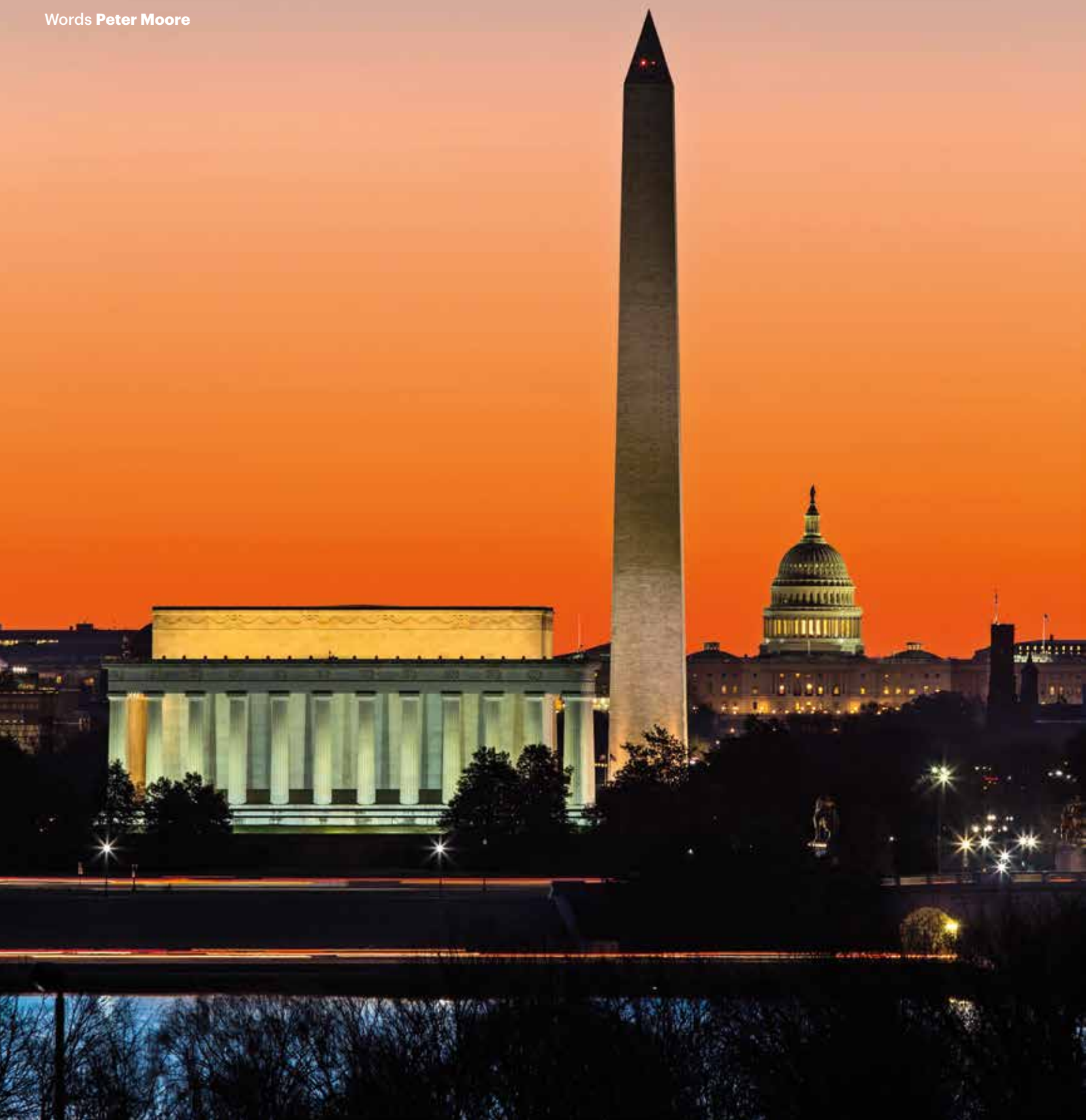


HIDDEN USA

# US Capital Region

The Capital Region isn't all politics and West Wing chatter. Washington, DC and the states beyond are filled with rejuvenated corners, vineyards and US history seen from every perspective

Words **Peter Moore**



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**Geography:** Capital Region consists of Washington, DC and the states of Virginia, Maryland and Delaware.

