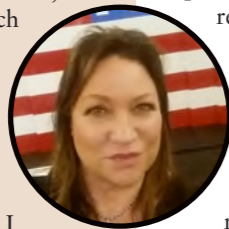


# CITY OF DREAMS



**Norah Casey** strolls through the corridors of The White House, meditates with a Buddhist monk and dons stilettos for the annual drag queen high heel race in America's capital of cool.

It's day one in Washington and I am starting the morning with a meditation session at 7am with the Dalai Lama's right hand man, Matthieu Ricard, French author and Buddhist monk whose claim to fame is that he is the happiest man in the world. It was quite something to contemplate the meaning of life in his presence.



At the other end of the day I found myself in a swirl of beautiful, bejewelled men, also very happy – the theatrical drag queens who compete in the annual High Heel Race at Dupont. In between, I strolled the rooms of the White House, stood in the spot where Martin Luther King made his famous 1963 'I have a dream' speech and sat dwarfed by Abe Lincoln as he gazed in perpetual reflection at the Washington Monument. It only took 24 hours to come to the conclusion that Washington DC is cool.

And it's not just me who thinks so, because last year *Forbes* listed the nation's capital as America's coolest city. It came as a bit of a surprise to many who harbour easily acquired misconceptions about one of the world's most familiar on-screen cities. Your Washington might well be the testosterone-fuelled political corridors where Frank Underwood plots Michaelvillian-like revenge on opponents or a White House where Jed Bartlet saves the free world in every episode of *The West Wing*, or maybe it's a Washington

immortalised in Hollywood movies such as *All the President's Men* or *Patriot Games*. I too had my preconceptions, mostly built up over years of watching those all-too-recognisable facades whether it's the front steps of the White House, the dome of the United States Capitol or the home of espionage, the FBI's J Edgar Hoover Building on Pennsylvania Avenue.

I love cities that have a strong rhythm. Some, like Shanghai, have the ability to change your momentum. When I land there I feel like I've been catapulted at warp-speed into a futuristic urban hive of adrenaline fuelled hyper-activity. On the other hand most Italian cities make me consciously take a step back from the frenzy. Wandering aimlessly in beautiful streets and lingering over a lovely Chianti seems the thing to do.

Washington has a unique tempo. On the one hand it is the culturally significant stately home of national treasures, not to mention the President, Congress, the Supreme Court, the Smithsonian museums, the iconic statues of the National Mall, and many more must-see sights. A strong magnet for a city break for those reasons alone. But what sets it apart from being a worthy if a little dull

school tour destination is that it is also home to the polar opposite. It harbours a young, vibrant, culturally diverse underbelly where new talent in music, the arts and gastronomy is verging on the experimental. Previously no-go areas are emerging as hip new neighbourhoods with a raw energy and edgy vibe that I have experienced in few cities (Berlin feels close). As one resident said, the only riots some of these streets see now are the ones to get into the hottest new restaurant.

So it was that my first day – mixing ancient meditation with a stroll through the White House and finishing with a drag queen race on six inch stilettos – turned out to be not so unusual for Washington.

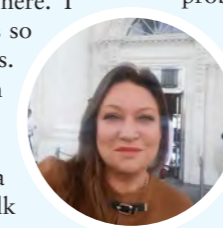


## What to see



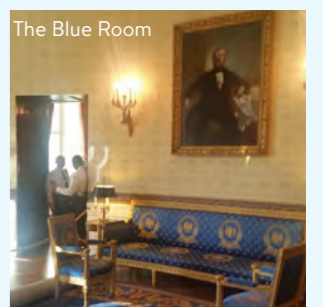
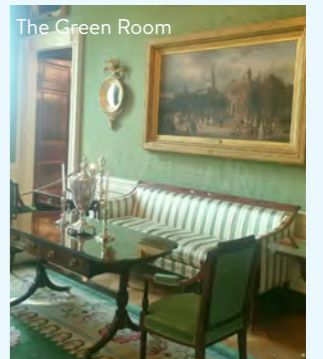
### THE WHITE HOUSE

The highlight of my four-day visit to Washington was definitely the chance to visit the White House. It's not that easy to get inside since 9/11 and I was grateful for this once-in-a-lifetime glimpse at the spectacular rooms and corridors – well, me and the Secret Service men dotted everywhere. I joked to a friend afterwards that it was so big they had to colour code the rooms. There's a stunning Blue Room with furniture dating back to 1814 which is home to the White House Christmas tree. The Green Room is now used as a parlor and the walls are draped with silk



with a beautiful white marble mantle. The First Lady's favourite, and also mine, is the Red Room now used as a reception room. It was remarkably informal once we went through the security hurdles, the atmosphere is relaxed (even with all that weaponry in evidence) and we browsed from room to room taking pictures (you are only allowed enter with a phone and passport). The corridors are adorned with artwork and photographs of past Presidents, First Ladies and visiting dignitaries, and rooms like the State Dining Room are set out as though ready to use at a moment's notice. You can imagine the current and former inhabitants of this grand home sitting by the fire in the Library or greeting guests for cocktails amongst the gilded silver of The Vermeil Room. Much of the White House exterior and interior remains as it was when it was first designed by Irishman James Hoban in the 1790s. Since then it has been home to many who proudly proclaim their Irish ancestry – 22 presidents in total and chief among them our own John F Kennedy. But others who claim Irish roots include Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton and the current President, Barack Obama.

