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Secret to Avoiding Summer Crowds in Washington: Wait for Fall



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Trees begin to show their autumn colors on the east grounds of the Capitol in Washington

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STEVE EMBER: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

BARBARA KLEIN: And I'm Barbara Klein. Visitors to Washington, D.C., in the summer often want to stay inside air-conditioned museums. The cooler days of fall are a good time to explore the outdoors in and around the nation's capital.

STEVE EMBER: Autumn in Washington is our subject this week.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: Imagine that the calendar says it is fall and you have just arrived on a visit to Washington. The leaves on many of the trees have already begun to change color as they prepare to drop to the ground. Soon they will be gold and orange and red.

The summer crowds of visitors have thinned. Children are back in school, parents are back at work. Points of interest will be easier to photograph. There are fewer people to walk in front of your camera.

The weather should be more cooperative, too. Washington can get very hot and sticky in summertime. July and August are usually the warmest months. By October, you may need to wear a light jacket, especially after sunset.

BARBARA KLEIN: There are tour companies that will take you around the city. Or you can ride public transportation, or rent a car or take taxis. There is a plenty you can see just by walking around.

One place that might interest world travelers is the area of the city called Embassy Row. Washington has more than one hundred seventy diplomatic and consular offices. About one-third of them occupy Embassy Row. This area is between two streets named for states in New England: Massachusetts Avenue and Connecticut Avenue.

STEVE EMBER: An embassy usually has two parts. The ambassador lives in the residence while embassy business takes place in the chancery.

Some of the finest embassies are along the part of Embassy Row near Dupont Circle. Six roads come together at the circle. A number of hotels and restaurants are also in this area.

(MUSIC)

BARBARA KLEIN: Many diplomatic buildings in the capital once were the houses of wealthy Americans. A building that houses the Embassy of Indonesia, for example, was known for many years as the Walsh mansion.

Thomas Walsh had it built more than one hundred years ago as a home for his family. The architect designed the mansion similar to a style popular at the time in Paris.

Thomas Walsh was born in Ireland. He came to the United States at the age of nineteen. He made a lot of money in the state of Colorado. There, he developed and owned one of the richest gold mines in the world.

STEVE EMBER: Walsh's daughter, Evalyn Walsh McLean, owned the Hope Diamond. She wore the huge jewel even though she had received warnings that it caused terrible things to happen. Some people saw proof of that in the fact that two of her children and her husband died before her.

Many big parties took place among the costly furnishings of the Walsh mansion. Wealthy and famous people visited the beautifully lighted house.

BARBARA KLEIN: It was a center of Washington society until the nineteen thirties. The house stood unoccupied for a while, then government agencies used it for offices.

During World War Two, the Red Cross made bandages in the house and also used the space to treat soldiers wounded overseas.

In the nineteen fifties, Ali Sastroamidjojo bought the building for Indonesia. He served as the country's first ambassador to the United States. About thirty years later, the old mansion was connected to a modern building that was added.

Today, some people attend Friday prayers at the Indonesian embassy. The embassy also offers educational courses.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: Traveling along Embassy Row, we pass a number of other embassies. One of the largest is the British Embassy. The grounds include two chancery buildings and a residence. The ambassador's home looks like an English country house.

BARBARA KLEIN: On the embassy grounds a bronze statue of Winston Churchill welcomes visitors and people passing by on the street.

Winston Churchill was Britain's prime minister during World War Two. His statue shows him making a V-for-victory sign with one hand. The other hand holds a cane and a cigar.

Churchill stands with one foot on British land at the embassy and the other foot in Washington. This placement calls attention to the fact that his father was British and his mother was American. It also calls attention to the honorary United States citizenship that he was given.

STEVE EMBER: Close to the British Embassy is the United States Naval Observatory. Astronomers use the observatory to study the positions and movements of the Earth, sun, moon and other objects in space.

The people who work at the Naval Observatory must also find time for another responsibility. They keep the Master Clock for the United States.

We see an electronic sign with red numbers near Massachusetts Avenue. The numbers change by the second. What time is it? Time to continue our tour.

BARBARA KLEIN: Public tours of the Naval Observatory are available but they are limited.

There are several main buildings on the grounds on the Naval Observatory. One of these is a big white house. No, not the house where the president lives. This is the official home of the vice president.

STEVE EMBER: Next, we leave Embassy Row and head for Washington's historic Georgetown neighborhood along the Potomac River. In Georgetown we stop at a mansion that holds the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection. Dumbarton Oaks is another fine place for an outdoor visit.

In nineteen forty-four, delegates from the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union and China met at Dumbarton Oaks. World War Two was nearing its end. The purpose of the Dumbarton Oaks Conference was to talk about ways to secure a just and lasting peace in the world.

BARBARA KLEIN: Meetings took place between August and October of nineteen forty-four. The delegates talked about proposals for an international organization. Those talks led to the United Nations, which was established in nineteen forty-five.

Today, however, it is not the history but the beauty of the gardens at Dumbarton Oaks that captures our attention.

STEVE EMBER: The gardens offer peace in the middle of a busy city. There are flowers and trees along with pools and fountains of water. Something always seems to be in bloom here. Visitors have even seen roses in full flower in December at the start of winter.

Almost all of the sculptures in the garden were made from limestone from the state of Indiana in the Midwest.

Greenery and flowering bushes surround the Ornamental Pool in the gardens. A visitor has to resist the urge to jump in for a swim.

(MUSIC)

BARBARA KLEIN: Washington has many outdoor memorials and monuments around the National Mall area and throughout the city. But if a road trip out into the country interests you, then here is an idea.

One place to enjoy the beauty of nature in autumn is along Skyline Drive in Virginia. The road is about one hundred forty kilometers from Washington, on the other side of the Potomac River. You can rent a car to get there, or go on a tour bus.

The trees are pretty even if they have not yet reached their full colors in the fall. Visitors may see deer walking in the road. Drivers have to be careful not to hit them. There is another reason not to drive too fast. The road is not very wide.

STEVE EMBER: Skyline Drive is in Shenandoah National Park. The park is in the Virginia part of the Blue Ridge Mountains. In turn, the Blue Ridge Mountains are part of the Appalachian Mountains. The drive is along the top of the mountains.

Skyline Drive is the only road through Shenandoah. It passes through about one hundred seven kilometers of the park.

The park has about eighty overlooks where you can pull your car off the road and enjoy a view of nature in all its autumn beauty.

(MUSIC: "SHENANDOAH")

BARBARA KLEIN: Our program was written by Jerilyn Watson and produced by Caty Weaver. I'm Barbara Klein.

STEVE EMBER: And I'm Steve Ember. For more programs about American life, go to voaspecialenglish.com, where you can download transcripts and MP3 files. We will also have links if you would like to take a picture tour of the gardens at Dumbarton Oaks or see what the Indonesian embassy looks like. And we hope you can join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.