

MY TRIP TO WASHINGTON, DC

Day One

As the American Airlines jet rose above the cloudy skies over Miami I realized I'd forgotten to turn off the central air-conditioning unit in my small duplex apartment. I *knew* I had missed something – regardless of the long list of things I had jotted down not to forget – but it wasn't until the plane's own air-conditioning apparatus had kicked into full stream that it occurred to me. Not only was my electric bill going to be outrageous next month, my apartment was going to feel like a meat locker when I got home. This was bound to happen; whenever I make meticulous plans, something always goes askew.

The plane ride itself was pleasant; it lasted just over two hours and the onboard video presentation was entertaining enough to make the journey go by even faster. Arriving at Reagan National Airport I was confident my transportation needs were adequately taken care of...that is, until I reached the Blue Shuttle kiosk and found a line longer than the famed Exodus out of Egypt awaiting me. This, too, never fails, and I wondered aloud why the hell do I even bother purchasing a shuttle ride in advance? After waiting more than thirty minutes to get my boarding pass I was told my actual ride would not be departing for another hour or so. Growing increasingly frustrated, I decided my time was more important to me than the twelve dollars I had paid for the shuttle service and opted to take a taxi to my hotel. There was a fuel surcharge in effect, so the ride cost me \$25 with the tip, but at least my driver, an Ethiopian immigrant, provided me with a brief tour of the area, enlightening me about interesting facts I would not have otherwise known; for example, Washington, DC is home to one of the largest Ethiopian communities outside of Ethiopia. In fact, as my trip unfolded throughout the week, I was surprised to discover just how many African and Middle Eastern communities exist in our nation's capital. I was not aware of the Islamic Center of Washington, DC, which serves as a national mosque and Islamic cultural center, built during the 1950s.

I had booked seven night's lodging at the Days Inn on Connecticut Avenue in a beautiful residential neighborhood near the University of DC Campus. My room was small, but clean and adequate, and the Van Ness Metro subway stop was less than three blocks away. The Metro was my lifeline to the city; over the next few days I would become as familiar with it as the freckles on my arms. On the first day I purchased a weeklong pass for \$26.50, and pretty much that covered the rest of my transportation costs while in DC. Over all, with the exception of food, I found Washington to be quite reasonable, tourist-wise.

My Day One itinerary consisted of what I thought would be a leisurely afternoon at the National Zoo, an institution administered by the Smithsonian. I am a Smithsonian member (meaning I subscribe to their monthly magazine) and had planned on seeing as many of their institutions as I could during my weeklong visit. Initially, I thought three

hours at the zoo would be sufficient to see the whole thing. An enthusiastic zoo representative assured me over the phone that I could accomplish the task in even less time. *Ha!* It took me just under five hours of trudging along through the heavy crowds to explore the entire park. Often times the animals were uncooperative. Ling-Ling, or whatever the Panda's name was, didn't budge for the entire fifteen minutes I stood there trying to get a closer picture of her. Likewise for the gorillas, who kept 'mooning' the crowds with their raw-skinned butts. I purchased a supposedly tourist-friendly illustrated map of the zoo to augment the one I down loaded from the Internet, but figuring it out was like trying to find jigsaw puzzle pieces in the middle of rush hour traffic; because of the way the trails meandered, I never really knew which way I was heading. I felt like Columbus: instead of India, I found the Elephant House by mistake!

The most interesting attractions were to be found inside the many exhibit houses throughout the zoo. Each had its own theme: mammals, insects, primates, etc. All of them were fun and informative. I particularly enjoyed the insect house, or was it the invertebrate house? Either way, it was full of creepy-crawlies in an assortment of small cages, glass containers or out in the open. Spending my first day in D.C. visiting the National Zoo was a good way to relax and orientate myself with the city's subway system. Although, by the time I reached my hotel that evening I was so exhausted I promptly fell asleep.

Day Two

I awoke, as I did each day of my trip, just before six in the morning. My Day Two itinerary was a busy one and I wanted to tackle it head on as early as I could. Besides, I didn't really know how long the Metro ride into D.C. would take, and I wanted to do a dry run, so to speak, that Monday morning. My hotel was approximately 14 miles from the downtown area. I was pleasantly surprised to discover it took only 15 minutes to reach the heart of the capital, the subway was an absolute pleasure to ride, easy to navigate (there are maps everywhere) and cleaner than most subways I've used in the United States.

My first stop that morning was the National Archives, the country's depository for every shred of documentation imaginable. It also houses the Rotunda, where the original Big Three reside: the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. I had acquired a reservation over the Internet for a self-guided tour, allowing me to enter the National Archives through a special side entrance, by-passing the long lines in the front of the building. But I was very fortunate; a group of about twenty or so people were waiting to take the 9:45 am *guided* tour of the building, something you need to reserve at least six weeks in advance, and when the security personnel called these people forward they asked me if I wanted to join them. I jumped at the opportunity, providing the name of my congresswoman, which, for some reason, they requested. The

advantage of taking the guided tour, besides the obvious knowledge of the docent who leads you through it, is that you get to spend twenty or so minutes in the Rotunda before they open it to the general public. The crowds are so big you barely have time to study the original documents on display. We, on the other hand, were able to leisurely peruse the exhibit (for twenty glorious minutes, anyway). None of this really mattered, though, since the founding national documents of the United States are encased in hermetically sealed, temperature-controlled glass displays, and are so faded with age one can barely make out any details, let alone the actual written words. Besides, the entire Rotunda is so dimly lit (direct light further damages the documents) that you feel as if you're in an enclosed tomb. No flash photography is permitted in this area. But regardless of these conditions, being able to see them without the harried crowds, and with the further trivia knowledge of the docent (for example, there were originally 27 proposed Bill of Rights) made it worthwhile. Personally, I felt a sense of emotional pride gazing – in such a small setting – upon the actual documents that gave rise to the greatest democratic government in world history.

