

Two-wheel Travel Best Way to Tour the Nation's Capital
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As tough as traffic can be in the nation's capital, you might think a person would be nuts to tackle it on a bicycle. Or maybe not.

On a Bike the Sites tour of the National Mall, we found getting around on a bicycle in the nation's capital to be about as easy as, well, falling off a bike—maybe easier, because everyone in our group finished the 8-mile route, and no one fell off.

Because we were on bicycles, we were able to take paths that cars can't travel. Crosswalks allowed us to safely navigate busy intersections. Distances that stretch too long for a comfortable walk from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial were just about perfect for a nice, stop-and-go bike ride called the Capital Sites.

The only hill to speak of was the gentle rise to the base of the Washington Monument. Almost everything else was flat, flat, flat, which was good news to someone like me who'd only ridden a bike once all year. The only time I faltered was on the final slight ascent from the Jefferson Memorial to 14th Street. That's where I grabbed at a fence to pull myself along when we cyclists left the paved path to go around some pedestrians. I was at the end of our little line, and as I explained to the people I passed, it was easy to see why.

With me were my two teenagers and two twenty-something Washington residents, one of whom was checking out the city as she began a yearlong job as a nanny. All of them were more proficient on a bicycle, but I was good enough.

"It's for the occasional exerciser," said Stephen Marks, owner of Bike the Sites. "There's no real long distance that we ride. I wouldn't call myself an avid cyclist, though I'm definitely bicycling more now than I used to. I'm beginning to appreciate how friendly the city is to bicycling and how important it is to bicycle. It's good exercise and [causes] no pollution."

People who want a more demanding ride can travel 12 miles over and under the Bridges of Washington. The most challenging ride is a 45-mile round trip to Mount Vernon.

Marks bought the business in November from its founder, a dedicated cyclist who started with 10 bikes carried around in a station wagon for tours. The company now has more than 100 bikes and a very visible kiosk and office at the Old Post Office Pavilion on 12th Street just north of the Mall.

In addition to organizing the guided tours, which are limited to 15 riders or fewer, the office also rents bicycles to people who'd like to tour on their own. All tours and rentals include a helmet and bottle of water as well as a mountain bike with a cushy comfort seat.

On our three-hour Capital Sites ride, we didn't go into the museums and monuments along the Mall, but we did get the inside story that would help us decide where we might

want spend more of our time. Tips and quips from our tour guide Andrew Snow ranged from which museum entrance is the quickest to which museum restaurant is tastiest to where's the best chance of finding a parking space or a bathroom.

For the quickest entrance, he said, to try Constitution Avenue or Independence Avenue. The lines to go through security are usually shorter on those street sides, because tour groups are required to enter from the Mall.

The best restaurant in a museum may be Cascades at the National Gallery of Art, he said. The food is pretty good, and a waterfall creates nice ambience.

The likeliest places to find street parking, he said, are Jefferson and Madison drives, which run along the front of the museums on the Mall side. We could have used that tip earlier, because we got tired of looking before we found a parking space and ended up paying for a garage. Even better would have been to take the Metro to the Federal Triangle stop.

The bathroom quest only becomes a problem before the museums open at 10 a.m. That's when it's handy to know that the Smithsonian Castle opens at 9, "which means it has the only public bathroom available from 9 to 10 a.m.," he said.

A student at George Washington University, Snow knows how handy such tidbits can be. But he was also full of information on the important stuff. My teenagers were surprised at how much they learned and how entertaining it was.

"It was a lot more personal" than a bus tour, said the 17-year-old.

"I liked all the symbolism," the 14-year-old added. "At the Vietnam War Memorial, it's amazing how much symbolism could be packed into a wall."

As students, they also liked the story of how a student won the Vietnam Memorial commission over her professor. Maya Lin had entered her design as a class project, and her professor wasn't impressed with her idea of a below-grade granite wall etched with the names of the dead. She entered the competitions anyway, and her design was chosen over his.

"It's a very untraditional memorial," Snow said. Some veterans weren't much happier than the professor, so a more traditional sculpture of three soldiers was added several years later. Her original design gets most of the attention, though. Visitors pause to make a rubbing of the name of someone they knew. They leave notes or flowers.

"The reflective nature of the granite — you see your own face," Snow pointed out. "Everyone's face is on that wall. Everyone played a role in it. If you stand in the center, you're 6 feet below ground, the same depth we bury our soldiers."

Symbolism also plays a big role in the Lincoln and Roosevelt memorials.

Lincoln is surrounded by 36 columns for the 36 states in the union when he was president. The number of steps leading up to the memorial is 87, for the “four score and seven years” of his Gettysburg Address. Not all is somber, though.

“That kid is timing himself to see how fast he can go up the stairs,” Snow pointed out.

And over to the other side, where people were standing on top of the plaques for Alaska and Hawaii, there’s a lesson to be learned, he said. Emblems of the other 48 states surround Lincoln’s statue high on the entablature, but Alaska and Hawaii weren’t added to the United States until after the memorial was completed.

It goes to show, he said, “If you are late for the party you will be walked over for all eternity.”

Lincoln’s memorial may be the focus of the next battle on the Mall, he said, now that the World War II memorial is settled in its location at the reflecting pool. One group wants to add a small plaque at the spot where Martin Luther King gave his “I have a dream” speech; another says that the monument honors Lincoln, not the rallies that have occurred at his memorial.

At the FDR memorial, symbolism flows with the water rushing over the falls. At the beginning, to represent the years when Roosevelt was bringing the nation out of the Depression, the flow is in an orderly pattern. By the end, when the nation was embroiled in WWII, the water takes a jagged path over jumbled rocks as if an explosion had hit.

A wheelchair caused controversy here. Since Roosevelt didn’t like to be seen in a wheelchair, the monument originally didn’t include one. Advocates for the disabled protested, and a wheelchair statue was added later to show how he coped with legs weakened by polio.

As we passed museums along the Mall, we heard a bit about the must-see attractions in each, such as the Hope Diamond at the national Museum of History and the Wright Brother’s airplane at Air and Space.

At the National Gallery of Art, the museum building itself is one of the exhibits. I.M. Pei designed the East Wing with a 19-degree angle to reflect its triangular site. “If you’re going to put art on my walls, I’m going to make my walls art,” Snow said as he paraphrased the architect’s intent.

“It’s one of the sharpest angles in a building anywhere in the world. It’s not very practical at all. He knew it was going to be used as a museum, so he might as well make it interesting.”

Each of us had the chance to stand at that angle, hold on and look up to fully appreciate the sharp line. “We say ‘hold on’ because we’ve had a couple people fall over,” Snow said.

“The world’s second largest mobile is in here, by [Alexander] Calder. The largest is just down the street in the Hart Senate Building. The two largest mobiles in the world are just

a few blocks from each other. If America's not great because of that, I just don't know what's going on."

Such silliness endeared him to kids young and old. And it also made the information stick. With exercise to boot, what more could you want from a tour?