

# THE SLOW-TRAVEL City Trip

WHAT'S BETTER WHEN YOU VISIT A CITY? SEEING ALL THE SIGHTS OR ONLY FOCUSING ON THE PLACES AND THINGS THAT INTEREST YOU AND LEARNING MORE ABOUT THEM?

NOWADAYS, JOURNALIST CAROLINE BUIJS OPTS FOR THE LATTER.

After my very first trip to Paris—I must have been around nineteen at the time—as well as the Eiffel Tower, Pompidou Centre and the Rodin Museum, I was able to check off an endless list of ‘places to see’. After all, whenever I went on a city trip, I always thought I had to make the most of it while I was there. This is how it went with every foreign city I walked around. I tried to cram as much as possible into a single day, and ran from the one ‘museum you absolutely must see’ to the other ‘cathedral that has to be on your list’, and ate in restaurants ‘you really should try’. The thing is, I don’t have any detailed memories of these cities; everything seems to have been reduced to a single, hazy event. I can’t name any of the paintings I stood daydreaming in front of, much less know anything about the history of one of these cities even though I really love history.

In his TED talk, *The Art of Stillness*, British travel writer Pico Iyer talks about how invigorating it can be to take it slow in an age of acceleration. “One of the beauties of travel is that it allows you to bring stillness into the motion and the commotion of the world,” he says. “[...] I think that many of us have the sensation—I certainly do—that we’re standing about two inches away from a huge screen, and it’s noisy and it’s crowded and it’s changing with every second, and that

screen is our lives. And it’s only by stepping back and then further back, and holding still that we can begin to see what the canvas means and to catch the larger picture.” After all, as Iyer says, “In an age of acceleration, nothing can be more exhilarating than going slow. And in an age of distraction, nothing is so luxurious as paying attention. And in an age of constant movement, nothing is so urgent as sitting still”.

## HOUSE OF CARDS

These days, I take a different approach to a city trip: I no longer use checklists, and I spend more time sitting still. I know that I’ll never be able to see everything. I think what’s more important is to know yourself well and figure out what you truly like or are interested in and to use this as your guiding principle. This enables you to suddenly turn your city trip into a thematic journey. This is why I decided to make three days in America’s Washington, D.C. a slow-travel city trip.

I would rather spend time checking out one museum than only half experience ten of them. I would prefer to notice a couple of great details over having to take in an entire building. And I would rather take the time to read more about the history of a city, building or painting. >



## 'SLOW TRAVEL ALSO MEANS THAT I CAN TAKE THE TIME TO LOOK THINGS UP'

'The House' is how the White House is designated on traffic signs in the city. Washington D.C. is of course the political epicenter of the US, and I recognized many of the city's buildings from television. I mostly know the iconic tall white dome of the US Capitol—which is located in the heart of the city and is the seat of the Senate and House of Representatives—from bingewatching *House of Cards*.

Instead of reading something about Capitol Hill, I set out with Sam, who leads the Airbnb Experience Architecture of Capitol Hill Tour (see box on page 32). Sam is a man after my own heart—he also adores details. We started out at Union Station, Washington D.C.'s beautiful old central train station. Sam didn't just point out the gold details on the ceiling, he also brought the Great Eastern Dining Room to life again, portraying it the way it once apparently was, full of waiting passengers with steamer trunks instead of wheeled suitcases, dining at wooden tables with starched white tablecloths. Second only to the Capitol, the Library of Congress is possibly the most impressive building on Capitol Hill. It is the largest library in the world (a new document is apparently submitted every four seconds) with Harry Potter-like reading rooms and a copy of the *Gutenberg Bible* (the first book printed using movable types made of metal—there are only three copies in existence).

### DIARY ENTRY

The next morning, I rented a bike and cycled to the Lincoln Memorial. And even if a monument in the form of a gigantic marble neoclassical temple isn't really my thing, I definitely found it impressive. I texted a photo of Abraham Lincoln's characteristic head to the home front and almost immediately received a photo of a page from a book in return. Coincidentally, my husband had just been reading diary entries written by American poet and author Walt Whitman who spent time in Washington D.C. during the American Civil War and wrote about Lincoln in his journal. This is more or less how I pictured 'slow travel': to sit on the marble steps of the monument without feeling rushed, reading Whitman's

diary entry: 'I never see that man [Lincoln] without feeling that he is one to become personally attached to, for his combination of purest, heartiest tenderness'.

Since I couldn't remember off the top of my head why Lincoln is so revered, I grabbed my travel guide: in 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the US, but his desire to abolish slavery caused several of the southern states to secede from the Union. This led to the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861, which lasted until 1865.

