

TRAVEL + LEISURE

How to Do DC

Visiting Washington, D.C., can feel like the school trip from hell: no matter who you are, no matter what you're interested in, you're stuck with the same obligatory sights. We say, Table that notion! The city is more varied than guidebooks let on, and a whole lot more fun—especially if, like most residents, you have a clear-cut agenda. We've taken the liberty of dividing families into four special interest groups—political animals, diplomats and spies, history geeks, and artists and aesthetes—and mapped out a weekend's worth of activities for each. You can even eat and sleep staying true to character. So skip the forced march, the civics-teacher gulag. Take your cue from your family's temperament, then take on the town—your way.

From [March 2007](#)

By David Plotz

Political Animals

BACKGROUND CHECK Must-see TV in your house: Senate coverage on C-Span. Newspaper you can't do without: *Roll Call*. Your son's dream date: Wonkette.

It's your lucky weekend! Here's your chance to observe our nation's leaders in their natural habitat—schmoozing, preening, pretending to remember your name.

When to Begin

Early. Arrive Friday morning so you can watch the city at work. Political Washington completely shuts down by Sunday (unless you count listening to the talk-show windbags on TV).

Where to Begin

The **Capitol** ([202/225-6827](tel:2022256827); www.aoc.gov), naturally. Sign up for free tickets at the kiosk on the southwest corner of the grounds. After the tour, you can drop by the office of your senator or representative—and maybe even score a handshake. If you visit when Congress is in session (most weekdays, except around holidays), you can sit in the House or Senate visitors' gallery and take in the action on the floor, which usually consists of a few members gossiping and ignoring the speech being made by a colleague.

The Ultimate Insider Lunch

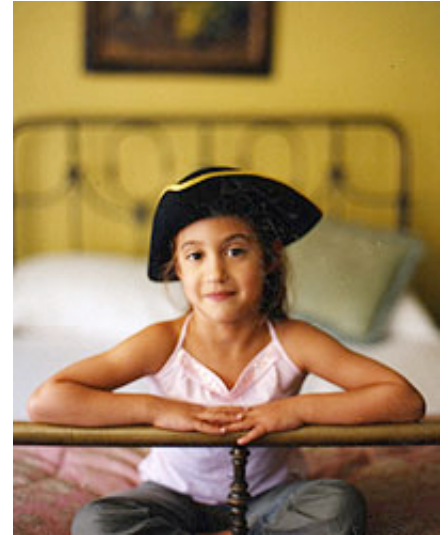
The **Senate Refectory** isn't as glamorous as it sounds—nary a senator in sight. The real clubhouse for political D.C. is *A.V. Ristorante Italiano* ([607 New York Ave. NW; 202/737-0550](tel:2027370550); lunch for four \$60), a.k.a. the A.V.—an old-school joint with red-checked tablecloths and surprisingly decent food. Yes, that's Justice Antonin Scalia, one of the regulars, digging into his anchovy pizza.

Our Country's Paperwork

Wander down the Mall a few blocks to the **National Archives** ([700 Pennsylvania Ave. NW; 866/272-6272](tel:8662726272); www.archives.gov), where the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights are housed. Check up on your favorite amendment—it's still there, despite what you've been reading in the papers.

A Dinner Splurge

If you're dressed more like lobbyists than tourists—no shorts! no fanny packs!—try to snag a table at **Charlie Palmer Steak** ([101 Constitution Ave. NW; 202/547-8100](tel:2025478100); dinner for four \$170). It's expense-account central for power brokers



Buff Strickland

and dignitaries; you're bound to spot a senator or two.

Where to Stay

Political junkies might be tempted by the Willard InterContinental, one of D.C.'s grandest hotels—it's where negotiators attempted to prevent the Civil War, and where, nowadays, inaugural balls are held. But a whopping \$579 only gets you a basic double with a lousy bathroom and a fussy opulence that won't go over well with the kids. The Hotel Sofitel Lafayette Square (806 15th St. NW; 202/730-8800; www.sofitel.com; doubles from \$235) has a less fuddy-duddy air and an equally choice location, a three-minute stroll from the White House.

Presidential Digs

Always stingy about tours, the **White House** (1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW; 202/456-7041; www.whitehouse.gov) has been even more so since 9/11. You're allowed to visit from 7:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., Tuesday to Saturday—if you've reserved a spot well in advance (submit a request to your member of Congress at least a month prior to your visit). These walk-throughs offer a look at the president's house that's more *Antiques Roadshow* than *West Wing*, but you might catch a glimpse of Karl Rove, or a reporter trying to wheedle a source. The best part: all those Secret Service officers whispering urgently into walkie-talkies, wrist mikes, and lapel mikes.

D.C. Downtime

Head over to **Capitol Hill**, the residential neighborhood flanking the Capitol. Eastern Market, in a gorgeous 1873 red-brick building, is home to butchers, greengrocers, and crafts vendors. Your goal: brunch at **Market Lunch** (225 Seventh St. SE; 202/547-8444; brunch for four \$35), which has incredible blueberry pancakes and even better crab cakes. Walk them off in the Capitol Hill Historic District. Stanton and Marion parks are lush oases—just right for a senator to enjoy a quiet assignation with a mistress. As always, in Washington, keep your eyes open and your camera handy.