**Getting there:** Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD) welcomes daily non-stop flights from London Heathrow with British Airways (ba.com), American (americanairlines.co.uk) and Virgin Atlantic (virginatlantic.com). Flights cost from £492 one way and take eight hours. If you fly in from elsewhere in the US, you'll likely land at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA), which is more conveniently located – only four metro stops from the rail links of Union Station.

**Getting around:** Public transport is a viable way of getting about in the Capital Region, especially with a SmarTrip® Card. This can be used on the Metrorail, Metrobus, DC Circulator and bus networks in Virginia and Maryland. In Baltimore, water taxis are an affordable way to reach waterfront locations such as Federal Hill and Fell's Point. A single adult ticket costs \$12 (£11); a \$20 (£18.25) pass gives you unlimited rides for a day. In Alexandria, a free trolley bus shuttles King Street, linking the train station and waterfront. Uber and Lyft are the local ride-sharing apps of choice.

**Deals:** Alexandria's Key to the City pass (\$20/£18; visitalexandria.com) offers discounts on various sites and activities, including free entry to Carlyle House Historic Park and Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Museum, plus a 40% discount on Hornblower Water Taxi cruises and entry to Mount Vernon.

To outsiders, the Capital Region is often a confusing concept. 'Is Washington, DC a state?' is just about the most commonly asked question. (Answer: no, it's a district – cue puzzlement). Then there's what lies beyond America's political centre. There is more to this region than the West Wing, something that is swiftly apparent as you explore DC and the packed states around it – particularly Maryland and Virginia.

Through DC runs the mighty Potomac River, with breathtaking mountains to the west, glistening bays and beaches to the east, and close to 300 years of history rammed in between. What's more startling is that much of this lies within just an hour's drive of the iconic Washington Monument.

In the far north of Virginia you'll find Loudoun County. This is DC's wine country: a rolling landscape of hills braided with vineyards and dotted with wineries and breweries. County seat Leesburg buzzes with hipster bars and restaurants in its downtown, while nearby Purcellville gives off more of a family-friendly, Norman Rockwell vibe.

Elsewhere in Virginia you can sample the leafy colonial charms of Alexandria and visit historic Mount Vernon, a site with a complicated history but one that also honours the most famous founding father of them all, George Washington.

To the north-west, you'll find Chesapeake Bay and the big city vibes of Baltimore in Maryland, which, despite its tough reputation (fuelled by TV series *The Wire*), is also exceedingly sophisticated in parts. This is a port city with world class galleries,

a vibrant waterfront, a rich sporting heritage and blue crabs that are to die for.

Lastly, there's DC itself, which is in a constant state of renewal. You'll want to tick off iconic sights such as the Lincoln Memorial and the White House, of course, but take time to explore buzzy new neighbourhoods like the Naval Yard, the Wharf and the many galleries and museums, both in the National Mall and beyond. Whatever you choose to do in this extraordinary region, you'll have a capital time.

## HIGHLIGHTS

## THE NATIONAL MALL

Never has there been a more misleading name. The National Mall is no shopping centre, but 'America's Front Yard': 400 hectares of urban green space stretching from the Capitol building to the Potomac.

