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Historic D.C. Mall Hike: East Loop

Washington, DC

Distance: 4.5 mi (7.3 km)

Time: about 9 hrs · plan 2 days (2 h 25 m walking + 5 h 40 m at stops)

Difficulty: Easy

Stops: 14

Route: Loop

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By Gregg.

The east half of the Historic D.C. Mall Hike: a loop from the Smithsonian Metro station past the Smithsonian museums and the National Archives to the U.S. Capitol, the Supreme Court and the Library of Congress, then back along The Mall to the Smithsonian Castle, with challenges at each stop.

Free hike kit — generated October 25, 2026

About This Hike

Positioned downtown in the heart of the nation's capital, Washington D.C., the National Mall is an open-area national park that includes all of the most prominent D.C. destinations. This symbolic setting features monumental historical structures, museums and galleries, honors the most distinguished public figures of our time and offers beautiful open areas for the recreational enjoyment of visitors. In addition to its many great attractions, the D.C. Mall plays host to a large array of free annual events and receives millions of visitors each year.

This is the east loop of the D.C. Mall hike, covering the museums, the Capitol and the Library of Congress. The west loop covers the monuments, the memorials and the White House. Both start and end at the Smithsonian Metro station. Rather than suggest museums for you to visit, it is recommended that you select the ones that interest your group the most. The museums that most youth groups frequent are: the National Air and Space Museum, the National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of American History. If you want to walk The Mall, then this hike will include some challenges to make it more interesting. The Capitol is sometimes closed to visitors, so it can be hit or miss.

Hike Map

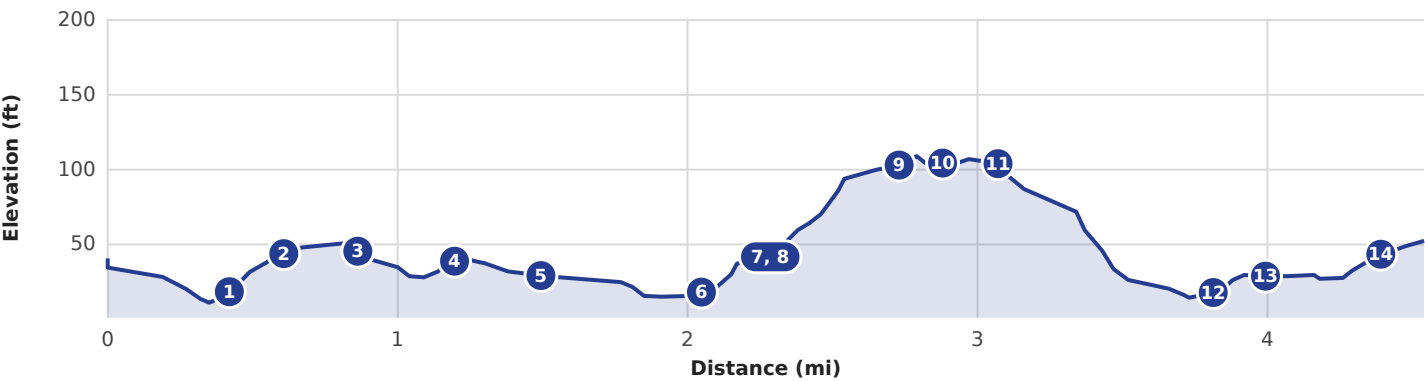


 Trail start · Transit stop

Satellite imagery © Esri — route and numbered waypoints as drawn by the hike author.

Elevation Profile

↑ 240 ft (73 m) gain · ↓ 231 ft (70 m) loss · 11-109 ft (3-33 m) elevation



The Trail, Stop by Stop

1

National Museum of African American History and Culture (38.89080, -77.03272) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

The National Museum of African American History and Culture is a place where all Americans can learn about the richness and diversity of the African American experience, what it means to them personally, and how it helped us shape this nation. This museum transcends the boundaries of race and culture that divide us and becomes a lens into a story that unites us all.