The real fun to be had in the National Archives is in the Public Vaults section. Here, there is a most curious and entertaining display of national artifacts and documents that will keep one interested and engaged for a long time. I was able to hear an actual campaign speech given by Teddy Roosevelt, the first US President to have his voice recorded. I saw some fascinating letters from ordinary citizens sent to the White House over the past seven or eight decades (including one from Fidel Castro when he was only 12 years old to FDR requesting a ten dollar bill!). From what I understand, the exhibits within the Public Vaults are rotated periodically; so each time you visit there'll be something new on display. We spent most of the tour inside this particular exhibit. When the tour was over, I went downstairs to the McGowan Theater where an 11-minute film about the National Archives is continuously playing. Afterwards, I saw the political cartoon exhibit from the first half of the last century in the Lawrence F. O'Brien gallery; very entertaining for political pundits and history buffs. By the time I finished my visit in the National Archives (a total of two and a half hours) the building was packed with tourists. I was so grateful to have had the opportunity to take the guided tour.

It was 12:15 in the afternoon and I knew that the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, my next stop, would be open extended hours because of the summer (until 7:30 pm); in fact, almost all of the museums and galleries stayed open much longer than their stated hours of operation, and even after they closed their doors the staff didn't kick people out, but rather allowed everyone sufficient time to make their way through the exhibits. I opted to take a diversion to the National Art Gallery's west building (the larger of the two galleries; the east building, which houses mostly modern or contemporary art, is next door) located right on the National Mall. I had not Googled the National Art Gallery prior to leaving for Washington because my priority was the Smithsonian Institutions, so I was not prepared for what I discovered inside. The building itself was magnificently designed, but the art treasures were truly spellbinding. There was artwork from every recognizable artist in the world: Monet, Picasso, Michael Angelo, Da Vinci,

Rembrandt, and so forth. I am not an art buff, but I was moved by the displays I saw, including the original Monet painting ‘Artist Garden at Vetheuil’ of which a cheap duplicate hangs on my sorry walls in Miami. When I completed my self-guided tour of the National Art Gallery I ate lunch in the café inside their Sculpture Garden, which is situated adjacent to the Museum of Natural History. By now, my feet were beginning to bother me – all that walking and standing in front of exhibits! – and I welcomed the respite sitting down for lunch offered me. Afterwards, I made my way into the Museum of Natural History.

When you walk into the main entrance of the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History you are greeted by an enormous stuffed elephant with long, majestic tusks. I had downloaded a map of the building and had meticulously planned my tour of the exhibits, so I knew instinctively to veer to my immediate right and begin with the Early Life exhibits. There was a method to my madness: I would walk through the section of the museum which showed how the earth came into existence, how life eventually formed on earth, the earliest types of life, gradually reaching the dinosaur stage, the extinction of the dinosaurs and the rise of today’s animals, and finally, the eventual appearance of man. The second floor had some great exhibits including the rise of Western Civilization, demonstrating how western cultures came into existence and flourished. There were also some interesting gemstone exhibits on the upper floors, including the Hope Diamond of India, the largest known perfect diamond in the world (147.5 carats) and some jewelry Napoleon gave his wife. I also saw a collection of interestingly shaped quartz and mined gold from different areas of the U.S. There was a butterfly pavilion housing gosh-only-knew how many free and floating butterflies in an enclosed section; this was next to the insect zoo, home to some pretty creepy bugs!

By now I was no longer walking, but rather hobbling. Thankfully, I had purchased advanced IMAX tickets to two shows that ran back to back in the IMAX Theater downstairs. I was able to sit for over an hour and give my poor feet a break. Through sheer determination on my part to see every single exhibit, I walked out of there at eight o’clock in the evening with a triumphant, albeit painful, look on my face. I made my way through the now deserted downtown area to the Metro and reached my hotel forty minutes later after stopping to pick up a delicious Italian sandwich at this place called Potbelly Works located down the street from the Days Inn. I think my head hit the pillow as soon as that last bite hit my stomach.

Day Three

When I awoke on Day Three of my outing I attempted to do some stretching exercises in my hotel room to hopefully loosen up my aching lower limbs. I have been a mailman for the past thirteen years and was under the illusion all that walking would somehow prepare me for seven straight days of non-stop sightseeing. When I bent over to stretch, I nearly froze in that position from the pain, and I decided I would leave the exercising for when I returned home.

Today's plan was relatively simple; I would spend the entire day at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum on the National Mall, the most popular, most visited museum in the world. It extended for what looked like an entire block. I arrived just before it opened at 10:00 am. Time permitting, the back-up plan called for visiting the nearby American Indian Museum which I scouted (pardon the pun) earlier. But it took me almost nine hours to see every inch of the Air and Space Museum, so my day was confined to that one building.

