

Wandering in Washington, D.C.

You may be surprised—and gratified—to learn that the U.S. capital is one of the more accessible cities for visitors in wheelchairs. Get ready for a monumental experience!

By Noella Kertes





“Amid the flickering fountain lights and glowing monuments you can reflect on the effort of those determined to provide access to all visiting the nation’s capital.”

AS the birthplace of the nation’s disability rights laws it should be no surprise that Washington, D.C., is among the most accessible cities in the world. A top tourist destination, it was recently named the number-one cultural getaway by *Travel + Leisure* magazine in its America’s Favorite Cities survey. For today’s budget-conscious traveler there is perhaps no destination that can top it, with proof found in the fact that the city’s largest museum complex—which boasts more than a dozen galleries—is free. Washington teems with whitewashed monuments, top-notch restaurants, and world-class theater and museums that can be experienced equally whether standing or sitting down, making it a prime vacation spot for people with disabilities.

The city’s famous skyline includes the U.S. Capitol dome, as well as the 555 foot-high stone obelisk known as the Washington Monument. There’s also plenty to gaze at since scores of Washington structures are on the American Institute of Architects’ favorite works list. And while you’re in town you may want to catch a performance at the city’s premiere artistic venue, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Bargain hunters can also rejoice. Free performances at the center’s Millennium Stage are held every weeknight at 6 p.m. No tickets are needed for the shows—which change every day and include performers as diverse as classical musicians and puppeteers.

While visiting D.C., however, be sure not to miss the real show: politics. To get a firsthand look head to the halls of Congress on Capitol Hill, where you can peer from wheelchair-accessible galleries and see the House and Senate in action.

Cruising the Capital

Wedge between Virginia and Maryland, the location for “the District,” as it is often called, was chosen by its namesake George Washington, the nation’s first president. Today travelers to the area have their pick of three regional airports. The closest to the city, Reagan National, is also a stop on the city’s wheelchair accessible subway system. You’ll need to book transfers from the others. To the north, in Maryland, is Baltimore-Washington International, while to the south in Virginia lies Dulles International. If you prefer rail travel, Amtrak has a major hub down-

town at Union Station. The train station also boasts newly restored architecture, boutique shops, and a food court on the lower level.

As for when to go, one of the best—but most crowded—times to see the city is during the National Cherry Blossom Festival, when more than 3,000 Japanese cherry trees bloom to signal the start of spring. A blanket of pink blossoms descends around the Tidal Basin, an inlet adjacent to the Potomac River. The tourist season peaks during the summer months, particularly during the Independence Day festivities, which include a major cultural festival, fireworks, and a concert near the Capitol. Summer also brings a host of free concerts and outdoor movie festivals.

Once you’re there, navigating the city is fairly easy. Designed by French architect Pierre Charles L’Enfant, the city features long diagonal avenues radiating out from traffic circles. It is divided

QUICK CLICKS

Washington D.C.
(visitor information)
www.washington.org

Washington D.C. Access Guide
www.disabilityguide.org

Washington Metro
(includes timetables, maps, and fares)
www.wmata.com

Super Shuttle
(airport transportation)
www.supershuttle.com

**Monument by Moonlight/
Old Town Trolley Tours**
www.trolleytours.com/washington-dc

Smithsonian Museums
(accessible entrances)
www.si.edu/visit/infocenter/access.htm

