

travelworld

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WASHINGTON: A CAPITAL FALL

By Dan Schlossberg

Leaf-peepers don't have to head northeast when the calendar turns to autumn. Instead of fighting the traffic on New England's country lanes, many Americans plan to sample the fall foliage in a more benign climate.

What better place for foliage followers in these changing but patriotic times than your nation's capital ... and though it is warm outside now ... this is the perfect time to plan for this fall and the spectacular season of color!



Did you know that fall is actually the best time to enjoy the nation's capital? Gone are the crowds of cherry blossom season, the oppressive humidity of summer in Washington, and the chill and desolation of winter.

The Virginia hills just across the Potomac from Georgetown glow with color and stretch into Maryland, ringing the beltway that circles the District of Columbia. Spectacular drives like Gettysburg and Mt. Vernon are just an hour or so away.

With schools opening and colleges offering no breaks before Thanksgiving, crowds are diminished but enthusiasm about the Potomac basin is revving up for foliage enthusiasts! The nature display simply adds color to a community that already ranks as one of the most photogenic on the planet.

An overgrown small town that begs to be walked, Washington is also easy to navigate by Metro; the sleek, color-coded, graffiti-free subway system that is so quiet, and easy to navigate. A \$5 daily visitor's pass allows unlimited travel.

One outing Metro riders will enjoy as they cross the Potomac is a gentle river outing on the Odyssey, a futuristic vessel that resembles a flat glass pancake.

The Odyssey may well be the best of several ships offering dinner cruises from the Washington waterfront. It is a frequent choice of locals marking special occasions, as well as visitors on vacation. The food, service, and views are memorable and the sights of the panorama of our capital produce fine photos and home videos.

Ducks for travel? Unconventional yes, but fun! A company called D.C. Ducks runs amphibious army surplus vehicles on tours that combine land and sea. Jolts are to be expected but, as the driver says, "It's not my fault, it's not the Duck's fault, or it's the asphalt." Though Gold Line buses, Old Town trolleys, and D.C. Ducks are competitors, each offers differing itineraries, giving visitors many choices.

There's plenty to see: the city is pregnant with attractions, entertainment venues, shopping, dining, and neighborhoods with distinct personalities. Georgetown, in the upscale northwest corner of the capital, buzzes round the clock with visitors walking the streets and sampling the coffee shops, bakeries, bistros, and bookstores.

With the possible exception of the White House and Capitol Hill, it's the best place to spot a celebrity out on the town. Spotting a pseudo celebrity is easy: a troupe of former Congressional aides called the Capitol Steps puts on a hysterical and constantly-changing

political satire that comes complete with dinner (another version plays on New York's 42nd Street).

Georgetown is also the home of the 262-room Four Seasons, the area's only AAA five-diamond property. It has held the coveted rating since 1990. In the hotel's new premier wing, the drapes open electronically, headphones allow for couples to avoid conflict over TV sound, and room-to-room soundproofing will even please light sleepers. There's a doorbell, stall shower, fog-free mirrors, oversized tub, and wide variety of television channels. The room service is speedier than most fire departments and coffee makers are provided upon request.

The Four Seasons has hosted Kings, Presidents, Hollywood titans, and even you will receive the red-carpet treatment inside this elegant property. The public rooms are filled with art collected over 30 years by owner William Louis-Dreyfus, the father of Seinfeld co-star Julia Louis-Dreyfus. They feature the sculptures of Raymond Mason, the embroidery of Raymond Materson, and many famous paintings.

There's even an artful touch to the hotel's spa design: a soundproof Quiet Room featuring a leather massage recliner, state-of-the-art audio/visual system, and blue mood lighting to ensure uninterrupted tranquility. The spa is nothing short of an urban oasis. In addition to the latest workout equipment and Olympic-sized pool, it features aerobics and step classes, yoga, massages, stress-free rooms, and a complimentary juice bar.

Many things are free in the city: 14 Smithsonian Institution museums, the United States Holocaust Museum, parks, gardens, and such historic structures as the White House, Capitol, and many of the memorials (check for current restriction on some buildings) - including well-known monuments of Lincoln and Jefferson and a new one of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The National Mall between the Capitol and Lincoln Memorial contains the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, a granite wall that contains the names of lost soldiers. An American with a dry eye is rare at this startling monument, which seems like a gaze into the depths of the soul, universe, and eternity.

Artifacts left at the wall by loved ones are collected for display at the National Museum of American History. That museum's newest exhibit is "On Time," exploring the ways Americans have measured, used, and thought about time over the last 300 years.

With more than 50 museums, 70 art galleries, and more public performances per capita than anywhere in the world, the annual influx of 20 million visitors does not seem overwhelming. Washington is not only a national treasure of American history ... it is also a cultural capital.

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, for example, houses the National Symphony, Washington Opera, American Film Institute, and Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, plus countless special performances. There's a postal museum, a museum of American-Jewish military history, and even a museum of newsgathering.

The Newseum, brainchild of USA TODAY founder Al Neuharth, is based in Arlington, home of Gannett Newspapers and Arlington National Cemetery. It can't compete with the city's most popular attraction, the \$40 million National Air and Space Museum, which draws 10 million curious spectators, many on school trips. Historic planes and spacecraft hang from the towering ceiling above 23 exhibit galleries, plus the IMAX Theater and planetarium (both require tickets). A new exhibit featuring 10-foot-high images of earth opened in July.

Guests of the 370-room Loews L'Enfant Plaza have only a short hike to the Smithsonian's on the National Mall and most of the major monuments. The Washington waterfront, with its fresh-fish markets, marinas and tour boat berths is a short walk the opposite way.

The upscale hotel, which tops a mixed-use office building, is also within walking distance of Union Station, restored to its original 1907 Beaux Arts elegance. The station has become a tourist Mecca filled with shops, movie theaters, and restaurants - from fine dining to fast food (including one called the Soup Nutsy).

Union Station is also the kickoff point for various sightseeing tours that allow unlimited stops. Visitors who want to make maximum use of limited time should definitely utilize this facility. Since there's so much to see, an advance itinerary is a good idea. Hotel rates are lower on weekends and around holidays.

Fine dining? The Galileo offers some of the city's top culinary treats! The service, ambience, preparation, and presentation make for a memorable evening. Earlier this year, owner Roberto Donna, author of Cooking in Piedmont, hosted a special tasting of recipes from the late chef Paul Love.

photographers like the confines of a bus or trolley. The capital's best photo ops coincide with cherry blossom time and fall foliage. But fewer people block the view in autumn. Reaching the capital is easy.

Your nation's capital is four hours south of New York by car, three by rail, or one by plane. Many easterners prefer Amtrak's Metroliner because it avoids auto traffic, shortens travel time, and leads to historic Union Station, lovingly restored to its 1907 Beaux Arts grandeur.

For Further Information:

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