The entire history of aviation, rocketry and space travel is documented and on display at the Air and Space Museum. Nowhere else can you go and see a former Soviet ICBM multiple-head nuclear missile standing upright next to an American Pershing nuclear missile. I kid you not. Inside this awesome museum, you can gaze at the original Wright Brother's 1903 airplane that started the whole aviation field. You can see Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis plane that made the first cross-Atlantic flight, or the first planes that crossed our continent or circumnavigated the world. They are *literally* hanging from the ceiling. This place is huge! The original Apollo 11 space capsule is also on display here, along with a fascinating account of the space race and the science of universal exploration. Is it warplanes you like? Well, you can see the original wooden prop planes used during the First World War and the more advanced props of the Second World War, including the first jet fighters and the V-Rockets invented by the Germans as the war came to a close. There are even several replicas of the current predator drones and unmanned vehicles being used today in Afghanistan and Iraq. I felt like a kid in a candy store; almost every exhibit area made me "oooooh" and "ahhhh" with delight and wonder.

As on the previous days, my feet started to bother me by midday, and I thought a little diversion would do me good. I came upon a Jet Fighter simulation section, which billed itself as the genuine article. For \$9 I could experience what jet pilots go through for eight minutes. I am not an idiot, and I was under no misguided notions here. I was certain this would be nothing at all like what real jet pilots experience in flight; after all, they allowed over-weight, middle-aged guys like me behind the 'controls'... *how accurate could that be, right?* But I plucked my nine bucks down and welcomed the idea of resting my feet, if only for eight minutes. I was told I would need a companion; one would 'pilot' the jet and the other acts as the 'gunner'. I was paired up with a 13 year-old girl named Samantha who probably weighed less than my right leg. She volunteered to be the pilot, and I, not being a video game wizard, acquiesced. They made us practice on this computer screen for about three minutes. As opposed to Samantha, who had to navigate our 'jet', my job consisted only of firing a missile button whenever the small screen in front of me detected an enemy warplane. A piece of cake, I thought. We were then strapped into the 'cockpit' with such care you would think we were actually going to fly.

When the simulation ride began, little Samantha was all blood and guts. This pony-tailed, blonde-haired All-American sweetie took us into a nose-dive that made our cockpit spin upside down like an out of control gyro. I was terrified. I envisioned my breakfast hurtling out of my mouth at the speed of sound. At one point we were upside down for nearly a minute, the whole while she kept yelling, "*Fire now! Fire now!*" I had no idea what was going on. I just kept pressing the trigger whenever Samantha told me

to, the whole while I was praying for this thing to end but was too embarrassed to say anything aloud...I mean, I didn't want little Samantha to think I was a wus. When the ride was over, an eternity later, the attendant who helped us out of the cockpit was all excited. Apparently, Samantha and I had the best record of the day, shooting down four enemy combatants. For the life of me, I don't even remember seeing the enemy's planes on the small firing screen; I was too busy trying to keep my own feet from smacking me square in the face. But I can say this, the ride accomplished it's goal of alleviating my foot pain...for the next hour I did not think about my poor aching feet, only the nausea rising up and down my head and esophagus.

I continued my tour of the Air and Space Museum, attending a free planetarium show on the second floor. Towards the late afternoon I also saw two IMAX presentations, including a fascinating one entitled Fighter Pilot which depicts the Red Flag military exercises conducted in Nevada every year designed to give our pilots (and our Allies' pilots) combat experience. I highly recommend it.

By 7:00 pm I had concluded my tour of the museum. It was another long, exhausting day, but a lot of fun. I had a spicy Kung Pao dinner in a restaurant in the Chinatown section of Washington before taking the Metro back to my hotel. And once again, I slept like a baby.

Day Four

Day Four's shuttle bus tour of Washington DC was a welcomed relief. After three grueling days of non-stop sightseeing by foot, being able to ride around in an air-conditioned vehicle was a pleasure indeed. I would recommend to anyone visiting the nation's capital to schedule at least one guided bus tour of the major sites. The reason why is because the distances required for such sightseeing are long in terms of walking. The one I selected was called OnBoard Shuttle Tours (previously known as the DC Party Shuttle) whose motto is: Arrive a tourist, leave a local. A lofty claim, but I did get a much better feel of the city when it was over. The cost was a little steep (\$60) compared to other tours, but having seen the rather large over-crowded tour buses traversing the capital streets, I was glad my shuttle group was small in size. It lent itself to a more intimate environment, and it was easier to hear and follow the guide. The other larger tour groups seemed somewhat impersonal.

I was instructed to go to the Old Post Office building on Pennsylvania Avenue where the shuttle bus would pick us up in front of the Benjamin Franklin statue at 10:00 am. As it turned out, the shuttle was late, allowing me time to go to the top of the Old Post Office tower, the second tallest structure in the city (only the Washington Monument is taller). I took some excellent layout photos of the capital from this vantage point. The Old Post Office building is more than a hundred years old, but it was only used as an actual post office for fifteen years. It was deemed too conspicuously spacious to house the postal

headquarters, and was, in true Washington bureaucratic fashion, slated to be torn down. Eventually, the post office was moved and the site became a federal office building. There is a beautiful glass elevator ride to the top of the tower that allows one to witness the largesse of this building, including the mini-mall on the lower levels.

