

VISITDCNOW
THE TRAVEL GUIDE

Washington *D.C.*

The Smart Traveler's Guide to the Nation's Capital

3-DAY ITINERARY • FREE ATTRACTIONS • WHERE TO EAT • INSIDER TIPS

EDITION 2026

CHAPTER 5

Day 1: The Icons, West to East

Start at the Capitol end of the Mall and walk west — you'll finish at the Lincoln Memorial right around sunset, which is exactly when you want to be there. Total walking: about 3 miles, all flat.

8:00 AM

U.S. Capitol tour — Enter through the Capitol Visitor Center for your pre-booked tour — the Rotunda, National Statuary Hall, and the crypt. Standing under the dome is free and genuinely moving.

10:00 AM

Library of Congress — Cross the street to the Thomas Jefferson Building. Give the Great Hall a slow ten minutes, view the Main Reading Room from the overlook, and stand between the Gutenberg Bible and Thomas Jefferson's personal library.

12:00 PM

Lunch on the Mall — Grab a museum café lunch or a food truck on the Mall (roughly \$14–\$18). Eat one meal off the Mall daily if you can — the neighborhoods are better — but today the schedule is tight.

1:30 PM

Choose your museum — The National Gallery of Art (European masters in the West Building, modern art in I.M. Pei's East Building) or the National Museum of American History (the Star-Spangled Banner flag, Lincoln's top hat, Julia Child's kitchen). One museum per half-day is the realistic maximum. Restrooms: every Smithsonian lobby has free public restrooms — use museum lobbies as your Mall restroom strategy all trip.

3:30 PM

Washington Monument — Ride to the 500-foot observation deck with your timed ticket — the Capitol to the east, the Lincoln Memorial to the west. No ticket? The Old Post Office Tower on Pennsylvania Avenue is the locals' free, no-reservation alternative.

4:30 PM

Walk west: WWII Memorial — Stroll to the World War II Memorial, then begin the slow walk toward Lincoln along the Reflecting Pool.

6:30 PM

Sunset at the Lincoln Memorial — Climb the steps, stand where Dr. King stood, and watch the sun drop behind the Memorial. Then linger as the monuments light up — the single most beautiful hour in DC. Do not schedule dinner over it.

8:00 PM

Dinner in Penn Quarter — Metro from Foggy Bottom or walk to Penn Quarter — busy, well-lit, and full of restaurants into the evening (roughly \$30–\$45 per person).

CHAPTER 15

Hidden Gems Most Tourists Miss

The places locals love and tour buses skip.

Old Post Office Tower

The locals' secret alternative to the Washington Monument: a free observation deck with sweeping views down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol — no ticket, no reservation. Enter on 12th Street; check NPS hours before you go.

Kennedy Center Rooftop Terrace

Free, open to the public, no performance ticket needed. One of the great underrated views in DC: the Potomac, Georgetown waterfront, and Roosevelt Island glowing at sunset. The free daily 6 PM Millennium Stage concert makes the perfect pairing.

Netherlands Carillon

Across the river in Arlington, next to the Iwo Jima Memorial: a 127-foot bell tower framing the entire DC skyline — Monument, Capitol dome, memorials — in one panorama. Rarely crowded, free, doubly photogenic in spring tulip season.

Kogod Courtyard

Inside the National Portrait Gallery in Penn Quarter: a glass-canopied courtyard that's DC's best indoor exhale. Free, quiet, and the perfect midday reset between museums.

Theodore Roosevelt Island

A memorial island in the Potomac with miles of wooded trails — and a free parking lot on the Virginia side. The footbridge drops you into sudden wilderness ten minutes from downtown.

Gravelly Point

The riverside park directly under the DCA flight path: watch planes land overhead with the DC skyline across the river. Free parking, one of the best free experiences in the region.

Dumbarton Oaks

Georgetown's free museum of Byzantine and pre-Columbian art paired with celebrated formal gardens — a peaceful uphill escape from M Street. Note: the museum is free, but the gardens need a timed ticket (about \$15, book ahead).

The Renwick Gallery

12 Food Spots Worth a Detour

Twelve places worth crossing the city for — the quick-hit list for when someone asks “where should we actually eat?”

1. Ben’s Chili Bowl (U Street)

The half-smoke ‘all the way’ — DC’s signature sausage since 1958. About \$7, and worth every cent.

2. Market Lunch, Eastern Market (Capitol Hill)

The blueberry buckwheat pancakes at the counter inside the 1873 market hall. Weekend mornings only — go hungry.

3. Old Ebbitt Grill (Downtown)

DC’s oldest saloon (1856), two blocks from the White House. The oyster specials are a local institution.

4. Founding Farmers (Foggy Bottom)

Farm-to-table comfort food in a soaring dining room. Brunch here is one of the hardest weekend tables in the city — book ahead.

5. Le Diplomate (14th Street)

The French bistro that anchors 14th Street — steak frites, perfect fries, and a sidewalk scene. Another reserve-ahead spot.

6. Union Market (NoMa)

Dozens of stalls under one roof. The group-pleaser: everyone picks their own stall, you share a table.

7. Mi Vida (The Wharf)

Big, joyful Mexican dining room on the water — guacamole made tableside. Request a terrace table at sunset.

8. Del Mar (The Wharf)

The splurge dinner: Spanish seafood by Fabio Trabocchi. Reserve well ahead on weekends.

9. Martin’s Tavern (Georgetown)

Serving since 1933 — DC’s oldest family-run restaurant, and the booth where JFK proposed to Jackie.

10. Ethiopian on U Street

DC has America’s largest Ethiopian community, and U Street is its kitchen. Order the vegetarian combo with injera and share it family-style.

11. Tatte Bakery (multiple locations)

CHAPTER 3

Your Interactive DC Map

Every stop in this guide — all three itinerary days, the hidden gems, the photo spots — pinned on one custom Google Map. Open it on your phone and the city navigates itself.



Scan the QR code with your phone camera, or open this link in your browser:

[Open the Visit DC Now Interactive Map](#)

How to use it

- **Save it:** in the Google Maps app, tap the place name, then Save — build a “DC Trip” list before you fly.
- **Walk it:** the Day 1 stops run west along the Mall in order — follow the pins and you’ll never backtrack.
- **Go offline:** download the DC area in Google Maps before your trip so the map works in the Metro tunnels.

What’s pinned (15 stops)

- U.S. Capitol
- Library of Congress
- National Archives Museum
- National Gallery of Art
- Washington Monument
- National World War II Memorial
- Lincoln Memorial