Diplomats + Spies

BACKGROUND CHECK You hunger for foreign intrigue. Your idea of the perfect snack is a bowl of Vietnamese *pho*. You've seen *The Bourne Identity*—29 times.

Ambassadors, world bankers, UN officials, and secret agents live in a world of embassy fabulousness in D.C., and hundreds of thousands of immigrants have created mini Vietnams, El Salvadors, Indias, and West Africas. Their worlds can be yours.

Where to Begin

At the International Spy Museum (800 F St. NW; 866/779-6873; www.spymuseum.org), to find out if you have what it takes for a career in espionage. Can you commit a cover story to memory in three minutes? Examine lipstick pistols and buttonhole cameras, learn how to work up a disguise, and buy an invisible-ink pen so the kids can write baffling postcards to their friends. Starting in late May, further hone your sleuthing skills at Operation Spy—the newest interactive experience at the Spy Museum—where you'll attempt to solve real-life assignments of U.S. intelligence officers. In one eventful hour you'll decode a covert audio conversation, break free from a high-security compound, and even conduct a climactic polygraph test of a suspect agent.

Other Essential Museums

The **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** (100 Raoul Wallenberg Pl. SW; 202/488-0400; www.ushmm.org) is as grim as the Spy Museum is whimsical. Although its concentration-camp footage and photos of victims are not for children under 12, they're required viewing for older ones and will likely spark more discussion than anything else you do in D.C. Continue your global tour down the street at the **Freer and Sackler Galleries** (Jefferson Dr. and 12th St. SW; 202/633-4880; asia.si.edu), exhibiting amazing Asian art, and the **National Museum of African Art** (950 Independence Ave. SW; 202/633-4600; nmafa.si.edu), the finest collection of its kind in the United States.

Your Stomping Grounds

Adams Morgan and the adjacent U Street Corridor are D.C.'s most cosmopolitan neighborhoods. Eat at one of the many Ethiopian restaurants, such as **Dukem** (1114–1118 U St. NW; 202/667-8735; dinner for four \$70) or **Meskerem** (2434 18th St. NW; 202/462-4100; dinner for four \$75). The stews are delicious, but be prepared to use your hands: the spongy *injera* bread is both plate and fork. For dessert, try America's contribution to the world's waistline: the

cupcake. Treat yourselves to the buttercream beauties at **Love Café** (1501 U St. NW; 202/265-9800).

Where to Stay

The **Hilton Washington** (1919 Connecticut Ave. NW; 202/483-3000; www.hilton.com; doubles from \$229), dubbed the Hinckley Hilton because it's where John Hinckley tried to assassinate President Reagan in 1981, is nevertheless a kids' Shangri-la. It has a glorious outdoor pool (with a separate toddler pool) and an alfresco café where you can load up on fries. Don't worry about all the security guards giving you the hairy eyeball—there's always some foreign leader and his entourage ensconced here.

Sunday Morning Outing

A few blocks south of the Hilton is the **Dupont Circle farmers' market** (20th St. NW, between Q St. and Massachusetts Ave.; 202/362-8889), which draws vendors from organic farms in the region. Buy cherries and strawberries from the Reid's Orchard stand and almond croissants at the Bonaparte Breads booth, then wander up Embassy Row along Massachusetts Avenue to see the most dazzling *fin-de-siècle* architecture in town. For brunch, head to **Cashion's Eat Place** (1819 Columbia Rd. NW; 202/797-1819; brunch for four \$45) in Adams Morgan. The *croque-monsieur* is reason enough for improved Franco-American relations.

History Geeks

BACKGROUND CHECK You have a lifetime subscription to *American Heritage* magazine. You're much more up on the American Revolution than on *American Idol*. Your cats' names are Grant and Lee.

Washington—site of two presidential assassinations and 217 years of congressional machinations—is your paradise. Your big challenge: resisting the urge to read every sign and see every exhibit.

Where to Begin

Unless you're a hardcore Lincoln fan, nix Ford's Theatre, an overrated attraction. Start instead at the newly renovated **National Portrait Gallery** (Eighth and F Sts. NW; 202/275-1738; npg.si.edu). Point your kids toward the presidential portraits and have them find Gilbert Stuart's famous George Washington—they know it from the dollar bill.

Another Essential Museum

The National Museum of American History is closed until 2008 for renovation, but that gives you more time at the **National Air & Space Museum** (Independence Ave. and Fourth St. SW; 202/633-1000; nasm.si.edu). Practically every key aircraft is here (the *Apollo 11* command module, Lindbergh's *Spirit of St. Louis*)—plus the IMAX Theater has a five-story screen and the gift shop sells astronaut ice cream. Count on crowds: this is the most-visited museum in the city.

