

# A Pause for Thought

You'll find few locations that feature as much soul-stirring history as Washington, DC, the home of American politics.

Words JOEL MEARES

**I**N THE CENTRE of the Contemplative Court inside the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, there is a constant rain plummeting from a halo-like skylight into a square pool. The steady stream easily fills the bronze-walled space with the mesmerising sound of a rushing river. Quotes from the likes of Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson Mandela mark the walls, and at the bottom of the pool, blurred by the surface of the water, lie coins from all over the world. They've been gathering here since former US President Barack Obama officially opened the museum in September 2016, a mere four months before he would vacate office.

In a city of many storied rooms — congressional chambers where some of America's most vital laws have been passed and the hideaways and dining rooms where those laws were created — the Contemplative Court makes a case for being among the most important. It's not that history unfolded here. It's not, as fans of the musical *Hamilton* might say, 'the room where it happens'. But it is where people enter after their ascent from the museum's history galleries, located four levels below the street. ►►





where the brutality of the slave trade is unflinchingly laid out — to the top, which ends with the election of Obama, and a display featuring the Shepard Fairey 'Hope' poster and the black, red-popper print dress that was worn by then-first lady Michelle Obama at an event in 2013 held to mark the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington.

On their way up, visitors are drawn into the hulls of European slave ships, taken into the cotton fields of South Carolina, confronted by the remnants of segregation and Jim Crow (you'll see original 'whites only' signs standing beside several golliwog-style minstrel toys), and swept up in the energy of the Civil Rights movement. The museum is the latest one from the Smithsonian Institution, which was founded during the 1800s after Englishman James Smithson left his estate to the US to found an "establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men" in Washington, DC, despite never having set foot in the country. His directions

of debatable size — gather to welcome presidents on Inauguration Day. Some might see the free museums as a touch tiresome, and wandering some of the levels of the National Museum of American History, with its statues of train conductors and ode to television marionette Howdy Doody, that feeling can resurface. But the National Museum of African American History and Culture, winner of the architecture category for the 2017 Beazley Design of the Year award, has been a shot of energy for the institution. More than three million people have visited since it opened, while entry passes are released three months in advance and are snaffled up within hours.

The mammoth network of museums is of renewed interest in 2018 for other reasons, too. Rarely has the American present felt so much a part of American history as it does right now, with ongoing investigations keeping the White House on edge. Some experts say the norms of democracy, established over the centuries, are being eroded, and the country is divided — geographically, politically and economically — like rarely before. It's quite a time to be walking the streets of this energised city and exploring the country's past. Everywhere you go, people are talking about the nation's history and politics, and the man who seems to be hell-bent on changing both.

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would eventually be interpreted by US Congress as a command to establish an institution for scientific research and the preservation of history.

These days, there are 19 Smithsonian museums carrying out that mandate — nearly all in DC — among them the National Museum of American History, National Portrait Gallery and National Museum of the American Indian. Most surround the National Mall, the famous green patch that stretches from Capitol Hill to the cloud-nudging Washington Monument, the space where crowds —

Which brings us to the hat: fire engine red and emblazoned with those famous words: 'Make America Great Again'. You can get them everywhere in Washington, right next to the Hillary Clinton and Kellyanne Conway bobbleheads. But you really need to see one specific 'MAGA' cap — the one you'll find on the third floor of the National Museum of American History in the Democracy gallery, encased in glass like a prized diamond, beside an Obama/Biden phone case and an 'I'm With Her' badge.