Nothing seems to divide Washington, D.C. more than the issue of slavery: Many of the city's residents were in favor of abolition, but there were also many slave owners living in the city. Lincoln called for giving African Americans the right to vote in a speech he gave in 1865—slavery had been officially abolished in the meantime—and was murdered a couple of days later. I now have a better understanding of why Martin Luther King, the leader of the American civil rights movement, gave his famous 'I have a dream' speech here, in front of the Lincoln Monument, on August 28, 1963.

### IN THE MUSEUM SHOP

Slow travel also means that I can take the time to look things up. In order to find out more about African American culture and history, I went to the National Museum of African American History and Culture. On two floors located underground, the history of slavery is told in sober words, making it all the more poignant, including iron chains that were brought to the surface from shipwrecks. The fact that over the course of around 200 years, the Netherlands (still called the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands at the time) transported over half a million people from the west coast of Africa to Brazil, the Caribbean and North America gives me a sense of shame.

On the upper floors, I saw an exhibit on Oprah Winfrey, Chuck Berry's shiny red Cadillac, and the leather jacket Jimi Hendrix wore. In reading the folder, I surmised that the museum's purpose is not only to place emphasis on slavery and the fight for justice, but



also on the contribution (and successes) of the African American community to American culture, in spite of all the opposition they faced.

I ducked into the museum shop on my way out. As I stood in front of a bookshelf displaying children's and other books featuring primarily black protagonists as role models, I got a sense of how it must feel for a person of color to walk into an average bookstore or newsstand and still see mainly white role models on the covers.

### WHEN EVERYTHING COMES TOGETHER

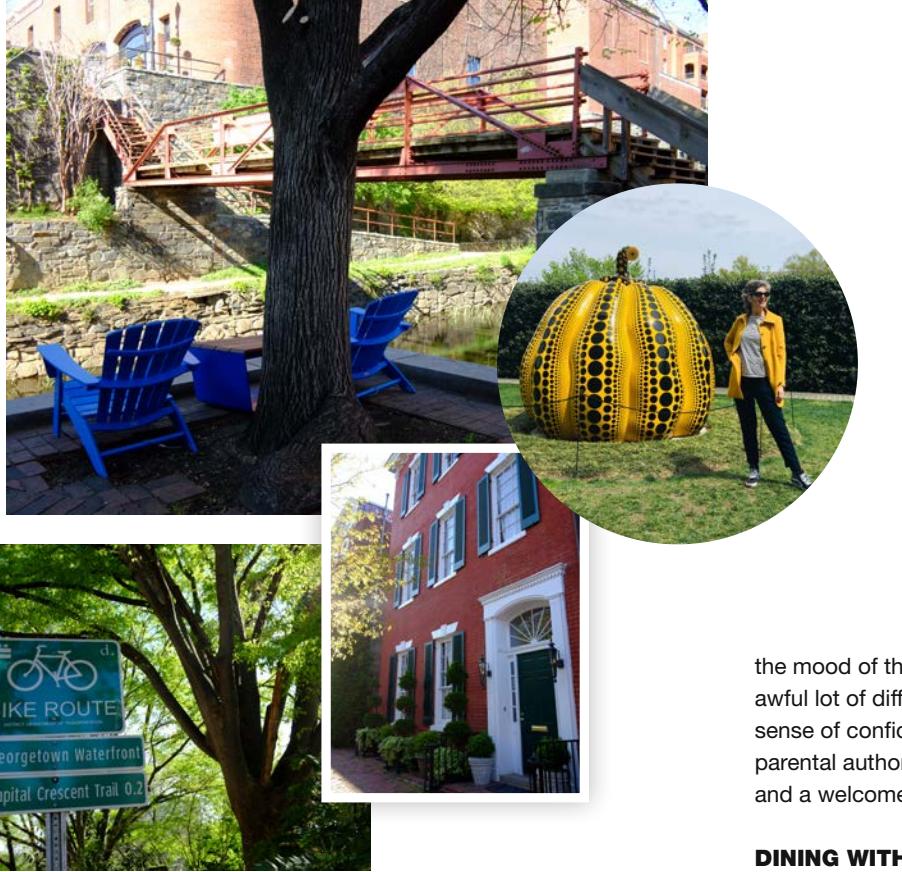
On my last day in Washington, D.C., there was one thing I definitely wanted to do: see a painting by my favorite American painter, Edward Hopper. *Ryder's House*, a painting with a house in the middle of a sort of dunescape, hangs in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. There are no people depicted in the painting, and although the museum is full of beautiful art, I was still sitting on the black leather bench across from the painting half an hour after having arrived there.