My shuttle tour finally began at 10:30 am. The guide was a young affable man by the name of Peter Pickhardt, who shared much in common with me. Both of us were from New Jersey and had graduated from Rutgers University with degrees in History and Political Science. But the coincidences didn't end there. I once ran against Bob Menendez (the current U.S. Senator from New Jersey) for a commission seat in Union City, NJ about 27 years ago when Menendez was just starting his political career. In fact, it was the only election he ever lost (I was not the winner, by the way; another political group won that election). As it turned out, Peter worked for Bob Menendez as a Washington intern and then later as a paid staffer when Menendez was still a congressman. What a small world. Peter and I ended up having lunch together during the tour and he wanted to know everything about his former employer.

We began our tour in front of the Capitol Building and then made our way towards the Lincoln Memorial, stopping at several sites along the way. We saw the Jefferson Memorial, which I especially enjoyed because of the quotations on the wall. Next, we saw the FDR memorial, a sprawling site covering 6 acres, built in sections to visualize FDR's impact on America; one section had statues depicting Americans suffering through the Great Depression, and throughout the grounds were a series of waterfalls symbolically suggesting the unstoppable force his presidency created within our society. It was very impressive, made with red granite.

We also witnessed the various war memorials: The Korean War Memorial (my favorite, with its statue soldiers and reflecting wall), the WWII Memorial (which is situated on the opposite side of the Reflecting Pond facing the Lincoln Memorial), and the Vietnam Memorial with its emotionally wrenching remembrance to those who died in that conflict. Our shuttle also drove by Arlington Cemetery, and we visited the Air Force Memorial, three extremely impressive metal points curving out into the sky. Nearby was the equally impressive Marine Corps Memorial, with its massive depiction of the Iwo Jima flag-raising event from WWII. The photos I took do not do justice to the grandeur of these large and imposing monuments. We had a solemn moment when we drove by the Pentagon and saw the site where the American Airlines jet crashed into the building on 9/11 (they were in the process of erecting a memorial to the victims that will open later that year). My favorite presidential memorial had to be the Lincoln Memorial. Standing on the top steps, in the same spot where Martin Luther King Jr. once addressed the huge crowds during the Civil Rights March back in the early Sixties, was very moving. And I must admit, reading the Gettysburg Address on the wall of the memorial brought tears to my eyes. What can I say, I am a sentimental political softie.

After a 45-minute lunch break we took a most informative road tour of the nicest real estate in the nation's capital. We got to see the house owned by Vice-President Cheney, and not far away was the Clinton's Washington home. This particular area housed almost

one fourth of all the embassies in DC, as well. Most were million dollar homes or mansions converted into official embassies. They were fascinating to see because of their individual designs; for example, the Mexican Embassy had a hacienda look about it. We also drove through the famous national park of DC, about three times the size of New York's Central Park (this was the wooded area where the murdered intern Chandra Levy's body was found). Another beautiful site was the National Cathedral, one of the six largest of its kind in the world, administered by the Episcopalian Church. We then stopped to see the White House (and the Executive Building next door). I was surprised to discover that the White House looks a lot smaller in real life than on television. By comparison, the Executive Building (where the Vice-President lives and the President's staff works) almost seems to dwarf it. I had an interesting moment when, hoping to get a better photo shot, I stepped onto the cement barrier holding in place the wrought iron bars protecting the White House. All of a sudden, three heads popped up from the roof. A police officer in back of me cautioned me not to go over the fence because I already had several snipers aiming at me. I thought he was joking, but when I stepped back down onto the pavement I noticed the heads all disappeared as well.

Our last stop was at the Washington Monument, the largest structure in the capital. We could not go in because the required tickets – which are issued free of charge – are given out early in the morning. Interestingly, the Monument is actually two-toned. The bottom part is whiter than the top two-thirds, and this is because the Monument was extended over a century ago. When the tour ended we were taken back to the Old Post Office Building. I had an early dinner in the downtown area and then opted to visit the National Crime and Punishment Museum located next to the red line Metro station on 7th street. It was a fascinating museum about the history of crime in America, containing an interactive section on CSI techniques and other fun gadgets and games, including artifacts and colorful accounts of some of our nation's most notorious criminals. The studio where they film America's Most Wanted television show was actually located inside this museum. The entry fee was expensive, \$24 (with an audio tour device), but I was able to knock off a buck fifty with a coupon from my travel guide booklet.

And once again, sheer exhaustion made me crash as soon as I got back to my hotel room that evening.

Day Five

Day Five was split into two separate museums. For the first, I took the red line Metro all the way to Union Square, the beautiful central train station and mall not far from the Capitol Building, to visit the Smithsonian Postal Museum. I am a proud member of the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC), and as such I was really looking forward to visiting this museum to see how my occupation has unfolded over the centuries. Benjamin Franklin was the first U.S. Post Master. A position he also held under the British Crown but lost once the American Revolution broke out. The Museum is very

small by Smithsonian standards, which is probably why I enjoyed it so much. On display were early postal ‘vehicles’, including a stage coach, a postal train car, the Pony Express exhibit, and even this weird contraption that looked like a half truck, half sleigh snowmobile.

