

Washington, D.C.—Beyond the National Mall

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When most of us think of a visit to our nation's capital, a few key places come to mind. The White House, the U.S. Capitol Building, and the Washington Monument are all iconic. As homeschoolers, we likely have visited or would like to explore some of the very popular Smithsonian museums on the National Mall. The National Museum of American History and the National Air and Space Museum are both very busy places, and understandably so.

Our family recently had the opportunity to live in Arlington for five months, during which we explored the area in much more depth than the average tourist or day tripper. We never did get to Arlington National Cemetery or to a dozen other places we wanted to see, but we experienced enough to know that D.C. is not a city to be visited once and checked off as “done.”

Whether you are one of thousands of Virginia's homeschoolers who live within a single-day field trip distance, or if your trips to D.C. are a bit more of a journey, here are some places to consider going and things to consider doing on your next visit.

Beyond the Mall

See money being made and measure your height's value in \$100 bills at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Learn about the fateful night President Lincoln was assassinated and go up in the balcony and get a good look at the box where he was sitting at Ford's Theatre. The Newseum is engaging and topical, with a nice blend of history and technology. The National Building Museum has a grand interior, and an exhibit to learn about how buildings stand up to natural disasters, and Legos for hands-on building. Another stunning interior, as well as many volumes of Thomas Jefferson's original book donation, can be found at the Library of Congress.

Head over to the Tidal Basin, where in addition to the Jefferson Memorial (recognizable from its image on money), two of the most kid-accessible memorials can be found. The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial is inspiring, and the Roosevelt Memorial is interactive, with life-size statues and water features.

Animal lovers of all ages enjoy posing with the statue of his dog Fala. For a truly special Tidal Basin experience, come to catch the sunrise. It is simply stunning during Cherry Blossom season in springtime. This is a peak season for crowds, but if you're willing to come early, there's free parking in East Potomac Park. That's only about a five- to 10-minute walk from the blooms.

Those Other Smithsonian Sites

In addition to the well-known history and art museums, there are a handful of other Smithsonian spots to check out.

The National Museum of the American Indian pulls visitors into the world of the Native Americans. The building's exterior is unique among a sea of gray bricks and columns, evoking nature in both color and form. There is a hands-on kids' area upstairs which has a nice open view of the U.S. Capitol Building. The cafeteria, though pricey, is very good, with many interesting offerings. Try to sit down next to the

window with the fountain outside. You might see, as we did, a duck swimming about and repeatedly flying away and returning for a landing.

The National Postal Museum is great for anyone interested in how we get our mail and how this process has changed over time. This museum has recently expanded, and more hands-on exhibits have been introduced.

The National Zoo is a few short miles from the Mall, but it feels like a different world. Admission is free (though parking is not, but it is accessible via Metrorail or Metrobus). Why come here if you have a smaller local zoo? The science reason would be that world-class research is done here and volunteers or keepers are available to talk about it. The heartstrings reason: giant pandas. The most recent cub, Bei Bei, was born on August 22nd. He is expected to go on public display in early 2016.

In addition to the National Air and Space Museum location on the Mall that is visited by millions each year, there is another, even bigger, place to become immersed in aviation. The Steven F. Udvar-Hazy building (an annex of the downtown location) is a bit of a drive from the Mall, out near Dulles Airport, but is worthwhile if you have anyone in your family interested in technology or flight. You can see many helicopters and airplanes from throughout history and stand right under a space shuttle! It is also accessible by taking the Metro to the end of the Silver Line, where there is a bus that goes directly to both the airport and Udvar-Hazy.

What's more, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture will be opening in 2016. I'm really looking forward to exploring this place.

For Transportation Buffs

Taking a city bus can be a fun way to get around, especially if you have a kid who really wanted to go to school not for the classroom, but to ride the bus. SmarTrip cards are the best way to pay for both the Metrobus and the Metrorail. While you're in the Metro system, you might want to get out at the Wheaton station on the Red Line, which is the longest single span escalator in the Western Hemisphere. Union Station, in addition to having restaurants and shopping and being a Metro stop for trains and buses, is where you can catch the Virginia Railway Express, MARC (Maryland commuter train), sightseeing buses, Amtrak, and taxis.

You can also rent bicycles there. Union Station is also a beautiful building; make sure to look up at the ceiling while you're there.

If your family's interests run more toward airplanes, you should visit Gravelly Point in Arlington. It's a wide open green space right next to both the Potomac River and Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. Every few minutes, an airplane is taking off or landing, and it's possible to position yourself so that they are zooming overhead only about a hundred feet directly above you.

More Memorials

In a city where one can navigate by heading toward the Washington Monument, there are large and small monuments and memorials throughout. Some to consider visiting: the WWI and WWII memorials, the Boy Scout Memorial, and the United States Navy Memorial. One that is fun is The Albert Einstein Memorial, especially if your family includes any science lovers. Outside the National

Academy of Science, this statue of Albert Einstein is fun to pose with. Mr. Einstein isn't far from the Lincoln Memorial, which brings us back to the National Mall.

A few tips for spots on the Mall:

If you want to go see the butterflies at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum, go on a Tuesday when the exhibit is free. The United States Botanical Garden is a natural respite from columns and marble. Take the tunnel between the east and west wings of the National Gallery of Art. Very cool.

Get reserved tickets to ascend the Washington Monument at sunset, then stay for a night tour of the monuments all lit up. That is a memorable way to end a day in D.C.

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