

Why Hike it? Bike It
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Even dedicated bicyclists could find themselves unprepared for this 2-hour, 15-stop nighttime bike tour of Washington—but not because they're out of shape. The magnificent views of monuments and memorials can virtually knock riders off their seats.

My family took a tour with Bike the Sites, a local company headquartered in the Old Post Office Pavilion near the Mall. It does brisk tourist business; the night of our tour we were joined by riders from Pennsylvania, Alabama, Wisconsin, New Jersey and South Carolina. It was easy to see why out-of-town visitors would benefit from either the Sites@Nite tour or its daytime equivalent. It is an efficient yet leisurely way to view the city's top tourist attractions, from the White House to the new National World War II Memorial. And the price includes the use of a bike and a helmet.

Kyle Ray, who worked in the District 20 years ago, brought his kids—Mason, 14 and Megayn, 11—from near Milwaukee for their spring vacation. He signed up for the bike tour because he thought it would be a great way to get acclimated to the city. “It turned out to be a perfect avenue to build the rest of the week around.”

The Walker family from Philadelphia took the tour at the tail end of their spring break. It was well worth the trip for 11-year-old Jackson, who had been waiting all week to catch a glimpse of the White House. “We never could have seen all that we did if we had been walking.” Jackson said.

“It was probably the only time the whole week I didn't feel like a tourist. Well I felt like a tourist, but a very hip one,” said his mother, Rebecca.

There is definitely a major cool factor to taking in the sites on two wheels, rather than four. People pointed at us, called out to us, and (most of the time) moved out of the way when they saw us coming. We traveled single file, our group of 30 outfitted in bright orange reflective vests and ranging in age from 4 (on a tandem tag-along model) to fifty-something adults. The tour covers a lot of territory: all the major monuments, as well as Federal Triangle, the Korean War Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the FDR Memorial, and Constitutional Gardens. Our guides—Bike the Sites owners Stephen and Janna Marks and George Washington University student Andrew Snow—stopped traffic whenever we crossed a street and entertained us with trivia at every intersection and attraction.

We learned that the canal keeper's house at Constitution Avenue and 17th street NW was once occupied by a family of 12 and that in the early days of the Washington Monument, the elevator was considered to risky for women. They had to walk up. Men, on the other hand, were offered beer or whiskey as they rode up “to calm their nerves.”

Nothing appealed to the young riders more than our stop at the oversized statue of Albert Einstein, near the National Academy of Science. Our guides demonstrated how to produce an impressive echo from a spot in front of the sculpture. That and the

opportunity to climb all over Albert (which is not only allowed but encouraged) were a highlight of the trip for both out-of-towners and locals. So was the FDR Memorial, where we spent at least 15 minutes walking through the different outdoor “rooms,” which were designed to reflect Roosevelt’s four terms in office.

For Sarah Snider of Northwest, “the best thing was being able to get so close to the monuments so easily.” Snider also liked seeing the city as dusk turned to dark, when everything begins to glow.

Her daughter, 10-year-old Leah, agreed, using the Jefferson Monument as an example. “During the day, it just looks like a building. If you were walking down the street, you’d think it was just a big Greek building. But at night, when it’s all lit up, you definitely know it’s a special place.”

Besides the views, there are several obvious advantages to biking at night. The air is cooler, there is less pedestrian traffic around the monuments, and it is easier to find a parking space.

It was past 9:30 p.m. when we reached the Mall and the final leg of our journey. At that point, there was no need for the running commentary or historical trivia. Our single line morphed into a mass of bikers who sprinted towards the finish line as our nocturnal jaunt came to an end against the backdrop of the Capitol, Smithsonian Castle and Washington Monument.