

# Capital gains

As all eyes fall on Washington DC in the run-up to the US election, Cathy Toogood explores a surprising city packed with political intrigue

**W**hen people notice that the Obamas are here, there's suddenly a mad rush for the bathroom as you can catch a glimpse of them on the way," says Rina Rapuano, director of marketing and PR for L'Ardente restaurant, with a smile. She points out Barack and Michelle's favourite table in the glitzy Italian restaurant where we're dining – a petrol-blue velvet booth facing the restaurant's open kitchen and gold-plated pizza oven. Its position means the couple have their backs to fellow diners to avoid too much attention.

"They come for date nights and Mrs Obama sometimes joins us for nights out with friends," Rina says. I ask for a recommendation from the menu based on the Obamas' favourite. "They often order our lasagne, which has 40 layers and takes two days to make," she adds. The showstopping dish soon arrives at our table in a rich sauce with a cloud of parmesan shavings at one side.

I'm in Washington DC, America's capital, taking in its city-break highlights. Visiting in the months before the 2024 presidential election, I knew election fever would be in full swing. But it was a particularly hot topic during my trip as two days before I arrived, there was an assassination attempt against Donald Trump, and two days after I'd left, Biden dropped out of the race. Everyone from taxi drivers to tour guides could be found speculating over what might happen in the coming months.

## HEART OF THE ACTION

Political drama is nothing new for Washington. Iconic buildings, memorials, monuments and traces of its rich history are everywhere. As well as dining like the Obamas, I stay at The Hay-Adams, the hotel where the family lived before moving into the White House.

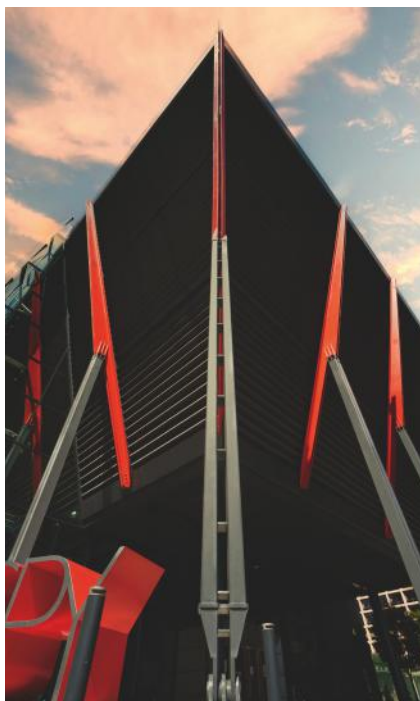
This is a perfect recommendation for clients looking for elegant luxury – and the kudos of sleeping under the same roof as past political greats. While admiring ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## THE US | WASHINGTON DC



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Abraham Lincoln statue inside Lincoln Memorial; International Spy Museum; National Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian Institute



the view from its top-floor wraparound balcony over Lafayette Square, I watch the Secret Service shift change on the roof of the White House, sniper rifles visible. It was a surreal reminder of where I was.

My view extended beyond the White House too, all the way to the soaring marble obelisk of the Washington Monument and the domed Thomas Jefferson Memorial, while a glimpse of the Pentagon was visible on the other side of the Potomac River.

This sprawling city panorama highlights the lack of skyscrapers in Washington DC, which was built around a late-18th-century blueprint by French city planner Pierre Charles L'Enfant. The Height of Buildings Act stipulates that no building in the city may be taller than 130 feet (40 metres) on commercial streets, which gives Washington a European feel with wide boulevards, plenty of green space and grand classical-style buildings.

"It's a small city, but one that keeps evolving," says Sarah Deam, The Hay-Adams hotel's sales and marketing director. "There's a lot more here than people realise."

### MUSEUMS ON THE MALL

This variety becomes clear while exploring the Smithsonian museums dotted around the central Mall, all of which are free to visit, though some require pre-booked time slots to guarantee entry.

Within a couple of hours, I'd dipped in and out of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the National Air and Space Museum and the National Museum of American History.

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I learnt about the history of slavery and walked through a recreation of a segregated railcar; saw the spacesuit that Neil Armstrong wore for his moon landing, along with the camera that filmed it; and admired the enormous original Star Spangled Banner (each star spanning more than half a metre in diameter) followed by Judy Garland's ruby-red slippers in *The Wizard of Oz*.