The Battle Zone

To escape the throngs, head for the war memorials (adjacent to the Mall, between 17th and 23rd Sts.; 202/426-6841; www.nps.gov). While you study the new **World War II monument**, let the kids race around its circular plaza. Then walk along the south side of the Reflecting Pool to the **Korean War Veterans Memorial**. Its granite wall may be a knockoff of the Vietnam Memorial, but the 19 statues of soldiers are heroic. Climb the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and read the two greatest speeches in American history, Lincoln's Gettysburg and Second Inaugural addresses, carved on the walls inside. Your last stop: the **Vietnam Memorial**. This stark black gash still has the power to quiet children and bring adults to tears.

Where to Stay

Crammed with leather sofas, brass beds, and vintage photos, the **Hotel Tabard Inn** (1739 N St. NW; 202/785-1277; www.tabardinn.com; doubles from \$163) in Dupont Circle feels like an old club. Nab room No. 62—the penthouse—and you'll get a huge living room and your own kitchen.

Your Stomping Grounds

Nowhere is the Washington of yesteryear on better display than in Georgetown. From Wisconsin Avenue, meander down **O, P, and Q Streets**, with their 18th- and 19th-century town houses; then walk over to **Georgetown University's** Gothic-style campus (37th and O Sts. NW; 202/687-0100) and up to **Dumbarton Oaks** (1703 32nd St. NW; 202/339-6401), a 19th-century mansion with 10 acres of formal gardens. Forage picnic sandwiches at **Dean & DeLuca** (3276 M St. NW; 202/342-2500), or try the **Moby Dick House of Kabob** (1070 31st St. NW; 202/333-4400).

Eat your takeout along the Potomac or the towpath of the C&O Canal, a relic of the brief period when Washington was a commercial city. At **Dolcezza** (1560 Wisconsin Ave. NW; 202/333-4646), the creamy handmade gelato is a treat George Washington could have sunk his teeth into.

Artists + Aesthetes

BACKGROUND CHECK You are: More interested in the pursuit of beauty than in the pursuit of power. Prouder of the kids' graffiti than of their report cards. Planning to get *The Da Vinci Code*—because you think it's an art book

Fortunately, the federal government's Hoover-like ability to vacuum up treasures has turned D.C. into an art mecca.

Where to Begin

Just down the hill from the Capitol—but a galaxy away—at the **National Gallery of Art** (Constitution Ave. NW, between Third and Seventh Sts.; 202/737-4215; www.nga.gov). The I.M. Pei– designed East Building, its pink marble bringing a rosy glow to the otherwise alabaster Mall, houses a modern-art collection with Calder sculptures that will thrill your kids (look for a fish fashioned out of wire, perched on tiny hands). The enormous West Building has the only Da Vinci in America, as well as Vermeers, Monets, and Van Goghs. Grab lunch in the gallery's sculpture garden—there's a café serving tasty salmon (pizza, too)—and then find the optical-illusion Roy Lichtenstein house. You're a stone's throw from the Mall's 1947 carousel; go for a whirl before forging on.

Other Essential Museums

The **National Museum of the American Indian** (Fourth St. and Independence Ave. SW; 202/633-1000; nmai.si.edu), the Mall's newest landmark, could do a better job teaching Native American history and culture, but it does have beautiful craftwork, such as beaded Lakota buckskin dresses and Cherokee wasp-nest masks. Plus, the museum's Mitsitam Native Foods Café is the standout cafeteria on the Mall—buffalo burgers, anyone? Adults have to pay to get into the **Phillips Collection** (1600 21st St. NW; 202/387-2151; www.phillipscollection.org; adults \$12, kids 18 and under free) in Dupont Circle—it's not part of the free Smithsonian system—but it's worth it, and your teens will identify with all of those rebellious Impressionists.

Where to Stay

Set in the converted 1839 General Post Office, the boutique **Hotel Monaco** (700 F St. NW; 202/628-7177; www.monaco-dc.com; doubles from \$229) has palatial hallways, and rooms with 20-foot ceilings, DVD players, and the bounciest beds your kids will ever jump on.

Your Stomping Grounds

Hotel Monaco is in the Penn Quarter, a former no-man's-land that's now ground zero for the gallery scene, concentrated on Seventh Street. The neighborhood also encompasses Chinatown, the place to eat bohemian-style. **Chinatown Express** (746 Sixth St. NW; 202/638-0425; lunch or dinner for four \$30) has a free sidewalk show: you can watch chefs in the window stretching and cutting soup noodles, then go in and slurp. D.C.'s best barbecue is at **Capital Q** (707 H St. NW; 202/347-8396; lunch or dinner for four \$30), which specializes in Texas-style brisket. Slightly fancier, the Spanish tapas bar **Jaleo** (480 Seventh St. NW; 202/628-7949; dinner for four \$60) has enough variety to please even the most finicky squirt, and its brightly colored murals are nothing if not artistic. ✚

David Plotz is the deputy editor of Slate and author of The Genius Factory: The Curious History of the Nobel Prize Sperm Bank. A father of two, he's a lifelong resident of Washington, D.C.

The information in this story was accurate at the time it was published in March 2007 but we suggest you confirm all details and prices directly with any establishments mentioned. The quality of offerings and services tends to change over time.