

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA • VOLUME 4

50 Activities

Washington, DC

A Family Activity Guide

Free museums • Timed passes • River woods • The walk nobody measures

FREE SAMPLE · PAGE NUMBERS REFER TO THE FULL GUIDE

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FROM THE EDITOR

A city that gives almost everything away, and still asks you to plan

Washington is the easiest major American city to visit cheaply with children and one of the hardest to visit well. Nearly all of the headline attractions cost nothing: the Smithsonian museums, the monuments, the National Zoo. A family can fill four days here and pay for little beyond parking, food and fares.

What that free access hides is a layer of machinery. Three Smithsonian locations in Washington require a free timed-entry pass and the rest do not, which is a distinction almost nobody gets right the first time. The Washington Monument elevator needs a timed ticket that releases thirty days ahead and disappears. The Capitol runs guided tours only. The zoo changes its closing time by two hours on September 15.

“In most cities the question is what you can afford. In Washington it is what you can get into, and when.”

This guide is organised around that. Every entry leads with why a family would choose it, then with the one detail that could change the decision. Fifty outings, seven sections, five paced itineraries, and a map.

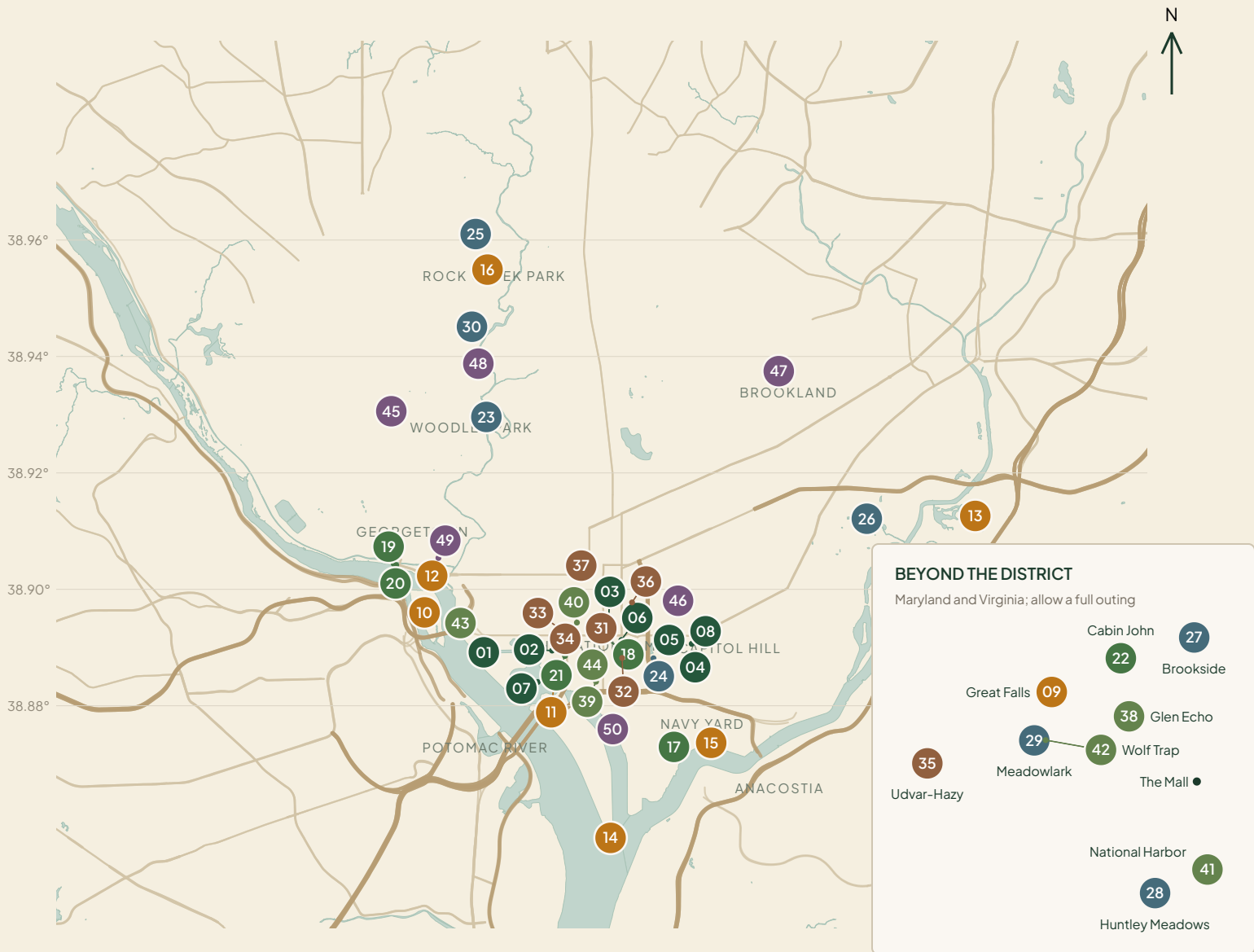


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EDITOR, KIDPATHS WASHINGTON, DC

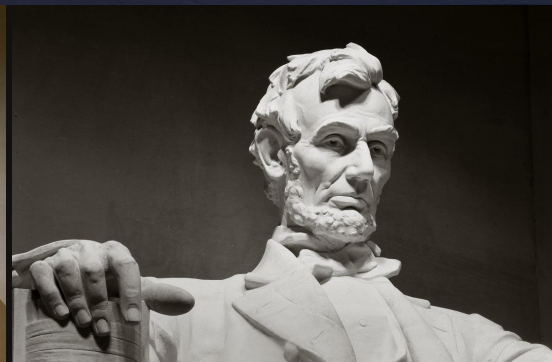
Find Your Next Stop

THE DISTRICT, ITS RIVERS AND THE OUTINGS BEYOND IT



Roads & water: U.S. Census Bureau, TIGERweb · Dots mark locations; leaders separate labels

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01 • FEATURED VENUE • SECTION 01

The Lincoln Memorial and the Reflecting Pool

Best for 3–12 National Mall Free

★ 4.8 (54,000+ reviews)

Every family visiting Washington goes to the Lincoln Memorial. The decision worth making is not whether, but when, and almost everyone gets it wrong by going at midday with everyone else.

