D.C. can make a big difference. We learned that hotel rates in downtown D.C. are significantly lower on Thursday through Sunday nights, due to the fact the typical work week ends on Thursday. The rates at our hotel dropped nearly \$200 from Wednesday to Thursday.

I had heard that summer temperatures in Washington D.C. were hot, but I didn't take these warnings seriously. After all, I'm a native southerner and used to hot, humid summers; how bad could it be? I quickly learned that June can be unseasonably hot! Touring D.C. involves walking to most attractions, so you will be spending a lot of time outdoors. Summer also means more tourists. The crowds don't really affect your experience at outdoor attractions, but the various museums can become quite crowded. Expect to stand in line during the summer months to view the exhibits in the Holocaust Museum, The National Archives, and the Smithsonians.

While it may be hot and crowded in July, the city puts on a spectacular show on Independence Day. What place could be more patriotic on the 4th of July than Washington D.C.? There are other events of interest during the summer as well, including free concerts and festivals.

A plus to visiting D.C. during the warmer months is that the local Boys of Summer, the Washington Nationals baseball team, are playing in their brand-new park. This state-of-the-art facility has some great views of the city's landmarks including the Capitol and the Washington monument. Check the [Nationals' web](#) site for their home schedule.

A winter visit could also include challenges. The average temperature in Washington D.C. in January is 27 degrees, with an average snowfall of about 7 inches. On the flip side, winter months have significantly less tourism.

Along with the spectacular array of blooming Japanese cherry trees along the Tidal Basin, the Cherry Blossom Festival arrives in D.C. each April. Nature lovers may want their trip to coincide with this two-week

celebration of spring. Crowd haters may want to select an alternate time to visit! Other factors to consider are the schedules of the various government agencies. To see Congress in session, contact your local congressman and pre-arrange a Capitol tour. Gallery passes are only available through the offices of your senator or representative. The Supreme Court hears case arguments from October through April and holds sessions to release opinions in May and June. Seats are first-come, first-serve. The House, Senate, and Supreme Court's schedules are posted on their websites.

If there is a must-see museum or attraction on your agenda, your planning should include an investigation of rehab schedules. The Museum of American History has been closed for two years for an \$85 million renovation and is scheduled to re-open on November 21, 2008. The Arts and Industries Building and Ford's Theater are both closed for refurbishment. The new Capitol Visitors Center currently under construction is scheduled to open December 2, 2008. Again, websites are a good source of information for scheduled refurbishments.

Where to Stay in Washington D.C.? Now that you've decided when to visit D.C., your next decision will probably be where to stay. Washington D.C. has over 27,000 hotel rooms available, with a wide range of prices for any budget. Many travelers prefer to stay outside the city in nearby suburbs of Virginia and Maryland for cheaper rates. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to have easy access to the Metro rail line. It will pay to investigate the proximity of your lodging facility to a Metro station. The daily ride from your lodging to downtown D.C. could take up time that you could spend touring. The [Metro web site](#) is a helpful tool for estimating trip times and fares.

If you have access to a car you might consider the option of a split stay. Take advantage of the less expensive hotels by staying outside of Washington for part of your trip. During a stay in the suburbs you can visit some of the attractions located further away from central D.C. such as Arlington Cemetery, Iwo Jima Memorial, Mount Vernon and the National Cathedral. Then move to a more centrally-located hotel to complete your touring. We chose to stay in Alexandria, Virginia our first night and moved to a hotel downtown for the remainder of our stay.

Sign up online for any customer loyalty or membership programs offered by the chain hotels because they can offer some great rates and other benefits. Most are free so you have nothing to lose by joining.

How Long to Stay in Washington D.C.? The next question to be investigated when planning a D.C. vacation is how long should we plan to stay? Of course this depends on which attractions you want to visit.

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For example, our three-day trip included Arlington Cemetery, the major monuments, a Capitol tour, the National Archives, and several museums. I wouldn't recommend this commando itinerary to my worst enemy! Plan a minimum of 2-3 hours for each museum, although I feel that 3-4 hours is probably needed to really enjoy them. More than two museums per day can cause information overload! The walk around the National Mall to view the various monuments is a daunting task and would probably be enjoyed more if broken up into two days. A nighttime walk to the monuments provides a serene atmosphere and gorgeous moonlit views, but a daytime visit will allow you to absorb the details of the architecture. So my best recommendation would be to sit down with your fellow travelers and make a list of the sites you want to include, and then base the length of your trip on that.

How much to spend in Washington D.C.? Ahh, the ultimate trip planning question! One of the more positive features of a D.C. vacation is that all of the monuments and museums run by the National Park Service are free, as are the Smithsonian museums. However, keep in mind that several of the Smithsonian museums have additional exhibits that require an admission fee. Other museums and attractions such as the Newseum and the Spy Museum do charge admission ranging from \$15 to \$20 per adult.

Cheap souvenirs are easy to find at roadside stands along the downtown streets. We bought D.C. t-shirts for \$7 each. Some carts advertised three shirts for \$10. I was pleased to learn that no sales tax is charged at government building gift shops.

Utilizing the Metro rail system is a must when sightseeing in D.C., so allow room in your budget for fare cards. A one-day metro rail ticket is \$7.80 with weekly passes ranging from \$26 to \$39. We found a large variety of dining options; however the majority were not budget friendly! Most of the Smithsonian museums have restaurants. The Air and Space Museum has a McDonald's that only offers value meals. I use the term "value" loosely as each meal was at least \$7.00. We did find a little gem at the Museum of Natural History; the cafe there gave free refills on drinks. Five Guys in Chinatown was an affordable option. Our hotel also had a decently priced breakfast buffet. And for those on a tight budget it's easy to find a hot dog cart on the street. If you have a car, plan on spending \$30 - \$40 a day for parking at downtown hotels. Parking is premium in Washington!

Where to go in Washington D.C.? One thing you can be assured of--you won't be bored in this city! In fact, there are so many things to see and do in the area that it could fill up another article, and it will soon!

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A Washington D.C. vacation requires some advance preparation. I definitely recommend reading up on the area, either on the internet or consider purchasing a guidebook. I utilized Fodor's Washington D.C. travel guide prior to and during our trip. We found useful advice just from talking to friends and acquaintances that had traveled to the area. The PassPorter message boards have a [Globetrotting forum](#) where you can ask questions about any travel destination and post trip reports. Here are some web sites that were helpful during our D.C. trip planning:

- * [Destination D.C.](#) (official Washington D.C. tourism site)
- * [Smithsonian museums](#)
- * [National Park Service, District of Columbia](#)
- * [U.S. Senate](#)
- * [U.S. House of Representatives](#)
- * [Cherry Blossom Festival web site](#)

About The Author: Michelle Clark is a self-professed thrill ride junkie and the mother of three teens who share in her obsession. Her goal is to experience as many theme parks as possible and stay in every Disney resort before she dies!

Article last updated: 11/13/2008

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