

Capital Building Credit: Michael Kleinberg



# THE CAPITAL OF COOL

By Caroline Chng

Washington, District of Columbia is unique among American cities because it was established by the Constitution of the United States to serve as the nation's capital. From the beginning, it has been embroiled in sectional conflicts, issues of race, national identity and, of course, power.

In fact, Washington DC is not a state and therefore does not appear on the American flag. Located south of Maryland and north of Virginia, DC is not part of either state, although the federal district is close to the above states and these form part of the American flag.

## The City of Duke Ellington

As a Southern city, Washington has always had a significant African-American population. Before the Civil War, the city was home to a growing number of free black people who worked as skilled craftsmen, hack drivers, businessmen and labourers. It also included enslaved African-Americans and was the site of slave auctions before they were outlawed in the city in 1850.

Slaves owned in Washington were emancipated on 16 April 1862, nine months before Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863. Washington remained home to a large African-American population who created vibrant communities and championed civil rights despite racial segregation and prejudice.

Duke Ellington was born and raised in Washington's Shaw neighbourhood and played in his first band here.

## Barack Obama Lives Here

Today, DC has evolved into a cosmopolitan city. The choice of Washington's site along the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers lends the city ambient riverbank towns and great views.

While Washington DC has always had foreign delegations, it boasts an increasingly diverse ethnic population. After more than two centuries as the nation's capital, Washington has developed as a layered city with multiple personalities.

With the inauguration of President Barack

Obama in 2009, a wave of change pulsed through the District and brought with it a new, youthful and invigorated DC. As the Obamas have settled into the White House, they've also made themselves at home in DC with visits to chic city eateries, cultural attractions and neighborhood staples.

Now unofficially dubbed the "Capital of Cool," it sheds new light on the District's appeal as a modern, cosmopolitan city.

## Whatever, Whenever

An epitome of the Capital of Cool is W Hotel DC, where Italian Renaissance meets modern class. Next to the White House and minutes away from Capitol Hill, the Washington Monument, the Smithsonian and major corporate offices, you can take in the view at POV Lounge and Terrace.

Feel the buzz and get your bearings from this vantage point as some of the nation's most important landmarks are all around you at the POV rooftop terrace. It's almost a 360° horizon view and on a sunny day, fabulous sunsets await.



Adam's Morgan Restaurant & Bar

to see and explore documents, maps, films and photographs of both national events and the lives of individual Americans.

- The National Mall

Officially, the National Mall is a swath of green space that begins at 3rd Street and stretches to 14th Street (W Hotel is on 15th Street). Visitors and locals, however, widely use the term to refer to the entire expanse of monuments and museums, from the grounds of the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial. The area often plays host to concerts, rallies, festivals, as well as frisbee matches, family outings and picnics.

Lincoln Memorial, one of DC's most familiar landmarks, honours its 16th President, Abraham Lincoln. Architect Henry Bacon designed the Greek temple and the trademark Lincoln statue was sculpted by Daniel Chester French, the Chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts.

Above the temple's 38 columns are the names of the 36 states that were in the Union at the time of Lincoln's death in 1865. Murals sculpted by Jules Guerin adorn the temple's inner walls. On the south wall is Emancipation, hanging above the inscription of the Gettysburg Address. On the north wall hangs Unification, above Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.

**Daytrip to George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens**

Since 1860, over 80 million visitors have made George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens one of the most popular historic homes in America.

A picturesque drive to the southern end of the scenic George Washington Memorial Parkway, Mount Vernon is located just 25km from the nation's capital.

Today, the Estate has been restored to its former glory, and upon exiting the orientation theatres, visitors pass through an outdoor gathering and transition space that serves as the "foyer" into the walk to the historic pastures – a gentle, woodland path.

The "Woodland Walk" immerses visitors in the landscape and beauty of the Estate, while giving specific views to orient them and built anticipation for their ultimate destination that

is the Mansion.

Admission fees at Mount Vernon are in support of the Estate's operation and restoration.

**Leesburg Corner Premium Outlets**

After all that history, include some easy-going (I hope) shopping into your itinerary.

The cosy Leesburg Corner Premium Outlets has a tour bus drop-off point at the car park. Despite it being off-season, single- or double-storey individual shops in a cluster, you can find very decent stuff here, at half, or more, the prices. Here, you can bag heavily discounted summer-wear right into autumn, larger than Singapore shoe sizes and, get this, off-season Coach bags and accessories between US\$39 and US\$99.

Based on my travels, I've observed that while some of these off-season outlets work, others don't, due to the lack of competitive pricing and insufficient range. Fortunately, as with most things I observe in Washington, local brands put up a pretty good show here. If you are used to European brands, you might want to familiarise yourself with a predominantly American shopping experience before heading to the US.

At Leesburg, outlets include Adidas, Coach, the Cosmetics Company, Diesel, DKNY, Gap, Guess, Kate Spade, Levi's, Liz Clairborne, Maiden Form, Nike, Nine West, OshKosh B'gosh, Tommy Hilfiger Kids, Polo Ralph Lauren, True Religion, Vitamin World, Yankee Candle and many, many more.

**The Culinary Capital**

Known for its power lunches and elegant state dinners, a dizzying number of new eateries have opened up alongside perennial favorites, and it is safe to say that DC has arrived as a foodie city.

