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Washington, D.C. offers kids a delicious slice of history

By Anne Bokma on June, 26 2014

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Like most teens, my kids love shopping. So when I start talking up Washington, D.C.'s National Mall as a destination for our last March break vacation, my two daughters got eagerly onboard. That is, until they realize they'll be visiting memorials, monuments and museums, rather than fashion boutiques and department stores. "But what about the shopping?" protested Lucy, 13. I explained that the National Mall is a downtown Washington park that stretches for 3 km between the revered Lincoln Memorial, a monument to the president who abolished slavery, and the U.S. Capitol Building, the American equivalent of Parliament Hill. They were unimpressed. But then Ruby, 16, remembered that Washington is home to the hit TLC reality series DC Cupcakes. It follows sisters and business partners Sophie LaMontagne and Katherine Kallinis (who happen to be from our hometown of Hamilton, Ont.), as they run Georgetown Cupcake, a small upscale cupcakery famous for its hour-long lineups. I want to go to D.C. to offer my kids a slice of American history; they want to go for a slice of cake, or, more specifically, the Valrhona chocolate cupcake with a whipped Callebaut frosting topped with a fondant flower. I agreed to a 40-minute detour to visit Georgetown Cupcake on the trek home and the deal was sealed.



Memorials offer profound moments

Washington is a great city for kids of all ages, but especially for preteens and teens who are able grasp the importance of significant events that have had a lasting impact on the world. I've never seen my girls so quiet as when we walked alongside the eerily unending Vietnam memorial. We run our fingers over some of the 58,000 named carved into the stones, including the 56 Canadians pointed out to us by one of the helpful guides and the 15-year-old boy who lied about his age so he could enlist. We are similarly in awe standing in front of the Washington Monument and its surrounding reflecting pool, where Martin Luther King Junior led a 250,000-person march on Washington against segregation in August 1963 and gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Experiencing these moments together with my girls was profound. I was happy to see that shopping was the furthest thing from their minds.



Museums and memorials top the list

Over the next four days we toured Washington from morning to night. There's so much to see we couldn't possibly pack it all in. The mighty Smithsonian alone has 19 museums and galleries, most of which are free and are located within easy walking distance of each other. Same goes for the dozens of memorials and monuments to generals, politicians, poets and statesmen – and yes, they are all men. (It's interesting to note that of 45 monuments and memorials only one – the Vietnam Women's Memorial – expressly honours the contributions of American women. It was installed in 1993 after years of lobbying.)

For younger kids who may not be as compelled by history and culture, there's no end of fun stuff to do in the capital – from visiting the famous pandas Mei Xiang, Tian Tian and baby Bao Bao at the National Zoo, to paddling down the Potomac in a canoe, pretending they are a secret spy at the International Spy Museum, delivering the weather forecast in front of a green screen at the Newseum or designing their own stamp at the National Postal Museum.

Our top 10 picks

It can be hard to choose with so much to do. Here are our top ten highlights:

1. Lincoln Memorial: We spent more than an hour on the steps of this iconic landmark, a shrine to Abraham Lincoln built in the style of a Greek temple, which my kids recognized from movies such as *Forrest Gump* and *Night at the Museum 2*. A great spot for picture taking.

2. Vietnam Memorial: A black granite wall inscribed with the names of 58,209 Americans killed or missing in the Vietnam conflict. An alphabetical directory helps visitors locate names.

3. Museum of Natural History: Our very favourite museum. The most visited natural history museum in the world has a collection of more than 125 million natural science specimens and cultural artifacts. Popular displays include dinosaur skeletons, an enormous collection of natural gems and minerals (including the Hope Diamond), artifacts of early man, an insect zoo, hall of mammals and a live coral reef.



4. The White House: My daughters are the same ages as Sasha and Malia Obama. Perhaps that's why they loved hanging around outside the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue so much, imagining what it might be like to live in the most well-known address in America. Tours can be complicated to arrange since they are only available by booking weeks in advance through the Canadian embassy. We were content to admire this seat of power from outside the gates where we watched small groups of peaceful protesters and important-looking folks come and going.

5. Bureau of Engraving and Printing: Your kids will be amazed at the huge piles of money all in one place. Watch paper money being printed, serialized, cut, bundled and examined for defects.

6. Ford's Theatre: The site of the April 14, 1865 assassination of President Abraham Lincoln is a theatre, historical monument, museum and learning centre all in one. The night we were there we caught a production of the delightful musical, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. The theatre offers a history-on-foot walking tour led by costumed actors portraying figures from Civil War Washington guiding patrons to different sites in a 90-minute historical downtown journey. The theatre commemorates the 150th anniversary of the assassination next spring with programming that includes an around-the-clock vigil on April 14 and 15, a special museum exhibition and world premier of *The Widow Lincoln*.



7. International Spy Museum: We spent an unexpected three hours here. While my husband relived his childhood fantasy of being an secret agent, our daughters pored over the more than 200 items used for espionage around the world, including lipstick pistols, invisible ink and buttonhole cameras. You'll also learn about famous spies (did you know Julia Child led a double life as an agent?)

8. National Zoo: Part of the Smithsonian complex, this is one of the most kid-friendly places to visit in Washington and has more than 400 species of animals. Best of all, it's free.

9. National Air and Space Museum: Here you'll view the largest collection of historic air and spacecraft in the world, including the original Wright 1903 Flyer and the Apollo 11 command module.

10. Madame Tussauds: OK, I know it's cheesy – and maybe not dignified to include this attraction on a list of venerable national historical and cultural treasures – but my kids loved this place. A lot. And so did I. Its Presidential Gallery is the only place in the world where you can get up close and personal and have your photo taken with life-size wax figures of all 44 presidents (many of whom are surprisingly short).

Coming soon

The National Museum of African American History and Culture, scheduled to open in early 2016 adjacent to the Washington Monument, will highlight the richness and diversity of the African American experience.

Good eats

For a fun family feast, check out one of two Ted's Bulletin locations in the heart of downtown D.C. Old black and white movies play on a giant screen at the back of the restaurant while you nosh on hearty fare such as ribs and potatoes or catfish on a bed of cornmeal. Ted's is famous for its 16 flavours of kids' milkshakes (including PBJ and peppermint) and has adult shakes too (the Nutty Professor – made with hazelnut liqueur – is a treat). Try the homemade pop tarts for dessert.

Where to stay

We stayed a 10-minute drive out of town at the über stylish and kid- and pet-friendly Monaco Hotel, a Kimpton property in historic Old Town Alexandria. Winner of the 2014 Certificate of Excellence from TripAdvisor, the hotel offers thoughtful extras such as a yoga mat in every room and access to free bikes. Pets are welcome (there's even a doggy happy hour) and if you choose to leave Fido at home, you can always keep company with the complimentary guppy that will be brought to your room in a glass bowl.

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