I discovered that the mail system was first utilized, oddly enough, to deliver newspapers and advertisements. *Imagine that, junk mail even back then.* And if people think postal rates are high today, they should see what our forefathers paid for postage. It’s actually cheaper to send something cross-country today than it was over a hundred years ago! Initially, a postal commission created Star Routes, which were independently operated postal routes. Due to inconsistencies and corruption allegations concerning the awarding of mail route contracts it was decided to centralize the whole shebang under a federal agency. On display in the museum, suspended from the ceiling, are various early airplanes used by the postal service. One was an original wooden prop plane from 1911 that an enterprising (and ballsy) air mailman utilized to literally drop mail onto customers’ farms on his ‘route’. Somehow he survived several crash landings. Other mail pilots were not so lucky. During the 1920’s, the newly created postal air fleet had so many fatalities it was nicknamed the ‘suicide club’.

I spent almost two hours in the Postal Museum and then hopped back on the red line Metro and headed over to the Chinatown/Gallery Place station. My next visit was a two-in-one spot. Both the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery and the American Art Museum share the same building. This was another huge, beautifully designed stone building, split down the middle, so to speak, between the two separate exhibition halls. One side of the building contained the Portrait Gallery; the other side was the American Art Museum. There were three floors in all, and plenty to see.

For me, the most fascinating thing about the National Portrait Gallery was the sheer number of hanging portraits of American historical figures. If you want to know what John Winthrop, puritan leader and first governor of Massachusetts looked like, then this is the place for you. Have a hankering to see Thomas Paine, the publisher of *Common Sense*, the American Revolutionary rag that spurred the colonists on? He’s here, next to other colonial historical icons. In fact, the portraits are set up in chronological order so you can see these people as they rose up through our nation’s history. Fascinating stuff. On the third floor is the presidential exhibit. Here, you can see what all those obscure U.S. presidents looked like: Buchanan, Monroe, Harrison, Pierce, etc, etc.

The American Art Museum was just as interesting. Much of the art was contemporary in nature, and some of the exhibits were titillating and really thought provoking. Paintings, sculptures, even a movie poster exhibit that was pretty wild. There were abstract pieces made of wood, and...well, junk, just about everything under the sun. I can’t say I understood it all, but, boy, did I have fun looking at it. There was one depressing display that still haunts me. It was by a husband and wife team entitled *Sollie 17*. It was a replica of an extremely run down Seattle boarding house, which depicted an elderly man living by himself. You could look into the actual rooms via mirrors and see the old man in various positions: looking out a window, playing solitaire, and, from the

looks of it, reading some racy magazine and masturbating on his sofa. The rooms were dirty and disheveled, and the theme was a social commentary about how lonely growing old in America can be. As a middle-aged man who is proudly independent this exhibit made quite a strong impression on me. I guess that is the essence of good art, to bring out an emotional response in the viewer. Even if those thoughts are depressing.

I have to admit, when I left the Portrait Gallery/Art Museum I was still actually bummed out by the Sollie 17 exhibit. I decided to see a movie to lift my spirits. There was a cinema plex next to the Metro station and I didn't care what was playing. As it turned out, the cartoon movie *Wall-e* was about to begin and I opted for that. Curiously, there wasn't one child in the audience. And then after I saw the movie I understood why; the film is actually a love story with an environmental message thrown in. The film did the trick; I returned to my hotel with renewed confidence.

Day Six

I awoke even earlier than usual on Day Six. My first stop this morning was at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP), right across from the Department of the Treasury on what is formally 15th Street, near Independence Avenue. Free tickets for the guided tour of the BEP are distributed on a first come, first serve basis in a small booth starting at 8:00 am. During peak summer months the tickets are usually gone within the hour, so I wanted to make sure I got there as early as I could. I arrived just before the booth opened, and the line was almost a block long already. Luckily, I was able to get the last ticket for the 10:15 am tour. But this meant I had nearly an hour and a half to kill, so I walked up the street and strolled past the Washington Monument and took some more pictures of the Reflecting Pond and the Lincoln Memorial.

The Bureau of Engraving and Printing is the actual "show me the money" place. It is here (and another facility in Texas) that all U.S. paper currency is printed. Actually, 'paper' is not the proper term; our money is made of a unique combination of cotton and linen by a company in Massachusetts. The guided tour of the BEP facility is probably one of the more popular ones for government agencies in Washington. Approximately fifty people at a time, in fifteen-minute intervals, take the tour. We started by watching a brief film in the lobby that explained the process and history of paper currency in the United States. In the early 1860's, Congress decreed that we needed to print official U.S. paper currency to augment the coinage that was already in use. That year, two women and four men – using an old printing press table – started churning out the first batch of paper money in the basement of a federal building. Thirty years later the Bureau of Engraving and Printing was given a permanent home, but continued to grow in size to accommodate the monumental task of printing our country's money supply. Hundreds of billions of dollars are printed each year to replace the old bills that are taken out of circulation.

After the introductory film, our guide led us upstairs to an enclosed glass catwalk where we witnessed federal employees using enormous modern printing presses to make one-dollar bills. Blank sheets of currency paper are fed through these massive printers and go through a process of inking. The paper itself already has certain security features built into it, like the tiny threads and the security strip. The first part of the printing process applies colored seals and markings; these sheets then go to other printing presses where more details are literally ‘pressed’ into the paper by thousands of pounds of pressure. Meanwhile, the newly printed sheets whiz by on conveyer belts to other machines which encode them with serial numbers and then stack them up to be mechanically cut into regular currency size. Throughout the process, workers are extracting randomly selected sheets for quality control purposes. Money sheets with errors or those deemed inferior in quality are simply shredded (and then sold in the gift shop in tiny bundles).