2

National Museum of American History (38.89089, -77.03001) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Since this is a historic hike, we feel this museum is an especially important place to visit. Opening in 1964, this museum now houses the American History collection. Youth groups may chose to skip this museum because after a day of historic sights it may be a bit too much to take in for one day. What should not be missed, however, is the original flag that inspired the Star Spangled Banner.

3

National Museum of Natural History (38.89083, -77.02596) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

This is one of the most popular museums in the capital, especially for youth groups. It has dinosaurs, life size whales, huge shark teeth and giant gems. It's amazing!

4

National Archives (38.89244, -77.02292) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 30 min

Here you will see the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Each person may bring one bag no larger than 17 by 26 inches, and everything goes through security.

5

National Gallery of Art (38.89088, -77.01990) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Completed in 1941 through an act of Congress, the National Gallery of Art has an amazing collection and is believed to be one of the best in North America. The Gallery's collection traces the development of Western Art from the Middle Ages to the present and includes many major works from artists including: Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Picasso, Cézanne, Leonardo da Vinci and Vermeer.

6

U.S. Grant Memorial (38.88981, -77.01310) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

This memorial honoring the General and the President began in 1902 and took 20 years to complete. It's the largest equestrian monument in the United States. Take some time to explore the details of this memorial.

7 The Capitol - West Side (38.88981, -77.01032) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

This building was designed by William Thornton after winning a competition suggested by Thomas Jefferson. The groundbreaking was in 1793 and George Washington himself laid the cornerstone. Congress met for the first time in 1800 with the building incomplete. Along with the White House and other buildings, the Capitol was partially burned in 1814 by the British. During these first years, only the two outside buildings were complete. In 1826 the center rotunda was completed.

Of interest, the famous Capitol dome was not the first. Originally, a much smaller timber dome was built. In the 1850s, the expansion of the building included the replacement of the timber dome with the cast-iron version you see today. The old dome was only about half the height of the new one.

8 The Summerhouse (38.89105, -77.01064) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

The Summerhouse is a brick structure set into the sloping hillside of the west Front Lawn among the paths that lead from Pennsylvania Avenue to the Senate side of the Capitol. This structure has offered rest and shelter to travelers for over a century. Constructed to provide comfort for those who explore the area on foot, it is also a pleasant location from which to appreciate the Capitol's classical architecture and its surrounding landscape.

9 The Capitol Tour (Capitol Visitor Center) (38.88981, -77.00719) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 1 hour

The Capitol Visitor Center is open to visitors with tour reservations from 8:30am - 4:30pm Monday through Saturday except for Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, New Year's Day and Inauguration Day. Tours run Monday through Saturday, and the last one starts at 3:20pm. It's a very interesting tour.

10 The Supreme Court (38.89063, -77.00522) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 15 min

This building was built in 1935 to house the Supreme Court, which was originally housed in the Capitol Building. You can walk through the building (open weekdays 9am - 3pm) and lectures are available, but not necessary.

11 Library of Congress (38.88869, -77.00543) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 30 min

Established in 1800 by Congress, the library was once housed in the Capitol Building. The current building was complete in 1897 to accommodate the expansion of the library. It is now the largest library in the world. The main reading room and the great hall are impressive.

A free timed-entry pass is needed to enter the Jefferson Building, but a quick walk in and out to observe the architecture of the original building is perfectly fine.

12 National Museum of the American Indian (38.88798, -77.01676) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

This 2004 museum has on display many artifacts from the Heye Collection. George Gustav Heye traveled through North and South America between 1903 and 1957. The National Museum of the American Indian houses one of the world's largest and most diverse collections of its kind. The museum's sweeping curvilinear architecture, its indigenous landscaping and its exhibitions are all designed in collaboration with tribes and communities from across the hemisphere. This unique place gives visitors from around the world the sense and spirit of native America. The restaurant serves unique Native American foods including bison.

13 National Air and Space Museum (38.88781, -77.01984) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 2 hours

This is perhaps the most popular museum with youth groups. In fact, since opening in 1976, it quickly became one of the most visited museums in the world. It has the actual "Spirit of St. Louis", the Apollo 11 Command Module, a touchable lunar rock, an IMAX theater and incredible displays. Free timed-entry passes are required.

