

Washington

Majestic city on the Potomac
is designed to inspire confidence.

By Jeff Borg

Washington has been my inspiration, escape, and second home for 35 years. As a kid, Washington sparked my love for architecture and appreciation for great museums. In business, it taught me to wear a blue suit, white shirt, and red tie. During my activist days, the city offered symposia at Georgetown and rallies at the Capitol.

Today I get to share Washington with my son, José, who grew up in Caracas, learned English in Miami, then moved here for his dream job in medical research. The first time he visited, young José saved the brochure from the Library of Congress on which he wrote: *“Voy a vivir en esta ciudad algún día, de verdad estoy enamorado de esta ciudad.”*

ON THE MALL

Washington’s broad avenues and dramatic vistas were conceived by French architect Pierre Charles L’Enfant to inspire confidence. People come to the National Mall, right in the center, to exercise free speech or just fly a kite.

Begun in 1793, the US Capitol has been built, burned, restored, and extended continuously. Citizens get tour passes from their representatives or senators. Visitors get them through their embassy, concierge, or the Capitol’s online system.

The 100-member Senate represents the states. The 435-seat House of Representatives represents the people. Their observation galleries welcome the public, but separate passes are required. When José first visited, we saw the House. “I expected people to be seated, civil, discussing bills politely,” he recalls. “But they were shouting and calling each other names. It was fun.”

Washington is a huge museum. The Smithsonian Institution, headquartered in the red sandstone castle on the Mall, is a complex of 17 museums and one zoo, all free.

In the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, dinosaur skeletons tower overhead. Exhibitions show how humans developed painting, drawing, engraving, and sculpture 17,000 years ago. The 3,500 brilliant specimens of the gem, mineral, and meteorite collections include the breathtaking blue Hope Diamond, unearthed in 17th-century India, owned by kings and socialites, cut to its current 45.5 carats, and donated to the Smithsonian in 1958.

Another favorite is the National Air and Space Museum. In its National Mall building are the 1903 *Wright Flyer*, Lindbergh’s *Spirit of St. Louis*, the Apollo 11 command module, and a lunar rock you can touch. In August, it reopens the Pioneers of Flight gallery, focusing on the 1920s and 1930s. Kids will enjoy new hands-on activities, toys, and memorabilia. Parents will appreciate Amelia Earhart’s Lockheed Vega and Jimmy Doolittle’s “blind flight” instruments.

My favorite Smithsonian museums, the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, house the Asian collections. Tucked behind the Castle, the Freer has 24,057 wondrous objects spanning 6,000 years of Asian history. The adjoining Sackler, another 8,818 pieces. I gape at the ancient Egyptian amulets, glass, and statues; Islamic illustrations and manuscripts; Chinese jades, lacquer, and calligraphy; Japanese Rimpa and *ukiyo-e* paintings; Korean Koryo ceramics, silver, and gold; and ceramics from Vietnam and Thailand.

Independent of the Smithsonian, the National Gallery of Art is the mother of all art galleries, created in 1937 when financier Andrew W. Mellon gifted his collection to the people. Must-see works in the West building include Leonardo da Vinci's "Ginevra de'Benci" (1474–1478) and Francisco de Goya's "The Marquesa de Pontejos" (c. 1786). Highlights in the East building include Jackson Pollock's "Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)" (1950) and Piet Mondrian's "Tableau No. IV, Lozenge Composition with Red, Gray, Blue, Yellow, and Black" (c. 1924–1925).

On Fridays after work, friends bring wine and snacks to the Sculpture Garden to enjoy jazz vocalists, saxophones, groups, swing bands, salsa, or Latin jazz, also free.

Visible everywhere, the Washington Monument soars triumphantly. The 555-foot obelisk, completed in 1884, celebrates George Washington, who won the country's independence and became its first president. Ride to the top and see over 30 miles.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, farther west, does not soar. It cuts the earth like a grave. On its black granite wall are carved the names of more than 58,000 Americans who died in the nation's most divisive war.

President Abraham Lincoln preserved the Union through the bloody Civil War and freed the slaves. The Lincoln Memorial became the site of Martin Luther King's hugely inspiring 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech on racial equality. Forty-five years later, within view of this memorial, an African American was inaugurated president.

CHINATOWN

José says, "I feel important living in Chinatown," also called downtown. "The White House is 10 blocks west. I run on the National Mall."

The National Building Museum examines architecture, engineering, construction, and urban planning. Completed in 1887, its red brick exterior is modeled after the Palazzo Farnese, in Rome. Colossal Corinthian columns define a Great Hall for functions. A detailed 1,200-foot terra-cotta frieze rings the exterior, depicting Union infantry, cavalry, artillery, navy, and medical units.

