

Father-son budget spree to D.C. recalls and adds memories

By Brian Irwin
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I was raised in the shadow of the nation's capital, and although I have seen its most popular sights, I admit I took them for granted. It's a fabulous town, replete with free exhibits, cheap eats, and boyhood wonders that in retrospect helped mold me. So when my son turned 10, it was his time. And we took on a challenge: Spend three days in D.C. for under \$1,000, round trip from our home in New Hampshire.

Andy's eyes widened the moment we emerged from the Metro, D.C.'s subway, onto the National Mall. The Washington Monument anchors one end, the Capitol the other. We struck out across the lawn to the National Museum of Natural History. A few exhibits had rotated since my last visit, but the venerable Hope Diamond and Giant Squid still enjoyed their resting spots on the marble rotunda's spokes. I lent Andy a point-and-shoot camera for the trip and he readily fired the shutter at every marvelous sight.

The National Museum of American History, next door to Natural History, is a fabulous collection of Civil War and beyond era treasures that make one proud to be American. Arguably not the most exciting collection for a 10-year-old, Andy was still awestruck at the display of the original Star Spangled Banner, the flag that flew over Fort McHenry. Sea-battered warships and wartime garb filled the halls, where we learned about our nation's inception.

The National Air and Space Museum was next. We nibbled freeze-dried astronaut ice cream and roved among the lunar lander, the Apollo space capsules that have flown to space and back, and the first plane to fly, unfueled, around the world. This is a hall of dreams, one where childhood spectacles like walking in a real space station or reveling in a giant planetarium come to life. And it hasn't changed much over the years, only been refreshed. After a meal at the Hard Rock Cafe and a stroll through Chinatown, we made our way back to Alexandria, Va., and Crystal City, where we'd rest for the day to come.

Day two took us to the National Zoo. The venerable giant panda exhibit was only one of the many exhibits that took us on a wild ride around the world. From mealtime otter viewing to tanks filled with coiled anacondas and cobras, from hay-munching elephants to roaring tigers and lions, the zoo was as spectacular as it was in my youth. Newer displays like the American bison were juxtaposed with classics like enormous tortoises, each and every one captured through Andy's lens.

That day was capped with a distant viewing of the White



BRIAN IRWIN FOR THE GLOBE

House. As we made our way to the South Lawn we passed the staff gate. With little warning, a dozen Secret Service agents sprang from the White House, halting traffic in every direction. Andy asked "What are they doing, Daddy?" In a flash, four black SUVs erupted through the gate: the president's motorcade. In seconds they were gone. I practically needed to scrape Andy's jaw off the sidewalk as he inquired about the security detail. The purpose of armored guards. The reality of bulletproof windshields. The things that would impress a visitor of any age, especially a little boy.

We retired to our hotel in Crystal City, a 15-minute Metro ride from the White House. For a country boy on a city holiday, room service provided as much excitement as watching the

The author's son sizes up the Washington Monument on a rainy day.

great cats dine on raw meat. Exhausted from miles of walking, the bed swallowed us as Andy faded into dreams of all things patriotic. Which was good, because in the morning, he'd see some of the most important sights in our nation.

It was raining hard the next day, but that didn't deter us from memorial hopping. We circumnavigated the Washington Monument. He and I raced sheets of rain down the reflecting pool to the steps of the wondrous Lincoln Memorial. The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial came next, followed by a distant spying of the Jefferson Memorial. He photographed the eerie, dripping sculptures of Korean War soldiers at that memorial. The Bureau of Printing and Engraving was closed, but he was equally excited to see the outside of a building that houses a true money factory.

Hunger strikes hard when you're 10, so we dove into the well-known D.C. Chophouse for a sirloin burger and crab bisque. After filling our tanks, we settled into a swift-moving line to enter the National Archives. Within minutes we were scanned, screened, through security, and had completed a debriefing about the prohibition of photography in the rotunda. And so we stepped forward to see the documents that made our nation, with nothing but the mental image to remember for years to come.

Andy had not yet learned about the Constitution or the Bill of Rights, about the Declaration of Independence or the events that compelled our states into one united country. The documents rest in ballistic cases, fireproof and built to survive a bomb blast. We viewed these, I explaining each one in the best way I could, elucidating how critical the survival of these documents is to every American, and even to those

who aren't.

We boarded the plane that evening for our return home to North Conway. As we settled into our seats, Andy recounted what he'd seen. His leather journal was splayed open on the seatback tray table, his pen scribbling words capped with exclamation points, and his drawings of the Washington Monument with its flags waving in the wind. Next to him sat a gold-plated commemorative

coin from the zoo and a collection of gems in a labeled box, his souvenirs of a trip he'll never forget.

He shot me a toothy grin. "How about the \$1,000 dollar budget, Daddy? Did we make it?" I opened up my wallet, flipped through some bills, and smiled at him. There was \$23 remaining.

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Getting there: Southwest Airlines offers cheap fares direct from most major airports to Ronald Reagan National Airport. Our fares from Portland, Maine, were under \$160 each. www.southwest.com.

Lodging: Crystal City in Arlington, Va., offers an abundance of nice hotels, and with proper advanced planning, we were able to stay at a Hilton for \$109 per night. www.hilton.com.

Getting around: Crystal City is minutes from the airport and can be easily reached from there on the Metro or free hotel shuttle. To reach the museums, explore the Metro. From \$5.60 per person per day. Don't bother with a rental car, you won't need it. www.wmata.com.

Dining: Dinner at the D.C. Chophouse could blow your budget, so hit it for lunch. It's a historic building. Lunch from \$9.50. www.districtchophouse.com. Sample the myriad food trucks. They're cheaper than museum cafeterias, better, and more fun.

Entertainment: Washington's gift to the world is the all-free Smithsonian. www.si.edu. The only entertainment we paid for was a movie in a planetarium. Make a punchlist, carry a backpack (they're allowed in museums) with water, raincoats, and snacks, and you're set for a day you'll never forget.



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