14 Smithsonian Castle and Associated Museums (38.88893, -77.02598) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

The Smithsonian Castle was completed in 1855 in the Norman style, a mix of Romanesque and Gothic. It is closed for a major renovation, so you can only see it from outside, but the Enid A. Haupt Garden behind it stays open.

There are four museums open in this area. If you still have energy feel free to explore them: the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (a modern art museum), the Museum of African Art, and the National Museum of Asian Art (the Freer Gallery and the Sackler Gallery). The Arts and Industries Building, the original home of the National Museum, is closed and is becoming the home of the National Museum of the American Latino.

Head back to the Smithsonian Metro station to finish.

Planning Your Hike

Getting There

Trail start: Smithsonian (Transit stop)

Smithsonian Metro station (Blue, Orange and Silver lines). Exits on The Mall at 12th St. and at the southwest corner of 12th St. and Independence Ave.

Parking can be quite a challenge. It is recommended to park in a garage and take public transportation to reach The Mall.

Union Station is a great place to find parking and the building itself is a must see! The parking garage address is 30 Massachusetts Avenue NE, and parking is about \$26 per car for the day. For youth groups, take the Metro since that can be a new and interesting experience for them. Take the red line to Metro Center station. Get off and switch to the blue, orange or silver line and go to the Smithsonian station. City Center Parking at 870 9th Street NW is also a good alternative; check current rates. Take the Metro's green line to L'Enfant Plaza, then the blue, orange or silver line to the Smithsonian station.

The hike starts and ends at the Smithsonian Metro station, right on The Mall at 12th Street.

Choosing museums: You can't stop at every museum on this loop. Our top pick is the National Air and Space Museum, and the stop times allow about two hours there. The times allow a quick look outside the other museums, where most of the challenges can be answered. Allow about an hour for the Capitol tour (reservations recommended) and half an hour each for the Archives and the Library of Congress. Free timed-entry passes are required at Air and Space, the African American History museum and the Library of Congress, so get them ahead of time.

It is recommended that you start your trip as early as possible. Many museums and buildings close at 5:30pm. If you can get to the mall at 8:00-8:30am, you can fit in a lot of sightseeing. You're probably hiking in the summer; so, the weather will get hotter as the day progresses.

Please Note: Washington has a great deal of construction and often closes its streets to accommodate renovation and new construction. In addition, heightened security concerns can cause areas, exhibits and buildings to be inaccessible at times. It is recommended that you carry additional maps.

Things you'll need: sunscreen, lots of water, a compass (real or on smartphone) and a camera.

Waypoint hours & fees

Waypoint	Hours	Fees	Restrooms	Notes
1. National Museum of African American History and Culture	—	—	—	The museum opened in 2016 and is one of the most popular stops on the Mall. Free timed-entry passes are required, so get them ahead of time.
2. National Museum of American History	—	—	—	Do not miss the original flag that inspired the Star Spangled Banner.
4. National Archives	—	—	—	One bag per person, no larger than 17 by 26 inches. Everything goes through security.

Waypoint	Hours	Fees	Restrooms	Notes
9. The Capitol Tour (Capitol Visitor Center)	Mon-Sat 8:30am - 4:30pm for visitors with tour reservations; last tour 3:20pm. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day and Inauguration Day.	—	—	—
10. The Supreme Court	Weekdays 9am - 3pm, except federal holidays	—	—	You can walk through the building; lectures are available but not necessary.
11. Library of Congress	—	—	—	A free timed-entry pass is needed for the Jefferson Building, but a quick walk in and out to see the architecture is fine.
12. National Museum of the American Indian	—	—	—	The Mitsitam Cafe serves Native American foods, including bison.
13. National Air and Space Museum	—	—	—	Free timed-entry passes are required.
14. Smithsonian Castle and Associated Museums	—	—	—	The Castle is closed for renovation; the Enid A. Haupt Garden stays open. The Arts and Industries Building is closed.

Challenge Quiz

Answer as you hike — check your score with the answer key on the last page.