The city itself is like an open-air museum too, and a great way to see its highlights is on a Monuments and Memorials Sunset Tour by Big Bus Tours. On a two-hour drive as the sun is going down, I take in big hitters including the White House, the Martin Luther King Memorial, the Capitol Building and more, with a commentary filling in the stories behind each site. Wending our way through the historic neighbourhood of Georgetown, I learn about past inhabitants Liz Taylor and the Kennedys – according to our guide, it was the only place that Jackie Kennedy wanted to be.

But there's no substitute for seeing the buildings up close to appreciate their scale and architecture. A tour of the Capitol Building takes me into

## Where TO STAY



### The Hay-Adams

This five-star hotel's tagline says it's the place "where nothing is overlooked but the White House". The service is all-encompassing, the rooms plush, the restaurant elegant, and the cool basement cocktail bar attracts locals as well as hotel guests. The location means that many important political figures have met, eaten and slept here. Rooms start at £298 per night. [hayadams.com](http://hayadams.com)

### Kimpton Hotel Monaco Washington DC

Built in 1839 as Washington's General Post Office, this hotel's original features are complemented by playful details including a 1.5m-wide lion's head above the beds and powder room stylings in the bathrooms. In contrast, its restaurant, Dirty Habit, feels more modern with exposed brick and pop art. Clients will love the bikes and Anthropologie accessories that can be borrowed. Rooms start at £312 per night. [monaco-dc.com](http://monaco-dc.com)



PICTURES: Shutterstock/Sergii Figurnyi, Paul Maguire; David Phelps/Ron Blunt; Kip Dawkins

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LEFT AND TOP: US Capitol Building  
ABOVE: National Museum of African American History and Culture

its central Rotunda, where I can't help but gaze up at the towering sandstone walls and their intricate carvings and above to a cast iron dome and *The Apotheosis of Washington* fresco. This depicts George Washington rising to the heavens, and covers more than 430 square metres – which our guide tells us is about the same size as a basketball court.

### SECRET MISSIONS

The city's International Spy Museum hails George Washington in another way – as America's first spymaster who used the power of espionage to triumph in the American Revolution. As well as tracing the lives of real spies and showcasing artefacts such as the ice axe that was used to kill Leon Trotsky, this fun museum allows you to take on a mission yourself through a series of interactive electronic tests. I pass – just – and am told that my strengths are a strong memory and technical know-how.

For clients with an interest in espionage, the company Spyer runs tours around the city led by former CIA officers and intelligence. On my last day, I am taken on an Embassy Row Tour with guide and founder Rosanna Minchew, who tells real-life tales of suspicious deaths in hotels and mansions and teaches the group how to do a 'dead drop' (leaving information in a secret location), which is one way that intelligence officers avoid being caught by spy hunters.

Rosanna also talks about the typical perception of spies and why they aren't true. "We are the good guys but no one in Hollywood makes spies

“The city's International Spy Museum hails George Washington in another way – as America's first spymaster

like this. We can't be bad people, or we wouldn't be successful in establishing positive relationships with our human intelligence sources.”

I leave Washington with a better perspective on the world of spies and also of the city as a whole. It's not only a place to get up close to world-famous buildings and monuments but one with a varied dining scene – I ate everywhere from a Cuban cafe to the tavern where JFK proposed to Jackie – plus a surprising range of attractions and cool cocktail bars where locals mingle after work. And you never know who you might sit next to – or spot on the way to the toilet. **TW**

### BOOK IT

**American Holidays** offers a four-night stay in the Kimpton Monaco from £1,395, based on two adults travelling. Price includes flights from Heathrow departing on November 27, one checked bag per person, three-day Explore Big Bus DC Hop On Hop Off bus pass and an hour's bike rental. [americanholidays.com](http://americanholidays.com)

## Where TO EAT



### L'ARDENTE

A classy Italian restaurant at the heart of the capital that is loved by the Obamas. Order their favourite – the 40-layer lasagne (pictured). [lardente.com](http://lardente.com)



### MARTIN'S TAVERN

Ask to reserve booth number three (aka the Proposal Booth) to sit where president-to-be John F Kennedy proposed to Jacqueline Bouvier in 1953. Order Grandma Martin's Meatloaf to try President Nixon's dish of choice. [martinstavern.com](http://martinstavern.com)



### LE DIPLOMATE

Kamala Harris and the Bidens have eaten in this upmarket French restaurant which looks like a Parisian bistro. Apparently, Joe likes the Burger Américain. [lediplomatedc.com](http://lediplomatedc.com)

PICTURES: Washington.org/Marcus Perkins; Graham Studios Inc; Mike Fuentes Photography; Shutterstock/Jakub Zajac; lucky-photographer