In some ways it's a kind of collective memory bank. It's here that you'll find the iconic Lincoln Memorial, the towering Washington Memorial and the austere Vietnam Veterans Memorial. There are also 11 Smithsonian museums, displaying everything from the tattered garrison flag that inspired 'The Star Spangled Banner' to one of the first Apple Macintosh computers. The National Air and Space Museum just re-opened its west wing, while the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Indian fill in many of the blanks missing from older institutions, recognising, at last, the contributions these cultures have made. Entry to all DC Smithsonian museums is free (si.edu). ►



**Beyond politics** (left) When you think of Washington, DC, you picture the Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument and US Capitol building, yet there is a world of countryside escapes, wineries and history on its doorstep that are also worth exploring; (top) George Washington's plantation, Mount Vernon, is not just where the graves of George and his wife, Martha, are buried – now a memorial to the slaves who worked and died there addresses its often difficult past



## BALTIMORE

It says much about Baltimore ([baltimore.org](http://baltimore.org)) that the city made world-famous as the focus of the gritty TV series *The Wire* also boasts the world's largest public collection of Henri Matisse paintings. This is proudly on display at the Baltimore Museum of Art, just down the road from Johns Hopkins University.

Inner Harbor provides the city's focal point, home to the National Aquarium, a Hard Rock Café and the esoteric American Visionary Art Museum, just across the way. Fell's Point is a vibrant area of bars, cafés and shops; it also accommodates The Sound Garden ([thesoundgarden.co.uk](http://thesoundgarden.co.uk)), the birthplace of Record Store Day, when all the vinyl shops around the world celebrate their resilient niche.

The retro Camden Yards is home to the world-famous Orioles baseball team and, just around the corner, you'll also find the birthplace of one of America's biggest sporting stars, Babe Ruth – a museum marks the spot. There's the new Sagamore Spirit distillery ([sagamorespirit.com](http://sagamorespirit.com)) to see, which pumps out award-winning rye whiskey. Then finish with a plate of local soft-shell crab, which is to die for – especially when combined with an ice-cold 'Natty Boh' (National Bohemian), the iconic local lager.

## LOUDOUN COUNTY

Loudoun County ([visitloudoun.org](http://visitloudoun.org)) is where stressed-out politicians go to unwind. Barely an hour north-west of downtown DC, its low hills are dotted with historic towns, secluded hamlets and countless wineries, craft breweries and field-to-fork farms. There is even a stretch of the Appalachian Trail, known as 'The Roller Coaster' for the many small ridges and hollows that walkers power through.

On the cultural side, there's an outdoor art trail in Leesburg, the annual LoCo Musicians Festival at the 868 Estate Vineyards ([locomusiciansfestival.com](http://locomusiciansfestival.com)) and the Middleburg Film Festival ([\[burgfilm.org\]\(http://burgfilm.org\)\), where Oscar-hopefuls tout their wares. But the reason city folk flock to LoCo for the weekend is more to do with what grows there.](http://middle-</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

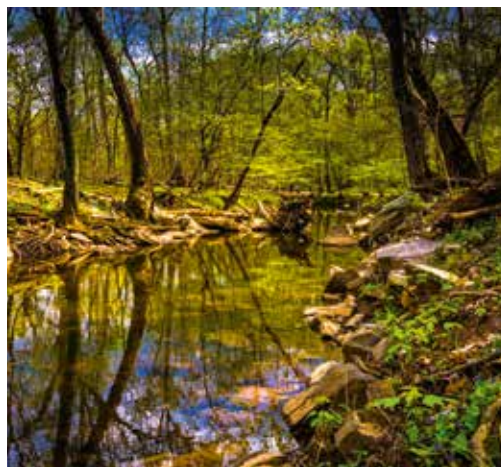
For foodies, the bounty of what George Washington dubbed 'The Breadbasket of the Revolution' is not to be sniffed at – or rather it is. Follow the Loudoun Wine Trail, then, if you're still standing, kick on to the LoCo Virginia Ale Trail ([visitloudoun.org](http://visitloudoun.org)). Finish with a farm-to-table feast at Patowmack Farm ([patowmackfarm.com](http://patowmackfarm.com)), or simply head to downtown historic Leesburg and sample all of the above in its many hipster bars and restaurants.