The tour took less than thirty minutes and ended in the gift shop, which also doubles as a mini-museum of sorts. You can see a copy of the original printing press used to make the first U.S. currency back in the 1860’s. And on the wall are samples of both past and present U.S. currency and other BEP issued engravings and printings (such as official presidential invitations or documents). I found out during the tour that the one hundred dollar bill is the largest denomination note we currently print; although in the past the BEP did make \$100,000, \$10,000, \$5,000, \$1000, and \$500 notes (all of which are on display, and some are still in circulation). They also made \$500,000 bank notes used only for inter-bank transfers. My visit to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing was a fun diversion, and I really needed it since my next stop would be one of emotionally gut-wrenching sadness.

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The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is the nation’s center for the “documentation, study and interpretation of Holocaust history, and serves as this country’s memorial to the millions of people murdered during the Holocaust”. This statement was copied from the information pamphlet available to all who visit the museum. And it doesn’t do justice to the inexplicable horrors one nation inflicted on the rest of Europe. Personally, I knew the museum, based on what I have read and heard from those who visited it, would be a somber, sobering look at the horrible issue of genocide; but I was not prepared for what I saw, and must admit that on more than one occasion I was overcome with grief. This museum is not for the faint of heart, and I would caution bringing young children.

Prior to my trip to Washington, DC I had already purchased tickets to the Holocaust Museum’s permanent exhibit. Normally, the tickets are free, and are distributed on a first come, first serve basis outside the museum. Their website, though, recommends you purchase the tickets online (they charge a fee of \$4 per ticket) to avoid not only the long peak season lines, but also the possibility of not being able to obtain tickets, which are limited in quantity. Entering the museum itself is free, but in order to view the top three

floors, which constitute the Permanent Exhibit, you need a ticket. They only allow so many visitors per hour. My self-guided tour was scheduled for 11:30 am.

Before taking the elevator up to the Permanent Exhibit, I walked through another exhibit on the main floor entitled, *Remember the Children: Daniel's Story*. This section is designed for visitors who bring children with them. Daniel is a fictional little Jewish boy who lived in Germany during the Holocaust; his story is created from countless diaries and accounts of children Holocaust survivors. When you enter the exhibit, you watch a brief film and hear Daniel's voice and story. You then walk through various hallways witnessing Daniel's "life". There is a replica of a German home where Daniel lived, and it is interactive; you can open drawers in his room or touch his belongings in order to get a feel for this child. As you progress through the corridors, his story becomes one of terror, as he and his family are signaled out by the community, rounded up together with other Jewish families and forced to live in a ghetto prior to being sent to the concentration camps. Here, you can witness what his family had to endure. The exhibit ends with another brief film, and Daniel's sad voice explaining how only he and his father survived the ordeal. *This* was how I prepared myself for the Permanent Exhibit upstairs.

The actual attendee who escorted me into the elevator was himself a Holocaust survivor. He explained how the floors of the Permanent Exhibit are set up. The top floor, where the exhibit begins, is a depiction (through a narrative history of artifacts, rare films and eye-witness accounts) of the Nazi rise to power in Germany from the 1920's through the 1930's, and their assault on the Jewish populations in the areas under their control from 1933 to 1939. You begin by watching a 13-minute film on the rise of Hitler and Nazism, and then walk through the exhibit halls seeing exactly how a country turned hatred and prejudice into an inexplicable act of mass murder. This was sad enough, but nothing in comparison to the next floor of the exhibit. Entitled, "The Final Solution", this entire floor is devoted to the Jewish ghettos and concentration camps and the wholesale killing of over six million Jews. In addition, other groups were also targeted, such as Gypsies, homosexuals, Catholic Poles, Slavs from the German invasion of the Soviet Union, disabled people, basically anyone who the Aryan masters felt were not worthy of being alive. On display are scale models of the gas chambers and Jews being murdered there. Along the exhibit walls are haunting pictures of the slaughter and actual archival films depicting the atrocities captured when the camps were liberated. There are actual clothing and uniforms and other artifacts on display, including a railroad car used to transport Jews to the concentration camps. By the time you reach the final floor of the Permanent Exhibit, you have experienced a gamut of emotions ranging from curiosity to shock, from anger to overwhelming grief.

The final floor, "the Last Chapter", is a sobering account of the war's end, and the liberation of the death camp survivors, including footage taken by allied troops of piles of dead bodies. It covers the War Crime Trials that followed, and lists courageous acts of heroism on behalf of individuals who helped Jews escape the German's wrath. There is a wall commemorating the nations that helped the plight of the Holocaust victims, and another detailing the actions of those countries that did nothing and allowed the

Holocaust to continue unabated. I was personally ashamed upon reading the story of a group of 900 Jews aboard a cruise ship who had managed to get visas to Cuba at the start of the war. When they arrived at the port in Havana, the Cuban government had a change of heart and decided they could not disembark. The Jewish passengers waited off the coast of Cuba for thirty days, hoping to get entry visas somewhere else. But when no other country took them in they had to return to Europe, where the Nazis murdered all but 51.

