

IN THIS TEMPLE  
AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE  
FOR WHOM HE SAVED THE UNION  
THE MEMORY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN  
IS ENSHRINED FOREVER



The Lincoln Memorial

# Bastion of History, Power and Democracy

Text and photos by Dr Oh Jen Jen

**WASHINGTON DC** had been on my bucket list for many years, not solely because of its rich history and abundant monuments. As a TV and film buff, I was most eager to check out landmarks featured in blockbusters like *Independence Day* and *National Treasure*, and acclaimed series *House of Cards*.

The day I arrived, I made a beeline for the White House, located just a block from my hotel. The southern facade is the main attraction, and it was no surprise to spot tourists clustered at the fence, frantically snapping photos. The Obamas' Portuguese water dog, Bo, was spotted taking a walk in the garden, triggering even more excitement.

The building is indeed as beautiful as I imagined it would be, and considering the tight security, I'm quite baffled by the recent breach where a man managed to scale the fence,

run across the lawn and enter the White House before he was arrested.

The place I loved visiting most in the American capital was the National Mall, which stretches from the US Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial. I made three separate trips to the latter, exploring Constitution Gardens, the Reflecting Pool and memorials dedicated to veterans of World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars.

Despite the huge number of visitors I encountered each time, the atmosphere remained sombre and respectful. Everyone spoke in hushed tones, and parents kept their active children in check. As I stood in front of President Lincoln's majestic marble statue, I was overcome by awe and great sadness. His legacy revolutionised the civil rights movement, and in 2008, the nation's first African-American



president was elected. Slavery will always be a part of US history, but President Lincoln's courage and compassion will never be forgotten.

Continuing the political history theme, the US Capitol is another excellent stop. Home to the US Congress (made up of the Senate and the House of Representatives), its neoclassical architecture, white exterior and imposing dome are visible from miles away, and a jaw-dropping sight up close.

Visitors are subjected to a lengthy security check at the entrance (no fun when it's raining!), but once inside, the staff are friendly and helpful, with well-coordinated guided tours that take you deep inside the dome. I mostly remember the introductory short film, which covered major historical events and had a production value that rivalled the best Hollywood movies. In fact, it was so moving my eyes teared up, and I finally understood why Americans – despite their many conflicts – remain so patriotic.

Next was Arlington National Cemetery, located in Arlington County, Virginia, just across the Potomac River. Sprawled over 624 acres of land, this military cemetery contains 400,000 graves, including those of President John F Kennedy; his wife, Jacqueline; and his brother, Senator Robert F Kennedy. It also celebrated its 150th anniversary in May last year.

Due to its large size, the cemetery cannot be covered on foot, so a bus shuttle loop service is provided. One of the stops includes the Tomb of the Unknowns, a monument which

commemorates American service members who died without their remains being identified. The symbolic changing of the guard ceremony takes place daily, but the morning I stopped by, there also happened to be a special dedication event, with veterans and their families participating, and wreaths presented in honour of those who had perished while serving their country.

The adjacent Arlington Memorial Amphitheater – an impressive structure made of white marble – should not be missed. A popular venue for many occasions, including state funerals, its key structures bear inscriptions of quotes from George Washington and Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which pay tribute to American soldiers.

The weather was beautiful the day I visited the cemetery. Once again, I was overwhelmed by a heavy heart, especially when the bus slowly wound its way through the grounds, and thousands of white tombstones came into view. I couldn't help but lament the lack of peace in our world, despite the horrors so many wars have already wrought.

Finally, I had to pick a museum from the long list of options available. The more renowned ones include the Library of Congress, National Archives, National Museum of American History and the Smithsonian (where the first two *Night at the Museum* movies are set). However, I eventually decided on the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), which provides for the study, documentation and interpretation of Holocaust history.



From left The US Capitol, Arlington National Cemetery, and the Reflecting Pool with the Washington Monument in the distance

The Hall of Remembrance is USHMM’s official memorial to Holocaust victims and survivors, containing an eternal flame and an area for lighting candles. There are multiple temporary exhibitions scattered throughout the building, as well as documentary screenings and talks by Holocaust experts. As I sat in a darkened auditorium and watched gut-wrenching exclusive film footage of concentration camps, my familiarity with the subject failed to prepare me for the emotional trauma. Fellow audience members reacted similarly, sniffing softly or sitting in grim silence as heartbreaking images and interviews appeared on screen.

The Permanent Exhibition is a definite must-see, but make sure you reserve tickets in advance or risk not being able to enter on busy days. Covering three floors in chronological order (ie, the Nazis’ rise to power, the Final Solution, and eventual liberation by Allied forces), it is unsuitable for young children or the faint-hearted. Artefacts include a train car which was used to transport Jews to death camps (and which visitors are allowed to explore), and a huge pile of shoes which belonged to Holocaust victims.

There were hundreds of high school students at the exhibition, and many, like me, were mentally and spiritually drained by the experience. Before leaving, I left a donation

at the information counter, as the museum relies on public funds to continue its important work.

I stayed only five days in Washington DC, but was profoundly altered by what I witnessed. This city isn’t merely another tourist attraction – it is history brought to vivid life, highlighting the best and worst of humanity, constantly cautioning us to never forget. ■

*“Only guard yourself and guard your soul carefully, lest you forget the things your eyes saw, and lest these things depart your heart all the days of your life, and you shall make them known to your children, and to your children’s children.”*

*– Deuteronomy 4:9*



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