## ALEXANDRIA

George Washington laid out the original street plans for Alexandria in 1749. Close to 300 years later, this charming colonial city ([visitalexandria.com](http://visitalexandria.com)) is still best explored by foot: leafy King Street is recognised as one of the 'Great Streets of America'; Captain's Row, on Prince Street, offers a serene pocket of cobblestones and colourful Federal-style houses; and historic Carlyle House and Market Square exude a stately grace.

The city is also steeped in African American history, which is best explained on the Black history walking tour that starts at the sobering Freedom House Museum ([manumissiontours.com](http://manumissiontours.com)). Afterwards, drop in on Intertribal Creatives ([indianyouth.org](http://indianyouth.org)) on N Lee Street, which celebrates Indigenous art and culture, to see another side to the city.

There's no shortage of eateries to fuel your endeavours. Start with breakfast at Bob & Edith's ([bobandedithsdiner.com](http://bobandedithsdiner.com)), an old-school diner near the station. Lunch at Augie's Mussel House and Beer Garden ([etaaugies.com](http://etaaugies.com)), halfway along King Street. And finish at BARCA ([barcaalx.com](http://barcaalx.com)), right on the Potomac, where you can enjoy tapas and gaze over to where the sun sets over the Capitol building barely a half-dozen kilometres upriver.



**Capital ideas** (clockwise from top right) Alexandria's bustling King Street spans more than a kilometre of shops and centuries-old architecture in the Old Town; the USS *Constellation*, anchored in the Inner Harbor of Baltimore, was the last sail-only warship designed and built in the USA; the best-preserved portions of the historic Patowmack Canal are only visible within Great Falls Park; the hillside views from Bluemont Vineyard in northern Virginia



## THINGS TO DO

### Explore Virginia's Great Falls Park

Just 24km from DC and home to the most dramatic falls on the Potomac River, the 323-hectare Great Falls Park in Virginia serves up a multitude of walking trails, rapids (classes 5–6) and what's left of the Patowmack Canal, built under George Washington and one of the earliest examples of a lock system in the US. Indigenous American petroglyphs are etched into the cliffs above the tumultuous falls and the picnic areas are perfect for an All-American grill-up. And that flash of red? It's probably a cardinal, Virginia's striking state bird.


### Drink like they do in Loudoun County

Nate and Sarah Walsh are the 'It Couple' of the Loudoun County viticulture scene, farming 21 hectares of wine grapes across six distinct sites to produce world-class vintages. Their Walsh Family wine ([walshfamilywine.com](http://walshfamilywine.com)) is best experienced in their sun-drenched tasting room in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and ideally soundtracked by a vinyl record chosen from their vast and eclectic selection. Make sure you try 'What Will The Women Drink?', a cheeky riposte to a visitor who thought their wines might be a little too complex for the ladies. It's delicious.

### Make a pilgrimage to Mount Vernon

To understand modern America, visit George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate ([mountvernon.org](http://mountvernon.org)). Just 25km south of the capital, the former plantation is both a shrine to the iconic founding father and a paean to American exceptionalism. Watch a 4D spectacular at the Revolutionary War Theater, gaze upon Washington's dentures (made from animal and human teeth), marvel at Martha's bold interior-decorating choices in the restored mansion, and then consider the other side of life here with a visit to the slave cemetery, where a memorial to the plantation's indentured workers is finally granting them the recognition they deserve.

### See DC's rejuvenated shipyards

Known as Navy Yard, DC's former shipyard district once made gunboats and submarines; now it is a hive of craft breweries, hipster cafés and boutique hotels, all given a dusting of industrial chic. The Bull Pen, a fan zone for the Washington National baseball team, remains a fun, if sweaty, nod to the area's blue-collar past. Next, head to the river for manicured green spaces and the new Anacostia Riverwalk Trail. This leads to the Wharf ([wharfdc.com](http://wharfdc.com)), a new entertainment precinct that sits cheek-by-jowl with the city's fish market, which has been running since the days of the Civil War. 



Alamy