The saddest part of the entire exhibit for me was just at the end, before I walked into the Hall of Remembrance. Prior to entering the Hall, there is a quote by Elie Wiesel, founding chairman of the museum and Nobel Laureate, Nazi war criminal hunter, and Holocaust survivor, where he states he will never forget what he witnessed and endured, even if he “lived to be as old as God Himself”. It was such an emotional quote that tears welled up in my eyes, and as I passed into the Hall I lost it completely. I am not ashamed to say that I cried. Nobody who walks through this museum should. If there was ever a place to experience sheer grief, it is here. There is a circular room spanning upwards the entire three floors of the Permanent Exhibit. Its walls are literally covered with black and white photographs of the inhabitants of a small Latvian town, all Jews, whose ancestors had lived there peacefully for 900 years. That is, until the Nazis invaded the former Soviet State. Today, not one Jew lives in this Latvian town, almost all of them were killed during the Holocaust. It is the overriding magnitude of such acts that compel one to ask, “Why?” How could the German people, a nation of law-abiding citizens, be such willing participants to such unspeakable horror and depredation? And how can that long-ago generation ever reconcile itself with this terrible history? I guess that is why the Holocaust Museum exists. To serve as a reminder of what can happen when national bigotry and hatred reaches a boiling point. One walks away from this place with a renewed understanding of our own fears and prejudices, and for this I am truly grateful for the opportunity to have experienced the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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As much as I had witnessed on Day Six already, my day was not even half over. During the next five hours I would wander through four art galleries, and traverse the Smithsonian gardens and the outdoor sculpture exhibits of the Hirshhorn Museum. I made my way back to the National Mall, to the front of the Smithsonian Castle Information Center, a beautiful castle-like structure designed by the same architect who created St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. Lining the National Mall, along Independence Avenue, are four smaller Smithsonian institutions: The Freer and Sackler Art Galleries, the African Art Museum, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (of modern and contemporary art). The Freer and Sackler Galleries are actually connected by an underground passageway and are home to ancient and centuries-old Indian, Middle Eastern and Asian artwork ranging from sculptures to paintings, from written religious works to jewelry, carvings, vases, and whatever else you can imagine an antiquities gallery would possess. I found the Buddhist art, especially from Japan, the

most interesting. The amazing Chinese Exhibit offered artifacts dating back more than 3,000 years ago, all of it expertly crafted. The African Art Museum was a short distance away, containing centuries old artifacts and interesting modern African Art.

I made my way through the beautiful Smithsonian gardens, walking around the Sculpture Garden leading towards the Hirshhorn Museum of modern and contemporary art. The Hirshhorn is a round building, with four floors. On the lower level is a collection of abstract and modern art and sculptures, including an original Andy Warhol and some pretty bizarre art pieces. One of my favorites was nothing more than a swaying collection of hundreds of clothes hangers arranged from the ceiling to the floor. Another display looked like a stretched piece of large intestines (made of plastic) in the shape of a big box. The top two floors contained hallways filled with abstract/modern paintings and sculptures, with rooms that led to video presentations that were also very interesting, including a series on 'realism', and one mind-bending film of a man and a woman approaching each other, caressing and then turning around in different directions, yet ending up heading back the same way they came from; this weird effect was created by camera angles and I watched it numerous times to see how they achieved this illusion (I couldn't figure it out). I really enjoyed the Hirshhorn; it was one of my favorite museums. Around 6:00pm, bone-weary tired and my poor puppies inflamed, I took the Metro back to my hotel, having an early dinner at an Italian restaurant across the street. Tomorrow was my last day and I needed to rise early, once again, for my final sightseeing tour before heading out to the airport. I tried to watch a film on HBO in my room, but I was so exhausted I fell asleep ten minutes into it.

Day Seven

Day Seven – the last day of my Washington, DC trip – consisted of one primary stop. The Library of Congress conducts free guided tours of its Thomas Jefferson building three times a day, the earliest one at 10:30 am. My Blue Shuttle airport pick-up from my hotel was scheduled for 2:45 pm, so I had plenty of time to do some final sightseeing before leaving. But today's Metro ride would be a little different. It was Saturday, and the commute would be slower due to the weekend train schedule. I had to make two transfer stops along the way in order to reach the Capitol South station, which is the closest to the Library of Congress building. I checked out of my hotel and deposited my bags with the front desk for safekeeping. Since I wasn't sure how long it would take to reach the Library of Congress I timed myself so I knew when I should start heading back to the Days Inn. I didn't want to miss my airport ride.

The Library of Congress consists of three buildings: The Jefferson, Madison and Adams buildings. But of these, the granddaddy is the Jefferson building, which is the main structure and the one most visited by tourists. The Library of Congress is exactly

that, the library of the members of congress, but it is also a public library. If you are a citizen of the U.S., and have a valid ID, you can obtain a library card inside the Madison Building that will allow you to sit in 19 of the 21 reading rooms throughout the facility (the other two are reserved for congress and special visiting scholars). But unlike your public library back home, you cannot check books out of the Library of Congress. A library staff member retrieves your requested book and then you must read it there, under the watchful eye of cameras and staffers.