**The John F. Kennedy Center
for the Performing Arts**
www.kennedy-center.org

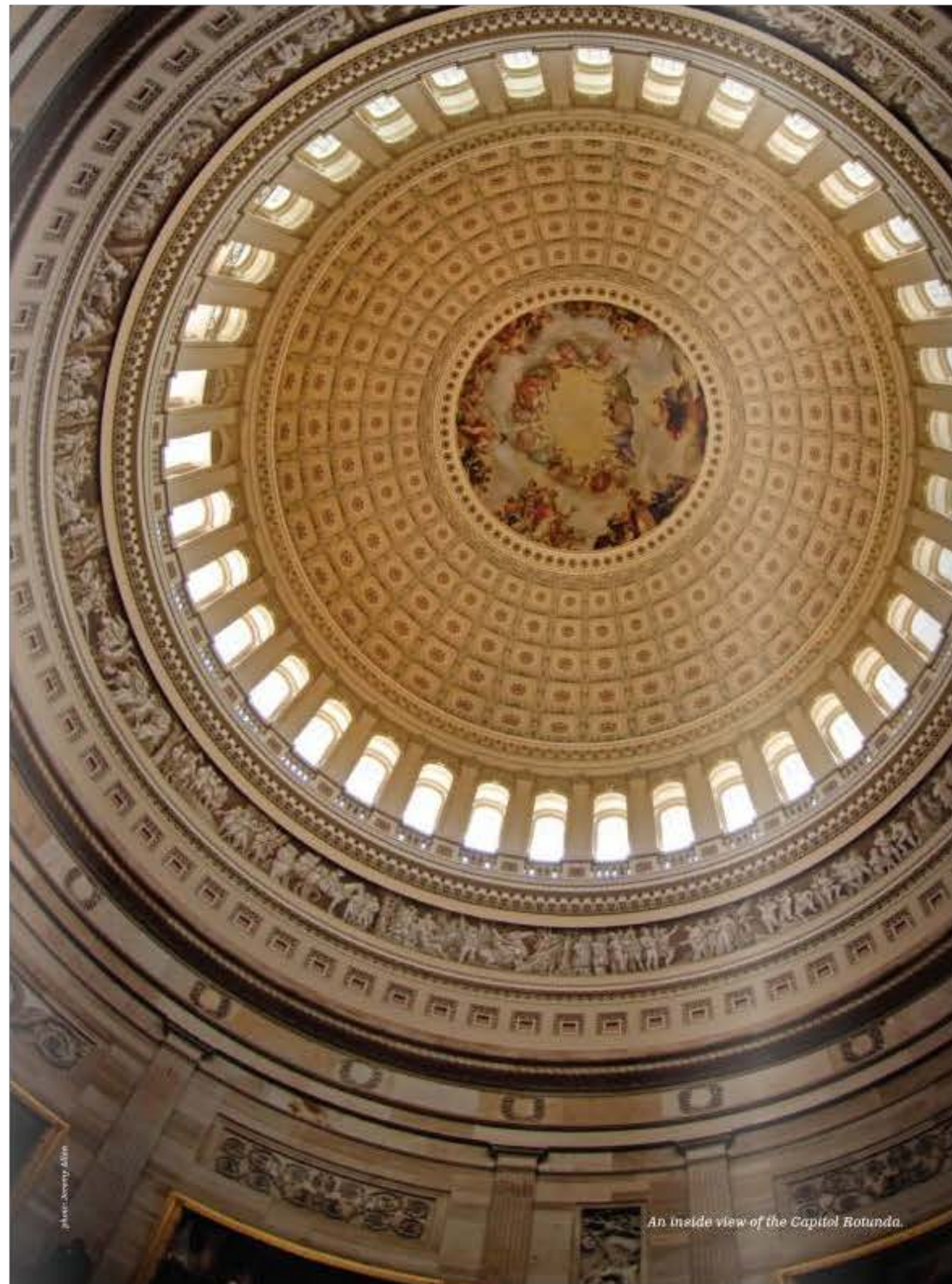
Newseum
www.newseum.org

National Archives
www.archives.gov

Smithsonian National Zoo
www.nationalzoo.si.edu



The south façade of the White House.



An inside view of the Capitol Rotunda.

photo: Jeremy Allen

into four quadrants that intersect at the Capitol building. Pedestrian access has been made easier, with wide sidewalks and curb cuts at nearly every street corner, and the city's subway—called the “Metro”—is the second-largest rail transit system in the nation, with elevators at all 86 stops.

The best places to stay are in the downtown north-west neighborhoods, with their dense population of hotels and restaurants near Metro stops. A good home base is near the Metro Center subway stop, since that's where two of the most-traveled subway lines intersect, and you're never more than a few blocks or Metro stops from some of the city's best restaurants.



The author at the FDR Memorial, above. View of the Washington Monument and blooming cherry blossoms, below.



Choose from neighborhood bistros like Chef Geoff's or the more elegant Oval Room, both located a few blocks from the White House. For an old-fashioned steakhouse experience head to The Prime Rib, where a jacket and tie is a must for dinner, or if you crave Italian try Toscana West. Rated among the most accessible restaurants by the *Washington D.C. Access Guide*—the best place for D.C. wheelchair access info—the restaurant also features live opera performances every other Saturday night.

Other optimal neighborhoods for lodging and dining include the West End, which is flanked by two Metro stops and within walking distance to popular neighborhoods Dupont Circle and Georgetown. In the West End, check out Circle Bistro, with its modern American and French-inspired menu. Slightly north of Dupont Circle is a local Tex-Mex favorite, Lauriol Plaza, where you can grab a pitcher of margaritas and some chimichangas. If you'd like to explore the restaurants and pubs in Georgetown, you'll need to stay flexible. One of Washington's oldest neighborhoods, its cobblestone and brick sidewalks can be difficult to navigate, and steps and narrow doorways may also pose a challenge. Be sure to take advantage of the outdoor seating at various restaurants during the summer months. Hotel and dining options also abound in the neighborhoods of Cleveland Park and Woodley Park. Each has their own Metro stop, as well as plenty of restaurants and nightlife. Both are also within blocks of the National Zoo, a sure-fire hit for the kids. For the adults, some of the city's best sushi can be found at the Sake Club in Woodley Park.

Malls, Museums, and Memorials

The first stop on any Washington itinerary should be the National Mall, which plays host to concerts and festivals and is home to more than a dozen free museums that make up the Smithsonian Institution. An expanse of grass and gravel that runs from the U.S. Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial, the Mall does pose a slight challenge to wheelchairs. The Smithsonian museums are roughly located along the north and south edges of the Mall, but there are cross streets, making museum hopping relatively easy.

