**Tours of Washington DC and Vicinity**

Whenever I go to the Washington DC (District of Columbia) area in the spring or the fall, there are large numbers of 8th grade students touring the nation capital. The main destinations appear to be the big 3 monuments of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, Capitol, Supreme Court, Library of Congress, and White House (if you can get in). All of these and the Smithsonian are free to tour. The DC Metro subway/elevated provides excellent transportation around the city area. There are huge office buildings for each of the Cabinet Departments, Congressional offices, and other Government Agencies.

The Smithsonian Museums are very educational. Most of them are on the mall between the Capitol and the Washington Monument; the two most popular are Air and Space Museum, and Museum of Natural History. The Hirshhorn is interesting. In the last thirty years, the Smithsonian has added the new DC museums of the American Indian, East Wing of the National Gallery of Art, African-American History, Freer/Sackler Asian/African Art (in and under the Smithsonian Building gardens), and Udvar-Hazy Center (Air and Space annex at Dulles Airport). I liked the Portrait Gallery/Museum of American Art which is located three blocks north of the mall, next to Chinatown. The excellent National Zoo in northwest DC (with its Giant Pandas) is also a part of the Smithsonian. The small United States Botanic Garden is next to the Capitol.

Of course, as the nation’s capital, DC has to have monuments to everything American. The original L-Enfant plan for the city had many circles and squares that have been filled with various memorials. The Navy memorial and the Pershing memorial near the White House tourist entrance were interesting. Around the Tidal Basin, new memorials commemorate the Korean War, Martin Luther King (all white rock), and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (all South Dakota red granite). Next to the Washington Monument is the long overdue World War II Memorial. The scenic Theodore Roosevelt Memorial is located on an island in the Potomac River.

DC also attracts private/public attractions to commemorate or inform about various activities. The Holocaust Memorial Museum is free and next to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (the Mint) which is also free. The National Archives building is at Federal Triangle. You can sit on the Albert Einstein statue on the grounds of the National Science Foundation building near the Lincoln Memorial. The International Spy Museum (Chinatown), Corcoran Gallery of Art (Farragut Square), Newseum (Federal Triangle), and the Philips Collection (Dupont Circle) all have admission fees but are informative and entertaining. Of course, the visit to Mount Vernon to see the George Washington estate is required along with a visit to old town Alexandria which has a free bus down King Street from the Metro stop to the dock on the Potomac.

The DC area is the home of many educational institutions, including Georgetown University, George Washington University, Howard University, American University, Catholic University of America, University of the District of Columbia, Gallaudet University(deaf/hard-of-hearing education), and other more specialized schools. These schools offer many cultural and performance opportunities as well as informative lectures.

The Civil War had many battles around the capital area. Manassas in Virginia had two major battles early in the war. Harpers Ferry is located where the Shenandoah meets the Potomac. It is the location of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, the Shenandoah Canal, and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad crossing of the Potomac. This location was the site of many conflicts throughout the Civil War and the main battles are well documented. Further north is the Antietam Battlefield near Sharpsburg, Maryland. I have been there several times and I still can’t figure out what happened. The most important battle was near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. This battle has monuments and stories everywhere in the area. Since I have played the old Avalon-Hill board game about Gettysburg several times, I can follow the action. The plethora of monuments and cannons and the preservation of the area as it appeared during the Civil War help in understanding what happened.

Baltimore should not be overlooked. It is the home of Fort McHenry and the original Star Spangled Banner signifying the failure of the British to take the area in 1814. (from Google-) Inner Harbor is a sightseeing hub, home to Maryland Science Center with a planetarium and observatory, and the National Aquarium, featuring giant turtles, dolphins and electric eels. The Top of the World Observation Level offers sweeping views of the city, while a collection of historic warships is docked below. Power Plant Live! is a complex of bars, eateries and music venues in a former power station. The McCormick-Schilling Spice Company is headquartered here. I liked the Baltimore and Ohio Museum. Rural Baltimore has the Plum Crazy Diner from the 50’s as well as the tour of the National Security Agency. Nearby, Annapolis is the home of seafood and the Naval Academy.