There are some things you know you will probably never get a chance to do again and this was one of them. Currently White House visits are suspended but monitor the official website ([whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov)) for news of that being lifted. Irish citizens must go through the Irish Embassy in Washington ([dfa.ie/irish-embassy/usa](http://dfa.ie/irish-embassy/usa)).



### THE BEST SIGHTS

The best thing about Washington is that almost all of its attractions are concentrated in an area known as the National Mall that runs from the Potomac River to Capitol Hill. At the western end of The Mall is the United States Capitol (with the Library of Congress and the Supreme Court tucked in behind it).

At the mid-way point is the towering Washington Memorial seen from almost every point in the city – just north of it is the White House. From the Washington Monument to the eastern point runs the majestic long reflecting pool leading to the awesome sight of the Lincoln Memorial. Continuing eastwards from Lincoln you will cross the Potomac River to visit Arlington Cemetery and the changing of the National Guards and nearby the familiar outline of the Pentagon.

The city was designed by a Frenchman Pierre Charles L'Enfant and the grand avenues, thousands of elm trees and Chinese cherry blossoms add to the streetscape beauty.



### MONUMENTS & ICONIC BUILDINGS

We did a drive through of the Mall to get our bearings on the first day and see the sights from a distance. Dara and I went back to spend longer wandering through the more spectacular monuments including the Lincoln Memorial (and the scene of Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech), the Korean War Veterans Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Jefferson Memorial. Make a trip at night to see a totally different ethereal beauty to these illuminated icons. We walked from the Washington Memorial to the United States Capitol which will give you a great feel for the city, including some cool people watching especially around the Library of Congress and the Supreme Court (both of which you can visit). ▶

## MUSEUMS

One of Washington's great treasures is The Smithsonian ([si.edu](http://si.edu)), the world's largest collection of museums (19 at present), the National Zoological Park and nine research facilities. It is government owned and free to all. The Mall is overwhelming to the first time visitor so plan ahead or better still take a guide. We chose Fiat Luxe Tours ([fiatluxetours.com](http://fiatluxetours.com)), who came recommended by Destination DC and had the knowledgeable founder Andrew Rawls to hand-pick our experiences and keep us entertained with insights, facts and anecdotes along the way.

The National Museum of American History was a fantastic experience. The history of the Star Spangled Banner and the original flag that inspired it shares space with cinematic artefacts like Dorothy's ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz* and sporting memorabilia like Muhammad Ali's boxing gloves. Inventions like Alexander Bell's big box telephone features along with the first steam engine, a gallery of dresses worn by the First Ladies and Abraham Lincoln's top hat. It's a heady miscellany with something to suit all tastes and the Stars and Stripes café is a good stop off for lunch (try the cheese curds!).

The Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum also on the National Mall is an amazing collection of aviation and space exhibits from the first successful aircraft, the 1903 Wright Flyer through to some 3,500 artefacts from the Apollo II mission when astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin made history by taking those first steps on the moon on July 20, 1969. You can see the command module, Columbia, where the



three astronauts lived for most of that mission and which orbited the moon with astronaut Michael Collins. You can even touch a real life lunar rock. This is every aviation nerd and space geek's dream place. Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St Louis, a host of drones, satellites and various lunar modules are all on show. You can take simulated flights, surf the solar system in the planetarium and catch a *3D Journey into Space* at the IMAX theatre.

We visited The Spy Museum ([spymuseum.org](http://spymuseum.org)), not part of The Smithsonian and one of the few with an admission fee, \$21 each). Think James Bond and espionage inspired exhibits. We weren't that taken with it and after the first few rooms we raced through to escape but younger children may find it more appealing.

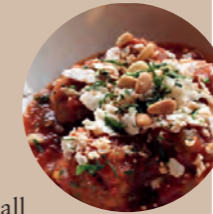
One crisp cold morning we headed to The National Zoo on Connecticut Avenue and spent a blissful few hours walking through this lovely tree-filled park catching those animals brave enough to venture out into the chill Washington air. One of the highlights is the four giant pandas, adults Tian Tian and Mei Xiang who gave birth to a female Bao Bao two years ago and twins in August – one sadly died but the other, Bei Bei, is thriving. You can see the progress of mum and baby on a cool Panda Cam on the zoo's website ([nationalzoo.si.edu](http://nationalzoo.si.edu)).