Sitting there alone in the middle of a busy city, staring intently at just one painting was such a gratifying feeling. Half an hour turned into 45 minutes, and 45 minutes turned into an hour. It felt like my spirit was taking a bath; when I woke up later that night, the painting immediately appeared before my eyes. The blue sky with the veil of clouds, the cracks in the white plaster, the shadow on the side of the small recess in the wall (I am always amazed at shadows in a painting because I find them so hard to draw).

Looking at this painting for an hour led to a moment of me feeling completely happy—one of those feelings that can come over you unexpectedly, when everything comes together and seems just right. A moment when, because I was alone and was literally watching everything from a distance, I could suddenly be so happy about the

people who love me at home. And a moment when it suddenly hit me how much I love something as simple as color, like the blue of the sky in the painting. Or textures, like the cracked white plaster of the house that you almost imagine you can feel with your fingertips. Or certain smells, like the briny air that floats among the dunes back home. The sounds that remind me of summers long past, such as the sound of a light aircraft in the distance or the fading caws of the seagulls. Looking at this painting evoked a feeling of total freedom in me.

Swiss-British philosopher and author Alain de Botton writes that when we look at a painting, it can represent something not easily attainable for us. It's one of the reasons we buy a postcard of a painting and then hang it in a prominent spot above our desks he says (and yes, a postcard of *Ryder's House* now hangs on the wall behind my desk). De Botton believes we have a need for a constantly present, tangible reference to the emotional capacity of the person we want to be and who we believe in our minds we truly are, deep down. Because we see this image every day, we hope to be able to take on certain traits from it. What we like about it often isn't so much the subject of the image as the feeling, the reproduction of it in color and so on. We naturally know that we will stray far away from it, that it isn't possible or even practical to constantly cling to >



## AIRBNB EXPERIENCE

Airbnb doesn't just offer places to stay; it also offers 'experiences' organized by locals where you can see the city through their eyes. Each experience has its own theme and you have a choice of different options. In Washington D.C., they offer a 5-Course Vegan Tasting Experience (eating in a vegan restaurant—a great way for you to book a restaurant ahead of time before you leave), a Sip & Sew Experience (where you learn how to make clothes), and of course the Architecture of Capitol Hill Tour featured in this article. You can book these experiences at the same time you book your Airbnb stay. The sooner you book, the better chance you have of getting a spot. You can also review these experiences just like you would your Airbnb stay. [Airbnb.com/experiences](http://Airbnb.com/experiences)

the mood of the painting and that we will have to be an awful lot of different people (with bold opinions and a sense of confidence, with a laconic sense of humor and parental authority), but it remains nonetheless a beacon and a welcome reminder, he says.

### DINING WITH PRESIDENTS

Slow travel might just also be exploring—on foot—the neighborhood around where you're staying. So, on my last afternoon, I strolled through Georgetown, the area in Washington D.C. filled with charming 18th-century homes, a university (where former US President Bill Clinton studied) and a canal, its banks lined with chairs and benches so people can enjoy the view. I bought college sweatshirts for my children and engaged in a friendly conversation with the saleswoman. I ate a delicious veggie burger at the Good Stuff Eatery, a place that former US President and First Lady, Barack and Michelle Obama are also known to patronize (there's even a 'Prez Burger' and a 'Michelle Melt' on the menu). And I drank a cocktail at Martin's Tavern where then-Senator John F. Kennedy proposed to Jackie in 1953.

I walked back to my Airbnb via N Street and stopped briefly at number 3307 where JFK and Jackie lived before he became president. This is where their daughter Caroline grew up, their son John Jr. was born, and where the sidewalk is the spot from which he addressed the press as a presidential candidate. I wasn't even born when he became president, but if you take the time and literally stand still, the past seems tangible, for a moment.

On the way to the airport, I reflected on my slow-travel city trip. Apart from the National Museum of African American History and Culture, that hour of just sitting in front of the Hopper painting made the deepest impression on me. As the Russian painter and art theorist Wassily Kandinsky once said: "Lend your ears to music, open your eyes to painting and... stop thinking! Just ask yourself whether the work has enabled you to 'walk about' into a hitherto unknown world. If the answer is yes, what more do you want?" ●

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY CAROLINE BUIJS THIS TRIP WAS MADE POSSIBLE IN PART THANKS TO AIRBNB EXPERIENCE AND ICELAND AIR, BUT WITH FULL EDITORIAL FREEDOM