1 National Museum of African American History and Culture

1. In what year did Congress establish the museum by law?

- A. 1996
- B. 2003
- C. 2008
- D. 2012

2 National Museum of American History

2. At the front entrance of the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History there are three panels of engraved quotations. Who are the three authors of the quotations?

- A. James Smithson, John Quincy Adams, and Joseph Henry
- B. Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Benjamin Franklin
- C. George Washington, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton
- D. John Adams, Andrew Jackson, and Theodore Roosevelt

3 National Museum of Natural History

3. Outside on The Mall (south) side of the museum there are two displays. One is banded iron ore. What is the other display?

- A. Petrified wood
- B. A meteorite fragment
- C. A quartz crystal
- D. Fossilized coral

4 National Archives

4. In the gable near the peak of the roof is a sculpture of a man sitting reading a book. How many keys is he holding?

- A. 1
- B. 2
- C. 3
- D. 5

5 National Gallery of Art

5. How many buildings house the National Gallery of Art?

- A. 1
- B. 2
- C. 3
- D. 4

6 U.S. Grant Memorial

6. Who sculpted the bronze statues at this memorial?

- A. Henry Merwin Shrady
- B. Daniel Chester French
- C. Augustus Saint-Gaudens
- D. Gutzon Borglum

7 The Capitol - West Side

7. How many small pillars hold up the west side fountain at the base of the Capitol Building?

- A. 4
- B. 6
- C. 8
- D. 12

8 The Summerhouse

8. What is the most refreshing thing found inside the Summerhouse?

- A. Drinking fountains
- B. An ice cream stand
- C. A misting fan
- D. A shaded reflecting pool

9 The Capitol Tour (Capitol Visitor Center)

9. BONUS: What is the name of the statue at the top of the Capitol Building?

- A. Statue of Freedom
- B. Statue of Liberty
- C. Statue of Columbia
- D. Statue of Justice

10 The Supreme Court

10. On one of the statues at the front of the building is a tablet carved with a three letter Latin word for LAW. What is the word?

- A. LEX
- B. JUS
- C. FAS
- D. REX

11 Library of Congress

11. What are the names of the three buildings comprising the Library of Congress?

- A. Jefferson, Adams, and Madison
- B. Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln
- C. Adams, Monroe, and Jackson
- D. Jefferson, Franklin, and Hamilton

12. BONUS: Above the front doors of the Jefferson Building are nine busts of famous writers and thinkers. Who is in the center?

- A. Benjamin Franklin
- B. Thomas Jefferson
- C. Ralph Waldo Emerson
- D. Nathaniel Hawthorne

12 National Museum of the American Indian

13. On the main glass doors at the entrance to the museum, there are some symbols. How many hand prints surround the circle symbol?

- A. 8
- B. 10
- C. 13
- D. 15

14. BONUS: What is the name of the bronze statue near the entrance of the museum?

- A. Buffalo Dancer II
- B. Eagle Dancer
- C. Rain Dancer
- D. The Chief

13 National Air and Space Museum

15. At the south entrance to the Air and Space Museum there is a sculpture. What is the name of the sculpture, the name of the artist and the year it was created?

- A. Continuum by Charles O. Perry, 1976
- B. Infinity by José de Rivera, 1967
- C. Delta Solar by Alejandro Otero, 1977
- D. Ad Astra by Richard Lippold, 1976

14 Smithsonian Castle and Associated Museums

16. There is a unique garden just outside the south entrance of the castle. What is the last name of the person for whom the garden is named?

- A. Haupt
- B. Ripley
- C. Smithson
- D. Folger

Challenge Answers — Leaders Only!

1. B — 2003
2. A — James Smithson, John Quincy Adams, and Joseph Henry
3. A — Petrified wood
4. B — 2
5. B — 2
6. A — Henry Merwin Shady
7. C — 8
8. A — Drinking fountains
9. A — Statue of Freedom
10. A — LEX
11. A — Jefferson, Adams, and Madison
12. A — Benjamin Franklin
13. C — 13
14. A — Buffalo Dancer II
15. A — Continuum by Charles O. Perry, 1976
16. A — Haupt