The memorial is open twenty-four hours a day and costs nothing. It is lit at night. At nine in the evening the steps are quiet enough to sit on, the chamber is close to empty, the temperature has dropped, and the view back down the Reflecting Pool toward the Washington Monument is the best it gets all day. At one in the afternoon in July, the same place is a slow-moving crowd on unshaded stone at ninety-five degrees, and a six-year-old will remember only the heat.

The geography is worth stating plainly, because the Mall is drawn on maps in a way that badly understates its size. From the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol is about two miles of open ground with very little shade. A family that treats the Mall as a walkable block will lose an afternoon to it.

From the memorial, the Korean War Veterans Memorial and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall are both a few minutes' walk, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial and the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial sit along the Tidal Basin to the southeast. All are free, all are open around the clock, and the FDR Memorial is the one built around waterfalls.

Insider Tips

- ▶ Make it the last stop of the day, after dinner, so nobody is racing a closing time to get there.
- ▶ It is a long flight of steps to the chamber. There is an accessible entrance; ask a ranger rather than carrying a stroller up.
- ▶ Take a bus, a bikeshare or a taxi for one leg of the Mall rather than walking both ways with tired children.
- ▶ The Korean and Vietnam memorials are a short walk and are quieter; the Vietnam Wall asks for a conversation with older children before you arrive.
- ▶ Sit on the steps facing the Reflecting Pool before going up. With children, the view is as much the visit as the statue.

ADDRESS 2 Lincoln Memorial Circle NW, Washington, DC 20002 ↗ **HOURS** Open 24 hours; rangers on duty during staffed hours **PRICE** Free

DETAILS [Current venue details ↗](#)



02

The Washington Monument

Best for 6–12 National Mall

Free; timed-entry ticket required for the elevator

★ 4.7 (24,000+ reviews)

WHY GO: The only place to see the city's plan from inside its own centerpiece.

The Washington Monument rises more than five hundred and fifty-five feet above the city, with an observation level reached by elevator. The grounds are open daily. Looking down from inside the monument gives children a different view of the streets and landmarks they have been walking past.

THE CATCH: Elevator tickets are timed, scarce, and require security screening fifteen minutes ahead.

Pro tip: Advance tickets go on Recreation.gov about thirty days ahead and disappear quickly. If you missed them, same-day tickets are handed out on site from 8:45 in the morning, and arriving before that is realistic.

Allow 1–1.5 hours · Grounds open daily; elevator hours vary seasonally

2 15th Street NW, Washington, DC 20024 ↗

Current venue details ↗



03

The National Archives Museum

Best for 8–12 Penn Quarter Free; \$1 timed-entry ticket optional

★ 4.7 (6,800+ reviews)

WHY GO: A manageable stop when the family has energy for something meaningful but brief.

The Archives brings the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights together in the Rotunda, which is free to enter. Seeing the documents makes this feel different from reading about them in a classroom. It helps if a child already has a question about what they mean.

THE CATCH: Children under about eight get very little from it.

Pro tip: The one-dollar timed ticket is the cheapest queue-skip in Washington. It is not required, so a family can walk in, but on a busy day the dollar per person buys back a substantial part of a morning.

Allow 1–1.5 hours · Open daily 10 a.m.–5:30 p.m.

701 Constitution Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20408 ↗

Current venue details ↗

DAY PLAN 02 OF 05

Choose Your Washington Day

Save this for a day when everyone would rather be outside. Bring a car for the transfers, then finish on foot in Georgetown.

ITINERARY 02

The Green Day

Woods, water and a free zoo, with no museum queues at all

8:30 a.m.

Smithsonian's National Zoo

Reserve the free entry pass first, then enter at Connecticut Avenue and walk downhill. Closing is 6 p.m. until September 14 and 4 p.m. after.

--- Drive from the Zoo to Theodore Roosevelt Island.

12:00 p.m.

Theodore Roosevelt Island

Boardwalk first with young children. Remember the parking lot is reachable only from the northbound George Washington Memorial Parkway.

--- Drive into Georgetown and park for lunch, then explore the towpath and garden on foot.

2:30 p.m.

C&O Canal Towpath at Georgetown

Start at Thomas Jefferson Street and follow the towpath as far as everyone feels like walking. Turn back while there is still energy for the garden.

--- Five-minute walk up to M Street.

4:00 p.m.

The Old Stone House garden

The walled garden behind Washington's oldest building is the best free place in Georgetown to make everyone sit down.

MONEY

The Zoo pass and the listed outdoor stops are free. Plan this as a driving day and budget for parking and meals.

Change of plan: If the zoo pass is unavailable, Rock Creek Park Nature Center and Peirce Mill make the same shape of morning. In heavy rain, substitute the National Postal Museum, which is free, uncrowded and indoors.



FAMILY ADVENTURE SERIES

EXPLORE THE FAMILY ADVENTURE SERIES

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