

8 of the BEST

WASHINGTON DC ATTRACTIONS

The US capital is a treasure trove of history and culture, says **David Whitley**

A tour through Washington DC is like the best history lesson you'll ever have. Visiting its monuments, memorials, museums and heritage sites means dipping into incredible stories that chart the birth of a nation, witnessing outstanding examples of art and engineering from around the world, and reflecting on the struggles and sacrifices made along the way.

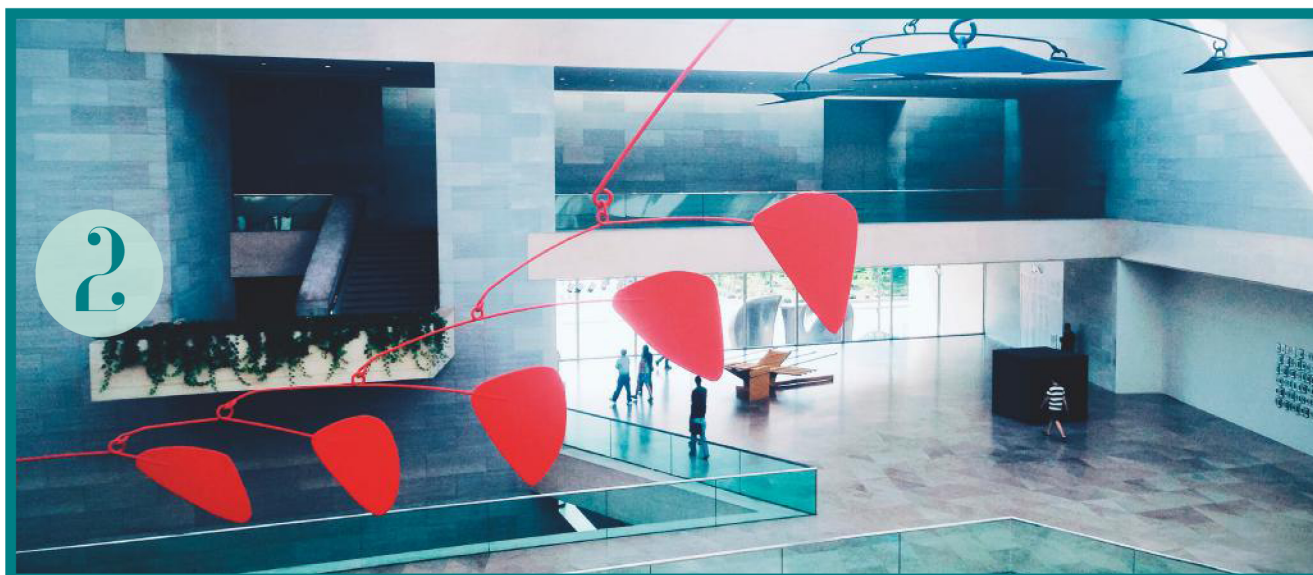
Anyone with a few days to explore the American capital can plot a route that takes them through a few of the highlights. Here are a few top picks to get you started.



SMITHSONIAN MUSEUMS

Washington DC has the greatest collection of free museums on Earth. It'd be easy enough to spend the bulk of a week just ambling round the Smithsonian Museums, but on limited time, pick according to taste. The National Air and Space Museum is the biggest crowd-pleaser, telling the story of flight with legendary aircraft such as the *Wright Flyer* and *Spirit of St Louis*. The American History Museum is a good bet for telling the country's story; the American Indian Museum takes a closer look at the cultures and traditions of America's native groups; and a newcomer, the African American Museum, is hard-hitting on slavery and civil rights.

Book it: Just walk in – they're all free.
si.edu



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Also free to enter is the National Gallery of Art, where the likes of Raphael, Titian and Da Vinci are represented among the paintings, and there's a six-acre sculpture garden. Most locals will point you to the Phillips Collection as the city's most impressive art museum, though. Other top cultural sites outside the Smithsonian collections include Ford's Theater, where Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, and the International Spy Museum. The latter delves into the world of espionage, with plenty of spy-craft tips and tales from spooks who've been right in the thick of it.

Book it: Context Travel offers specialised, expert-led tours of the National Gallery for \$85.
contexttravel.com

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MEMORIALS

Aside from the museums, the major attractions around the National Mall are the memorials. Some of these, especially the neoclassical Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, look like temples. Others are highly interpretive works of art, and everyone will have their own favourite. The Franklin D Roosevelt Memorial is in four parts, each representing one of his presidential terms, while the Korean War Memorial is striking for the haunted looks on the faces of the soldiers depicted. The memorials are quite spread out, and are arguably best tackled on a bike, but they're also open in the evening, which can be convenient if you want to save the days for the museums.

Book it: Do Something Different sells a two-and-a-half-hour Washington Monuments by Moonlight night tour for £35.
dosomethingdifferent.com