In 1969, a giant headline in *The Miami Herald*, “MEN WALK ON THE MOON,” inspired me to save that paper. Today the Newseum preserves 35,000 such specimens dating to 1526. I saw a 1545 Spanish newspaper reporting an earthquake in Guatemala and a 1603 broadside on the coronation of King James I of England. The Pulitzer photo gallery displays powerful images of our times. The 9/11 gallery examines the challenges of journalists reporting the 2001 attacks. A new exhibition explores the impact of Elvis Presley on music and culture.

Norman Rockwell painted a sentimentalized notion of an innocent America. When he took on serious subjects, like the young black girl walking to school past racist graffiti, it was his sweet style that helped viewers accept his message of equality. Opening this month in the Smithsonian American Art Museum is an exhibition of Rockwell, with 57 paintings and drawings from the private collections of filmmakers George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. Next door, José’s favorite is the National Portrait Gallery, where he goes to commune with the presidents. “I visit that room twice a month to get inspiration.”

For drinks and dinner, Zengo offers an exciting Asian-Latin fusion, next to the Verizon Center. Try a signature *mojito*. Creative bar food includes yellowtail and tuna with serranos. Mini tacos come wrapped in tortillas made of thin-sliced radish, stuffed with savory Peking duck and sweet apples, which disorients the taste buds. It’s all about contrast: the Mexican and the Japanese, the yin and the yang.

DUPONT CIRCLE / ADAMS MORGAN

Bohemian Dupont Circle is about bistros, bars, and boutiques, plus Washington's largest concentration of embassies. Dupont is a great place to hang out and a great base from which to explore.

Kimpton's Hotel Palomar puts visitors a block from Dupont Circle. Part urban art gallery, part chic boutique hotel, Palomar is done in comfortable taupe and golden hues with fun splashes of color. Guestrooms are spacious. In the comfy lounge, ask for Joe Bolam, just voted Best Bartender.

A little north, hip young Adams Morgan, centered along 18th Street, is the capital of Hispanic Washington, with plenty of live music and 90 liquor licenses.

Come dinnertime, "Lauriol Plaza makes me feel like my abuela is cooking for me," says José of our favorite restaurant. "Plus, the margaritas are *buenisimas*." Proprietors Raul Sanchez and Luis Reyes offer excellent, affordable Tex-Mex in an urbane atmosphere.

The contemporary building won critical acclaim from *The Washington Post*. The sidewalk tables and rooftop deck got the place voted Best Outdoor Patio, in addition to Best Margarita, by readers of *Washington City Paper*. The secret of Lauriol Plaza's warm, smoky salsa is fire-roasted tomatoes. For dinner, I like the grilled chicken. Jose likes the *masitas de puerco*.

GEORGETOWN

Before there was a Washington, there was a Georgetown. Today the fancy shops, bars, and restaurants center along M Street. Shady side streets are lined with the charming Georgian townhouses of Washington's elite.

Dumbarton House is an excellent example of Federal period architecture. Nearby, Tudor House, of the same period, highlights 100 objects originally belonging to George and Martha Washington, more than anywhere except the Washingtons' own estate. The gardens also reflect Federal design.

The Kreeger Museum is a private art gallery in a building designed by Philip Johnson, with a refined collection of paintings and sculptures by Monet, van Gogh, Picasso, Renoir, Cezanne, Chagall, Rodin, Miró, Munch, and Kandinsky. Reservations are required, and it closes during August.

For dinner, Hook is an M Street restaurant for those who worry about the future of fish. Restaurateur Jonathan Umbel has committed Hook to sustainable seafood, sourcing from around the world. Start at the bar and ask Todd to recommend a beer you never tried before.

José doesn't do sushi, but he does love salmon, so he was conflicted by the raw salmon appetizer. But he proclaimed it the best thing ever — so fresh that he could hear it protesting, “Don't eat me,” as it dissolved in his mouth. For dinner, he enjoyed the Hawaiian snapper in lemon sauce; I had the miso escolar.

The modern American lobby of the luxurious Four Seasons Hotel feels like your own living room, except more tasteful. Guests are surprisingly diverse, not just K Street power brokers from CNN but also young families with kids. Celebrated chef Michael Mina has opened a Bourbon Steak here, featuring butter-poached meats and poultries. The decor is rich leather, warm woods, and black granite.

GETTING AROUND

Washington's excellent Metrorail runs five lines covering 106.3 miles, mostly underground. Fares begin at \$1.35. Rechargeable plastic SmarTrip cards also work on the many buses. Special Circulators ply high-volume routes. To get in from Dulles Airport, take the 5A for \$3, leaving every 40 minutes, and transfer to Metrorail at Rosslyn.

[box with contact data for places mentioned?]