## THE CONCIERGE CHOICE

We were lucky enough to have one of the best guiding us through our restaurant choices during our stay. Michael High, Chef Concierge at The Dupont Circle, makes it his business to know Washington's fast moving food scene. He was a godsend. Here he shares his top five.

### 1 TICO

Tico is my top pick because of its fresh, organic ingredients and exotic meats like duck heart skewers. The decor is open space with street graffiti murals on the Walls. Street meets cool with a Latin twist. They have one of the best happy hours on 14th Street. Try the scallop ceviche – that's all I'm saying. [ticodc.com](http://ticodc.com)



### 2 Ghibellina

Ghibellina is another gem on the 14th Street corridor. This Italian eatery has a very rustic feel as far as décor and menu. Casual, yet sophisticated. The sweet potato gnocchi is sublime. [ghibellinadc.com](http://ghibellinadc.com)



### 3 GARRISON

Sometimes you hear terms that after a while sound a bit overused. 'Farm to table' has become one of mine, but in the case of Garrison it takes that ethos to a whole new level. I'm a steak man, so the Bison Hanger Steak did it for me. Although I'm not a person who typically likes beets, I thoroughly surprised by the flavour it added to the steak.



### 4 BARCELONA

Barcelona is a 'scene', the kind of place where you automatically like you're that 'It' person for the evening. Their charcuterie's everything you would expect, but it's their marinated mussels that are my weakness. [barcelonadc.com](http://barcelonadc.com)



NORAH RECOMMENDS

### 5 LE DIPLOMATE

The only reason I have this amazing French bistro at number five is because it's a chain, but an extremely well done one. From the impeccable service to the casual fare, this location on 14th street is a definitive destination. If you can get in for brunch, you've got to try the pâté, it truly is to die for. [lediplomatedc.com](http://lediplomatedc.com)



### 6 DENSON

This is my 'off the beaten path' place to go. Denson is a modern speakeasy with a cool *Great Gatsby* vibe to it. The décor uses actual Prohibition era style fixtures throughout. Their drinks menu is predominately Prohibition era drinks, updated. It's dark, sexy and very secluded. If you're in Washington, DC you have to go! [densondc.com](http://densondc.com)



## Where to eat

### MOST EXPERIMENTAL: MAKETTO

Destination DC's Vanessa Casas took me to the eclectic Maketto – one of the new hip eateries re-energising the previously no-go H Street area. It's a strange mix of Asian fusion restaurant, bar, café and clothing store. The interior blends from bar to patio to open kitchen with dinner seating throughout. Food is Cambodian and Taiwanese served on small plates (as it is tapas style) or large plates – all served family style. Take the plunge and order some Khmer sausage, braised beef tongue or pig's trotters.

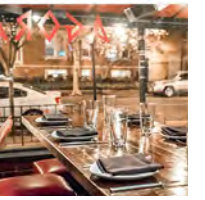
Maketto; 1351 H St. NE. 001 202-838-9972; [askusanything@maketto1351.com](mailto:askusanything@maketto1351.com); [maketto1351.com](http://maketto1351.com).



### NEIGHBOURHOOD CHOICE: AGORA

Our hotel, The Dupont Circle, was perfectly located for some great bars and restaurants within a short walking distance. I ventured out to meet a friend who lived a few blocks from the hotel and she took me to a great neighbourhood favourite, a Turkish/Greek tapas restaurant and bar called Agora. Great small plates and Mezes including tasty fresh olive oil from the family farm in Turkey, taramasalata, falafel, various fish and meat Dolma and Borek. A lovely fun atmosphere.

Agora, 1527 17th Street NW Washington DC 20036; +2023326767; [agoradc.net](http://agoradc.net)



### BEST VIEW: POV, W HOTEL

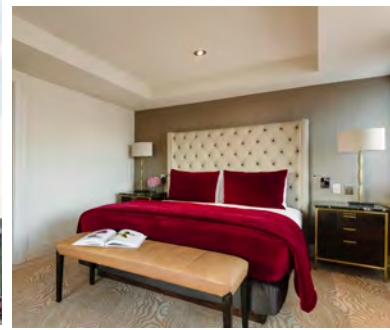
The best view has to be the POV lounge on the rooftop at the W Hotel with up close views of the top floors of The White House. We had been told your could see the snipers on the roof and while it seemed all clear the day we were there, the waiter told us the President had just left by helicopter. Great views of the Washington Memorial and the city stretched out on either side.