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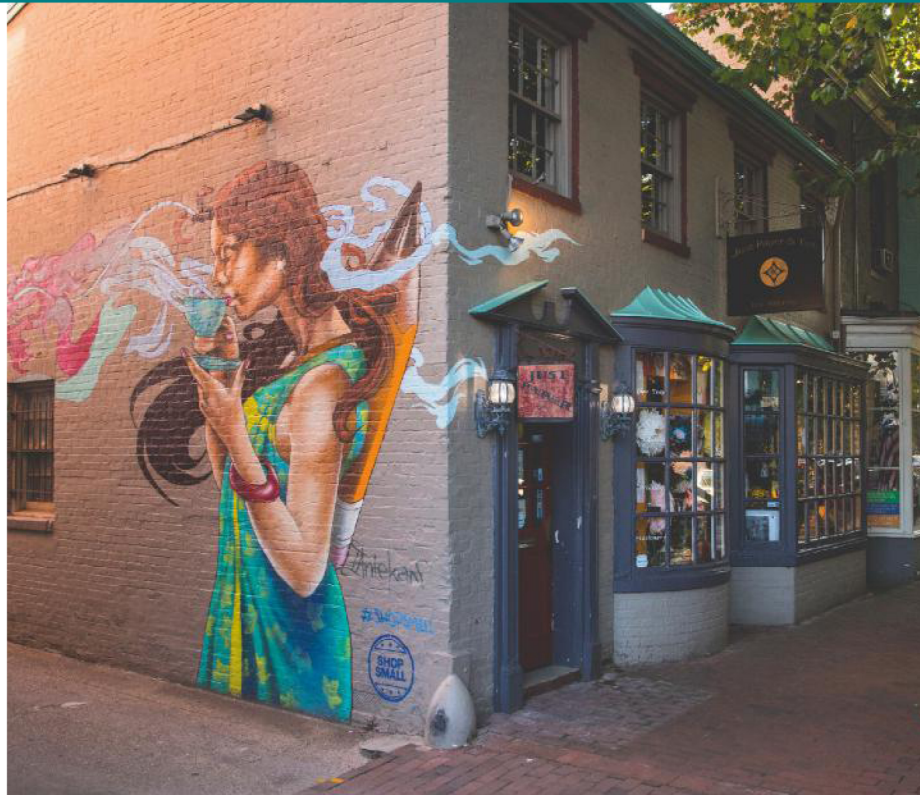
CAPITOL HILL

Washington runs on political intrigue and chicanery, and the Capitol building is the epicentre of it. Somewhat surprisingly, it is open to visitors, and offers free tours. Highlights include the Rotunda, where the huge dome is topped with a lavish painting of George Washington becoming a god, and the Statuary Hall, where two people from each state are immortalised as statues – some of the choices are idiosyncratic, to say the least. But the Capitol is not the only warren of gossip. Nearby on Capitol Hill are the Supreme Court and Library of Congress. Urban Adventures runs American Politics and Debate tours, which provide insights into the history of the city and the American political system. The tours bravely encourage discussion about current politics and finish with a drink on historic Barracks Row.

Book it: The two-hour Urban Adventures tour costs about £34.
urbanadventures.com



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GEORGETOWN

Historically distinct from Washington, Georgetown has an air of slightly snooty separation. With gorgeous red-brick buildings, it's a place for browsing independent shops and boutiques, and for slightly showy dining – either in people-watching cafes or classic old-favourite restaurants. The Dumbarton Oaks Park provides leafy, wooded respite, while Dumbarton House is one of the nation's greatest federal period homes.

Book it: Viator sells a three-hour Tastes of Georgetown: Food and History Tour, which tells the neighbourhood's story while stopping for food and drinks along the way. It's priced at £92. viator.com

WHERE TO stay

Moxy Washington DC Downtown

This millennial-focused hotel is designed to be sociable. Opened in 2018, it features a bright, open lobby with gathering areas and adult board games, and offers a complimentary drink at check-in. It aims to straddle the line between affordable and chic, although with doubles from around £250, that depends on how you define affordable. marriott.com

W Washington DC

This property, which is about as close to the White House as you can get, has been spruced up with a \$50 million renovation that introduced window-style closets and decor peppered with references to local history. New food and beverage venues Cherry and Corner Office feature open-fire cooking. Prices from £328. marriott.com

The Dupont Circle Hotel

This hotel has been a fixture at the heart of trendy, bookish Dupont Circle for a while, and a multimillion-dollar transformation finished in spring 2019. This included a new bar and restaurant, fireplace and a heated garden terrace with fine views of the Washington Monument. From £235. doylecollection.com

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U STREET

Washington DC is the capital of the US because it lies on the border of the north and south. This also made it a key location for African Americans migrating north to the free northern states, and the city has considerable black heritage. The U Street Corridor is traditionally where white and black Washington have mingled, and the Greater U Street Heritage Trail links key sites including the Bohemian Caverns, where Duke Ellington played, the restored Lincoln Theatre and the African-American Civil War memorial. Signs outside the main spots explain the history. U Street is also the most fun area of DC for a night out, with a variety of multicultural, open-minded bars and restaurants.

Book it: Isango sells a U Street Food Tour, taking in tastings of Cajun and creole dishes, for £60. isango.com

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GETTYSBURG

Gettysburg in Pennsylvania – the site of one of the most crucial battles of the American Civil War – is within easy day trip distance of DC. The battlefield touring experience is done with typical American panache, with sound and light shows attempting to take you back to 1863. Just as interesting is the Visitor Center, which looks at Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, one of the most famous speeches in history. It was only 272 words but encapsulated the struggle for what America is about and the concept of freedom. It's looking at this wider picture that makes Gettysburg special.

Book it: Big Bus Tours offers a Gettysburg Full-Day Tour from £120 including coach journey from Union Station, admission to the Visitor Center and Shriver House Museum, and a battlefield tour with a guide. bigbustours.com

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MOUNT VERNON

There's plenty more history in store at Mount Vernon, the home of the first US president, George Washington. The presentation is really strong here, and a visit can easily fill a day. Part of it is essentially a museum devoted to Washington, the revolutionary era and the tough decisions he had to make. The tour of the house is more for those nosy about how people lived back in the day, and the Washington Family Tomb is the place to pay respects. Unmissable, however, are the walking tours that focus on the slaves who worked there and George's highly dubious views on slavery.

Book it: Several tours head to Mount Vernon, but the most pleasant include a cruise down the Potomac River. Viator sells the latter from £49. viator.com



PICTURES: Jason Dixon/Washington.org; Shutterstock