



Memorial day

Robin Searle revisits Washington DC
to take a fresh look at an old city

@robinsearle



My mother always taught me that if I offended someone, I should apologise. And while it seems odd to extend this laudable approach to a whole city, in the case of Washington DC, I fear it is warranted.

So here we go: Washington, I misjudged you and may have spoken about you in less than flattering terms. I can only apologise.

My first trip to America's capital city was 20 years ago, with a rucksack on my back and a *Lonely Planet* in my hand. I had a great time and met some great

people, but an abiding memory was the first words of advice from the hostel receptionist: "If you go out after 6pm, don't turn right or you might get shot."

That's the kind of advice worth heeding, and my response to anyone asking me about the city since has been along similar lines. The history's cool, but watch your wallet.

Two decades on, the city's transformation over the past two decades is nothing short of astonishing. The history's still very cool, that much hasn't changed. But now you can

soak up so much more as you walk the streets and 'circles' - roundabouts to you and me - of a buzzing, clean and, generally, safe city.

I revisited that very hostel on my return, and while you may well get a shot (or even a double) at one of the many stylish cafes and restaurants nearby, I'm pretty confident the receptionists there now won't need to repeat the warning given to me in 1997.

That's not to say Washington is perfect, but there's clearly been a concerted effort to make it a place you'd linger in for more

than the couple of days it takes to check in at the Smithsonian and grab a selfie in front of the White House.

For a lively evening out with a historic backdrop, clients can mingle with the students in Georgetown, or for something less preppy, they can head to buzzing Dupont Circle or check out the vibrant bars, clubs and restaurants, including the iconic Ben's Chili Bowl, which make the U Street corridor a must-visit.

The city's cultural and culinary scenes are also on the up, and while the exchange rate isn't





LEFT:
Smithsonian
National
Museum
of African
American
History and
Culture

RIGHT:
National
World War II
Memorial

BELOW:
Bike and
Roll DC's
Monuments
by Bike tour



→ doing UK visitors any favours, customers can also discover a wealth of things to do without breaking the bank. Which brings us back to that history.

▶ MONUMENTAL ATTRACTIONS

While Washington's buzzing urban landscape now represents a great option for a city break, there's no doubt its heritage remains the big draw. With time of the essence (I was in town for the IPW conference so my leisure time was fleeting), I decided a good way to see the sights was on Bike and Roll DC's Monuments by Bike tour.

The main monuments are located on and around the National Mall – the national park running between the Capitol building and the Lincoln Memorial – so there is virtually no traffic to contend with.



Using two wheels to explore the Mall is a great way to save time and blisters

And with the Mall measuring a couple of miles in length, and a fair bit of criss-crossing to be done, using two wheels to explore it is a great way to save time and blisters.

For an introduction to some of the key sights, I'd recommend the three-hour tour that begins halfway along the Mall at the Washington Memorial, the 169-metre obelisk completed in 1888, and continues to established favourites including the

Lincoln, Jefferson and Vietnam Veterans memorials.

While these are as impressive as you'd expect, I was particularly taken with the two memorials added since my last visit – the beautiful National World War II Memorial and the poignant Martin Luther King Junior Memorial, adorned with quotes from the civil rights leader's most memorable speeches.

Our guide gave us a host of great insights – pointing out the gap in the trees that allows a direct line of sight from the White House to Jefferson's statue, or the 'Kilroy was Here' graffiti carved into the National World War II Memorial in a nod to the popular wartime sketch – but also gave us time to explore and reflect.

And with the area constantly changing thanks to new things to see and places to visit – not least the Smithsonian National

Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened to great acclaim last year – it is a rewarding trip for first-timers or seasoned DC fans.

Unlike the first time I left Washington, on a train bound for New York, this time I headed to the airport with a real desire to return. And this time, I won't leave it 20 years until I go back.

bikeandrolldc.com

Book it: Do Something Different offers a three-hour Capital Sites Bike Tour between March and November, costing £32 for adults and £24 for two to 12-year-olds.

dosomethingdifferent.com

Attraction World offers a Washington DC After Dark tour that takes in the memorials along The Mall plus the US Capitol Building, Pennsylvania Avenue and Georgetown at night. It costs £39 for adults and £17 for three- to 11-year-olds.

attractionworld.com 



PICTURES: ALAN KAPCHERNY/SHUTTERSTOCK; NATIONAL PARK SERVICE; RENEE DEGAN