Get oriented and pick up a visitor's guide at the Smithsonian Castle. The list of museum choices can be mind-boggling: from the popular—and often crowded—National Air and Space Museum which houses the Wright Brothers plane, to the newly renovated National History Museum, which is home to dinosaur bones and the infamous Hope Diamond. For lunch head to the National Museum of the American Indian, the newest addition to the Smithsonian family. Renowned for its na-

tive foods selection, the menu at the museum's Mitsitam Café is an eclectic mix that includes buffalo burgers, stuffed quail, and cedar planked fire-roasted salmon. But beware of sticker shock: A recent lunch of a cup of chilled corn and tomato soup, an appetizer portion of crawfish potato cakes, yucca with tomato garlic sauce, and Indian pudding came to roughly \$24.

And while not officially part of the Smithsonian Institution, the National Gallery of Art is also located along the Mall. Don't miss the museum's outdoor Sculpture Gardens. Perched on a six-acre block adjacent to the gallery's West Building, the garden consists of 17 large-scale contemporary sculptures along a winding path. In the summer months you can catch a free weekly jazz concert in the gardens. In between museum visits stop at the recently renovated National Archives Building, where you can wheel up to view the original Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution.

At the western end of the Mall are many of the city's famous monuments, including the Washington Monument, the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials, and the recently opened World War II Memorial. But if there is one must-see on any wheelchair traveler's list it's the Franklin Delano



The Lincoln Memorial inspires visitors to the nation's Capital.



At top, the dome of the U.S. Capitol building at sunset. At bottom, the entrance to the Newseum, an interactive museum dedicated to journalism that takes visitors behind the scenes into how news is made.



Roosevelt Memorial. Located along the Tidal Basin, the memorial is dedicated to the thirty-second president, and the only one who used a wheelchair. It traces the 12 years of FDR's presidency through a series of waterfalls and scenes depicting each of his four terms in office. The memorial includes an area of tactile reliefs with Braille writing.

One of the most recent additions, the monument's construction sparked some conflict within the disability community. Citing FDR's reticence at being seen publicly in his wheelchair, designers originally de-

cided against plans to have him shown in one. Instead, the original 10-foot statue depicts the president sitting down with a cloak obscuring a chair, which has tiny casters at the rear. The decision angered some activists, which prompted the placement of another smaller statue at the memorial's entrance depicting the president in a wheelchair much like the one he actually used.

From Shakespeare to Sangria

Take a break from history and culture and hop on the Metro to Cleveland Park for a stop at the National Zoo. It's about a half-mile and a slightly downhill walk from the metro station. The 163-acre zoological park is home to nearly 400 different species of animals, the most famous of which are the giant pandas Mei Xiang, Tian Tian, and their cub, Tai Shan. A part of the Smithsonian family, admission to the zoo is free. Once you're inside strap on your pushing gloves and hit the Olmstead trail. It still has some steep grades, but is the less hilly of the zoo trails.

You'll need to get your wallet out for either of these last two spots: the Newseum charges \$20 for admission, and the International Spy Museum costs \$18. For news junkies the hottest ticket in town is the newly minted Newseum, which is dedicated to the Fourth Estate. A seven-story museum in the revitalized Penn Quarter neighborhood, it features 15 theaters and hi-tech interactive exhibits that probe the history of news, taking you behind the headlines and into the reporter's seat. Among its unique collection, which includes a chunk of the Berlin Wall, is a gallery devoted to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Tissue boxes discretely surround the exhibit, at the center of which stands a large, mangled chunk of metal that was once the communications tower atop the World Trade Center. An observation deck on the museum's top level affords terrific views of the Capitol and downtown area, and it includes a galley of front pages from roughly 80 daily newspapers.

But if you'd rather skip the headlines and get the scoop on espionage, then head over to the Spy Museum. Located a block from the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metro, it is a treasure trove of gadgets such as buttonhole cameras, bugging devices, and even invisible ink. You can test your code-breaking abilities, immerse yourself in a secret identity, or find out how double agents like Robert Hannsen—a former FBI official convicted of spying for the Russian KGB—were exposed and caught.

For dinner take the elevator upstairs to Zola, a sleek modern restaurant that includes a pre-theater menu. Then check what's playing a few blocks away at the Shakespeare Theatre Company; the closest troupe this side of the Atlantic to the Royal Shakespeare Company. Or if edgier shows are more to your liking, head to the Woolly Mammoth Theater. Both are within blocks of the Metro. For a post-theater drink or quick bite, stop over at Jaleo for some authentic Spanish tapas and sangria.

Bid farewell to the District with a moonlight tour of the monuments along the Mall. Old Town Trolleys conducts a two-and-a-half hour tour of many of the city's monuments, with stops at the Iwo Jima, FDR, and Lincoln memorials, as well as those honoring Vietnam veterans and the Korean War. A wheelchair-accessible trolley car is available if bookings are made in advance. It is here, amid the flickering fountain lights and glowing monuments, where you can reflect on the effort of those determined to provide access to all visiting the nation's capital. ☺

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