

Touring the Virginia State Capitol with Kids of All Ages

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Planning a group field trip is a tricky business. As the saying goes, you can please some of the people all of the time, or all of the people some of the time. It's rare to find that special field trip location where you can please all of the people, all of the time! On a recent autumn morning, however, I was lucky enough to stumble across one such place, and it's probably not somewhere you would expect to please groups from little ones to high schoolers. Yet, the Virginia State Capitol has it all—big grassy hills, larger-than-life statues, underground tunnels, and big models that will appeal to the youngest travelers—alongside discussions of history, politics, art, and architecture that will satiate the older minds in your group.

I had called and arranged a [group tour](#) ahead of time; this is required for any group that is larger than 10. The people at the Visitor's Center desk suggested arriving 15 minutes prior to our scheduled tour time and recommended allowing extra time to find parking. There is no designated parking lot for the Capitol. In the fall, when we visited, everyone found plenty of inexpensive parking on-street or in nearby lots, but I imagine if you were to visit during the very busy legislative session, parking would be at a premium.

Our group made it through security and assembled in the Visitor's Center, where we waited for our tour guide and looked at a temporary exhibit in one gallery and a permanent exhibit in another. Our tour guide arrived and introduced herself; she was a former teacher and had been doing tours at the Capitol for over 25 years! She took a minute to ask about the age range of her target audience (which in this case was 3rd through 8th grades). Depending on the size of your group, you may have other people join your tour since they can accommodate up to 50 people at a time.

Our tour proceeded through the new underground visitor's complex and up into the actual Capitol building. Our tour guide provided a great narrative that wove the past and present together. She discussed everything from Thomas Jefferson as architect, the role of the Capitol building in American architecture, a bit of Civil War history, a bit of colonial history, and politics from past to present. The breadth of the tour was quite astounding. We appreciated our guide's vast store of knowledge and thanked her at the end of the tour, which wrapped up in the modern Delegate Chamber (which was several of the kids' favorite part).

The tour offered a bit of something for all the age groups we represented, and I think younger and older children would likewise be kept happy. For the youngest homeschoolers, a tour of the grounds and a general explanation of the building would be an excellent start. (Pointing out shapes in classical American buildings is a really fun activity at this age.) Look online for information about the [Virginia Capitol squirrels](#) if you want a fun story to tell while walking the grounds outside; older kids will enjoy this just as much. Explain to younger kids how the Visitor's Center is buried underground and how they will be walking through an underground tunnel for part of the tour; most young kids will find this pretty interesting. Stories about the Virginia Capitol underground tunnel system can also be found online.

I've found that younger kids engage most when looking at 3-D objects; the tour guide we had was

excellent when talking about the Thomas Jefferson and George Washington statues and an original flag of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Her stories captivated even the oldest kids in our group. Younger kids should find these statues pretty interesting as they bring these historical figures to life. There are also several models of the Capitol and Capitol grounds located throughout the tour. One is new, showing the renovations and restorations that have been completed. Another is Thomas Jefferson's original. Some kids really love models, so it can be worth stopping and explaining these to younger kids, in particular.

Older kids can be a bit easier to please on this tour, depending on their interests. If architecture intrigues them, they will be happy. The Capitol is typically listed on "top 10 most important buildings in America" lists as the seminal work of classic American architecture. The first lobby has a great display explaining Thomas Jefferson's inspiration for the design. There are also two models here: one of an outside garden that is planned, and one of the restoration and renovation of the Visitor's Center. Most of the people in our group spent at least a little while looking at this model. Our tour guide did an excellent job talking about Jefferson's design and his contributions not only to architecture, but also to politics, as we walked through the Visitor's Center tunnel from the lobby to the Thomas Jefferson statue. This statue is a recent addition to the Visitor's Center; any art-loving kids will find their interest piqued by the creative process behind the statue (which is told in further detail in a pamphlet available at the Visitor's Center desk). Art lovers will also be happy to find more statues and some great paintings further along in the tour.

History and politics are inescapable during the tour. While we visited outside of a legislative session, we were still able to go in and see what the chambers looked like and hear explanations of various procedures. Visiting during a session, however, is an entirely different experience! If you have enough kids in your group, you can schedule a special tour of a chamber presentation. These cannot occur during the legislative session and must be scheduled separately.

I went into our tour of the Capitol expecting a relatively finite learning experience and was pleasantly surprised that our tour guide was able to so deftly weave architecture, politics, history, and art into our tour. It really did wind up being a group tour that was able to please everyone, all the time, from our youngest participant to our oldest.

Mary Sandkam lives in Richmond with her husband and son, who is in 7th grade and has been homeschooled from the beginning. Since he is the child of parents who met in architecture school and a mom who went to graduate school for historic preservation, he has been going on tours of old buildings for as long as he can remember.