- The Power Spots and DC: the Sandwich City  
If you are eager to mingle with the



C&O Canal Georgetown

Washington's Whatever/Whenever philosophy, the first amendment of luxury, pampers guests with "whatever they want, whenever they want it", and Marketing Manager Kaitlyn Ferrara is quick to add, "Even if it means filling your bathtub with pizza."

Rooms are designed by Diana Wong, sleek in shades of black and white, accentuated with purple. Whether loosening that tie in your power suit or slipping into something more comfortable, mod it up on shaggy carpeting or spy on views of the city, from behind pearl drapes, of course.

**All Culture, Not A Thing to Pay**

Of notable mention are many of DC's cultural and historical attractions, as well as historic monuments and memorials that are free and open seven days a week to the public (note closure on public holidays though).

- The National Archives

The National Archives, in downtown DC, is intriguing with the Rotunda displaying the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence.

Needless to say, this is America, so any building that qualifies as a museum or the like will be well-architected with its trove of treasures presented in tip-top interiors for the public's benefit. Besides formal documents, the National Archives also houses 300,000 rolls of film, and of special interest are the Public Vaults, an interactive exhibit where visitors get

media, spot a Senator or rub elbows with a Representative, check out these power spots.

Near the White House, the Willard InterContinental Washington's Round Robin Bar serves up a menu of "All the President's Cocktails," listing the libations of choice of all men who have held the highest office.

On Capitol Hill, lively bars and restaurants welcome a continuous stream of notable political figures, staffers and interns. Capitol Hill's "first table cloth restaurant", The Monocle, set the stage for the neighbourhood's power dining reputation when it opened in 1960 as the closest restaurant to the Senate side of the Capitol complex. JFK was an early fan, frequently requesting roast beef sandwiches to be delivered to the White House.

Alternatively, grab a sandwich on the go. You can't go wrong at most of DC's sandwich joints, serving up warm bread with saucy meat ball bolognaise or crunchy onion and steak filling. Ask for a dash of mustard for a tangy twist.

- International Cuisine

Thanks to DC's large Latin American population, South and Central American cooking traditions are well represented on the District's menus. Diners frequently stop for pupusas and empanadas, or meat and vegetable-stuffed pastries, at casual storefronts in the Adams Morgan and Columbia Heights neighbourhoods.

### Get Cosy at the Waterfront

I think aloud that this ang moh city is unexpectedly humid, and an American friend quips, "Don't you know our capital is built on swampland?" Pretty much the same concept as Singapore having once been a fishing village.

Here, broad vistas of lush greenery, stunning in autumn, line the Potomac River. If you want to get up close and personal with this River that locals speak affectionately about, head to National Harbor, rising from the banks of the Potomac just south of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, a 15-minute drive from downtown DC.

National Harbor is a 300-acre, mixed-used development that includes five hotels, like the colossal Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center, the largest such facility on the East Coast; tree-lined promenades with scores of shops and offices, two marinas and much more.

For residents and visitors, National Harbor offers restaurants, entertainment and homes within steps of the water. Eateries include Ketchup, with hearty clam chowder, Bond 45, Ben & Jerry's and a gelateria.

There are quite a few art shops, with at least

one doubling up as a store with drinks going for US\$1. This means the shop has a humble beginning and with a keen eye, who knows?

- Aloft Washington National Harbor Rates for Aloft Washington National Harbor are market-driven, averaging US\$125 per night (rates may differ according to season). The competitive rate for this über-cool hotel is partly attributed to its "select-service" concept, which means you have to get your own luggage up to your room. Select-service hotels have traditionally been defined as totally unmemorable – dim lighting, low ceilings, heavy traditional furniture and polyester comforters on the bed.

Aloft Washington National Harbor reinvents the select-service market, with a centerpiece, ultra-comfortable plush platform bed, loft-like nine-foot ceilings and oversized windows that create a bright, airy environment. Large, stylish bathrooms complement the guest experience with walk-in showers featuring rainfall showerheads and signature bath amenities created by Bliss® Spa.

The rooms exhibit a calming palette with touches of blue and purple. Guests will be delighted to find that beds represent the style in many downtown lofts, with crisp, white cotton sheets and duvets. No polyester here!

Aloft Washington National Harbor has been open over a year, but it looks completely new, having lost not an inch of swank. And at this select-service hotel, everything works, including the gym, a 24/7 grab and go pantry and the front desk, dubbed Aloha! Desk.

### How to Get There?

Qatar Airways is one of the few carriers in the world that flies to Washington DC every day, via the Singapore-Doha-Doha-Washington DC route.

While in transit, the 90 million Premium Terminal in Doha is a cosy yet classy stop to

Blue cheese breakfast pizza at DC Guesthouse



Aloft Lobby during the night



The award-winning Qatar Airways



unwind, with fully-stocked cocktail and drinks bars, chef-attended dining features and personalised reminders from staff that your flight for Washington DC is close to departure.

The award-winning Qatar Airways emerged a strong third among 200 airlines in the Skytrax Airline of the Year Award 2010. And in a hotly contested category, Qatar Airways won the "Best Onboard Catering Business Class".

If you sleep through the breakfast, lunch, dinner or supper course on Business Class, you can wake up to "Indulgence" on a separate menu. Indulge in blue-vein and cheddar cheese platters, humous, salmon, and other delectables with fine wines and champagne at any time.

**SMA**