In reality, calling the Library of Congress a public library would be akin to calling Fort Knox a bank. This is *THE* library, bar none. If you can't find the book you're looking for here, then it must be a rare one indeed. The original Library was created by an Act of Congress, for their personal use, back in 1800, and was housed in the old Capitol Building. During the War of 1812 the British burned down the Capitol, looting the Library before destroying it. Within a month of this incident, retired President Thomas Jefferson offered to sell his vast personal library collection for the sake of establishing a new Library of Congress. At the time, Jefferson had the most extensive book collection in North America (almost 6,500 volumes, which are actually on display here). Congress paid him just under \$24,000 for the whole collection, and thus began the Library of Congress we have today.

Eventually, the Library of Congress grew into a massive institution with so many volumes and recorded documents and artifacts that Congress had to approve a new building for it. On November 1, 1897, the Jefferson Building was finally opened, and like today, it was a sight to behold. Designed in the Italian Renaissance style, complete with sculptures and paintings and various types of marble flooring, it doesn't look like any other building in Washington. In fact, when you enter its Great Hall, you are momentarily transferred back in time to some magnificent European structure of the 16th century. Additions have been made to the Library throughout its history, including the construction of the Madison and Adams buildings. Within these walls are over 28 million cataloged books and other printed materials and artifacts in over 460 languages, including the largest collection of rare books in North America. It also houses the world's largest collection of legal material, films, maps, sheet music and sound recordings.

A fairly large crowd was already gathered at the Tour Assembly room on the lower level when I arrived shortly before the 10:30 am tour began. We had to be broken up into three groups, each led by a very knowledgeable docent. Our tour commenced in the Great Hall upstairs on the main level where we learned the history (including the artwork) of the Library. We heard about the painted and glass-stained domed ceiling, about the different types of imported marbles used for the floors, the inlaid medallions, the various statues including a series of baby sculptures (called 'putti' in Renaissance art) that adorn both grand stairwells and depict the varying types of labor present in America at that time. We moved up to the second floor and saw the artwork etched into the ceiling and pillars symbolizing knowledge and the arts. Our docent took us into the gallery section overlooking the main reading room, an impressive cavernous chamber with a high vaulted ceiling that was breathtaking in its scope. We were also shown the private hallway leading to the reading room used by members of congress, an elaborate display

of gold-painted fixtures and sheer elegance. On the main level we saw one of only three known perfect copies of the Gutenberg Bible, the world's first printed version from 1455. And opposite this display is the Giant Bible of Mainz, a "magnificent example of an illuminated manuscript" from the same era.

When the tour ended, about an hour later, I had the opportunity to wander through the Library and see some of its various exhibit halls. On the lower level was a tribute display to American vaudeville, including a huge selection on one of my favorite comedians, Bob Hope. Very entertaining. On the second floor were two historical exhibits. The one entitled Exploring the Americas contained some fascinating artifacts and documents from the founding and exploration of North America. There are various original maps on display, one from Hernan Cortez, drawn by hand, to King Charles V of Spain outlining the capital Aztec city of pre-colonial Mexico, and the earliest maps made of the North American continent (including some pretty bizarre inaccurate ones!). The other historical exhibit was entitled Creating The United States, which contained drafts of our Declaration of Independence, Constitution and Bill of Rights, showing how the process of creating our great nation came about. The second floor also houses the remaining original volumes of Thomas Jefferson's personal library that started it all.

By one o'clock I was ready to make my way back to the hotel. I stopped briefly next door to take photos of the Supreme Court building. Unfortunately, the nation's top court is one of the few buildings in Washington that closes on the weekend, so I was not able to go inside. Content that I had crammed as much into my one-week D.C. trip as possible, I journeyed back to the Days Inn. I purchased a sandwich at a nearby Subway shop and ate it while sitting in the lobby of my hotel waiting for my 2:45pm Blue Shuttle pick-up.

At 3:00pm I was still waiting. I called the 1-800 number and someone confirmed my pick-up reservation, to which I replied, "Great, so where the hell is my pick-up?" By 3:15pm I was livid, and when the non-English speaking driver showed up just past 3:30pm I was fit to be tied. My flight was leaving in less than an hour and a half and I was still in the upper D.C. area! This is the part where life goes full circle. Remember how this trip began, with my meticulously laid out plans? Well, it never fails. We rushed to the Reagan National Airport and I stood in the hot sun for almost thirty minutes at the curbside baggage and ticketing section; afterwards, I ran wildly to the terminal gate only to discover my flight's departure had been delayed. Later, the departure gate was changed, as well. My flight continued to be delayed because something happened to our pilot and American Airlines was looking for a replacement. One of the airline representatives made an ill-conceived joke when she asked, over the intercom, if anybody knew how to fly a plane? Probably the last thing a nervous flyer wants to hear, and – *I kid you not* – about half the passengers bolted right then and there. When we finally took off for Miami the plane was empty. I had the entire row to myself!

My Washington, DC trip allowed me to see almost all of the Smithsonian Museums and Galleries that were currently open, for a total of ten, and several other museums and galleries I had not planned on seeing. I visited most of the major monuments, memorials and sites of the nation's capital, took a ton of interesting photos and learned fascinating

details about this great country's history. My aching feet notwithstanding, I would gladly go back and make my next visit even longer.

Until next time...

Richard C. Rodriguez

(My trip to Washington took place July 13 to the 19th, 2008)