W Hotel, 515 15th St NW, Washington, DC 20004; +1 202-661-2400; [washingtondc.com/pov](http://washingtondc.com/pov)



### Norah's top tip

Top choice for me would have to be Garrison which gives as much reverence to fresh vegetables as to meat. Chef Rob Weland has received numerous accolades since opening and the restaurant appears on multiple hot lists. We were tempted by a flavoursome Virginia Bison Tartare, a soothing sweet corn tortellini, foraged mushrooms, roasted cauliflower and some creamy hake with an earthy herb crust. Great buzz, warm staff and a Hendricks martini with a punch made for a memorable evening. Garrison; 524 8th St SE; Washington, D.C. 20003; (202) 506-2445; [info@garrissondc.com](mailto:info@garrissondc.com); [www.garrissondc.com](http://www.garrissondc.com)



# Where to stay THE DUPONT CIRCLE HOTEL

**W**e stayed in a home from home at The Dupont Circle Hotel, part of the Irish-owned Doyle Collection. I cannot recommend it highly enough. This hotel has everything – a great location, wonderful team, well-appointed rooms, one of the hippest bars in DC and the coolest decor to match. We stayed in the luxurious Level Nine in a spacious and stylish suite with expansive window and balcony views of the dramatic skyline. A wonderful personal guest relations manager, Cole Kelly, minded us throughout our stay. It was a pleasure to return each evening to complimentary drinks and canapés in the lounge, catching up on gossip from the Hill – Donald Trump featured largely in most conversations.

Dara made good use of the free Wi-Fi while I found myself lingering with staff at all levels who chatted amiably about all manner of subjects from Washington's homelessness problem with the doorman to the vibrant art scene with the charming Mark T Roche-Garland the General Manager. Mark, an Irish man married to a Washington woman, was in the know about all manner of things in the city – a great resource for activities and sights.

The ever present and ever attentive hotel manager Alan Mahoney (also Irish!) was always on hand to guide us in our attempts to squeeze in everything possible in a few days and Chef Concierge Michael High was an enthusiastic and knowledgeable gourmand who organised restaurants and offered hints and foodie news. I was only sorry that I couldn't visit all of Michael's recommendations so I asked him to give me his top five restaurants to pass on. What Michael didn't know,

Matthew Peschke in the marketing and communications department made up for – great attention to detail and nothing was too much trouble. As always, I am heroing the staff. If you travel as much as I do you appreciate the people more than anything. If someone asks me what the hotel was like in any given place, I am more likely to tell them about the staff who made an impression rather than the quality of the bed linen or the toiletries (both are superb by the way!).

You can't beat the location at The Dupont Circle, virtually every major attraction is walkable or a short metro or taxi ride away. Within a few blocks there were great restaurants and bars and we walked around the neighbourhood most nights to soak up the atmosphere. We had breakfast at the Café Dupont where the people watching was as good as the eggs Benedict and rubbed shoulders with congressmen and legal eagles.

Perhaps the biggest surprise at The Dupont Circle is the bar – it's not often that a hotel boasts one of the hippest bars in a city spoiled for choice like Washington. Almost every evening we were there Bar Dupont was packed with standing room only. Great cocktails and an al fresco terrace adds to the attraction and the staff told me they regularly have to close the doors on busy evenings because it's so full.

As well as The Dupont Circle, the Irish family-owned Doyle Collection has eight hotels including the Westbury in Dublin and others in London, Cork and Bristol. **IT**

*The Dupont Circle; 1500 New Hampshire Avenue NW, Washington DC, United States 20036; +1 202 483 6000; dupont@doylecollection.com; doylecollection.com*



## HOW TO GET THERE

We travelled with United Airlines who fly direct from Dublin to Washington, DC Dulles airport (a great hub if you were thinking of a two-centre holiday). It is fantastic to be able to fly direct, clear customs in Dublin and arrive in the shortest flying time possible. I flew Business Class (BusinessFirst) with United while Dara flew Economy (in the interests of trying both out of course!). Dublin to Washington is not a long flight - just under eight hours there and a bit less than seven hours back. BusinessFirst is a nice treat with fully reclining seats and all the pampering and personalised service you would expect. I plugged in my laptop, got a head start on my writing and the journey just flew by. Dara (who's six foot two) reported good leg room in economy, he delved into as many movies as he could watch, enjoyed the food and slept most of the return journey. At the time of writing, return fares in Economy from Dublin to Washington, DC start from €480 (including taxes, November 2015). Return fares in BusinessFirst from Dublin to Washington, DC start from €1650 (including taxes). For latest prices, visit [united.com](http://united.com) or call 1890 925 252.

**With thanks to Canon for providing cameras.**