The gallery and wider museum are great starting points for anyone wondering how America went from the top-hatted Abraham Lincoln to the red-capped Donald Trump. There is election paraphernalia aplenty — a red 'Re-Elect Roosevelt' licence plate sits near a 'We Don't Want Eleanor Either' badge — and artefacts that trace the development of American democracy from its earliest days. A highlight is the original portable desk (it's actually little more than a wooden drawer) on which a future president, Thomas Jefferson, wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

The rest of the top level of the museum offers a similar mix of sobering, spine-tingling and showbiz, all key pillars of American politics and presidencies. In one passageway, visitors can see the 14-starred, nine-metre x 10-metre American flag that, when raised into the air to celebrate an 1814 victory against the British, inspired Francis Scott Key to write *The Star-Spangled Banner*, which would go on to become the US national anthem. In a more brightly lit space, guests can view the dresses worn by the first ladies to the presidential inaugural ball. Hang awhile and eavesdrop — on my visit, a mother and daughter were loving the "elegant" red gown worn by Laura Bush, but were unimpressed with Michelle Obama's left-shoulder-revealing number from 2009. Melania Trump's vanilla silk dress, which revealed ➤

**OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Exterior of the National Museum of African American History and Culture; the Contemplative Court inside the museum; Old Ebbitt Grill; National Museum of American History. **OPENER** The Washington Monument.

## DETAILS

**Capitol Hilton** 1001 16th St. NW; [www.hilton.com](http://www.hilton.com). **Le Diplomate** 1601 14th St. NW; [www.lediplomate.com](http://www.lediplomate.com). **National Museum of African American History and Culture** 1400 Constitution Ave. NW; [www.nmaahc.si.edu](http://www.nmaahc.si.edu). **National Museum of American History** 1300 Constitution Ave. NW; [www.americanhistory.si.edu](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu). **National Museum of the American Indian** 4th St. SW & Independence Ave. SW; [www.nmai.si.edu](http://www.nmai.si.edu). **National Portrait Gallery** 8St. NW and F St. NW; [www.npg.si.edu](http://www.npg.si.edu). **Old Ebbitt Grill** 675 15th St.; [www.ebbitt.com](http://www.ebbitt.com). **Willard InterContinental Washington** 1401 Pennsylvania Ave. NW; [www.washingtonintercontinental.com](http://www.washingtonintercontinental.com).





**LEFT** The National Portrait Gallery courtyard is the perfect place for visitors to relax.

both of her shoulders, was “exquisite”. Eavesdrop almost anywhere in DC and you’re likely to hear people talking about Melania’s other half. That’s to be expected in the cocktail bar of a historic hotel such as the Willard, where Martin Luther King Jr penned his famous “I have a dream” speech, or the Capitol Hilton, at which every US president since Franklin Roosevelt has stayed. Or at the table next to you in classic restaurant

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the Old Ebbitt Grill, which has been a favoured haunt of power players since 1856, or buzzy French brunch hotspot Le Diplomate, near Logan Circle. Even at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, which is yet to install a portrait of Trump in its Presidential Portraits gallery (this will happen after his presidential term is finished), he dominates the conversation. “What will they do with Trump?” someone asks as they walk past a painting of Richard Nixon by Norman Rockwell. In the museum’s courtyard, friends discuss the Department of Justice’s investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election as if they were talking heads on CNN.

If you are entering the Presidential Portraits gallery seeking a reprieve from such chatter, to perhaps be transported to more tranquil times in which the presidency was held in high esteem, you might want to keep your expectations in check. It features stories of assassinations, political knifings and blunt historical assessments of presidencies with each artwork (the ineffectiveness of pre-Lincoln leaders to deal with the South-North divide over slavery is thrust into particularly sharp focus).

The gallery also offers a remarkable insight into how the image of the presidency has evolved. You enter to Gilbert Stuart’s incredible life-size, full-body image of first president and war hero George Washington, arm stiffly outstretched and eyes staring stoically away from the viewer, a formal dress sword at his left. You exit on a vibrant oil painting of Barack Obama, who was captured in paint by Kehinde Wiley sitting in a chair and surrounded by a colourful botanical background.

Presidential assessments at the National Museum of African American History and Culture are even more complicated, and none more so than Jefferson’s. In the museum’s History Galleries, a statue of the man whose simple writing desk inspires goosebumps at another institution stands surrounded by stacks of bricks bearing the names of some of the 609 slaves he owned (Hercules, Jupiter, Raphael, Unknown). The Declaration he wrote on that desk, notes the exhibition label, “did not extend ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ to all Americans”. The Smithsonian’s newest museum captures the tragedy of African American history in those subterranean

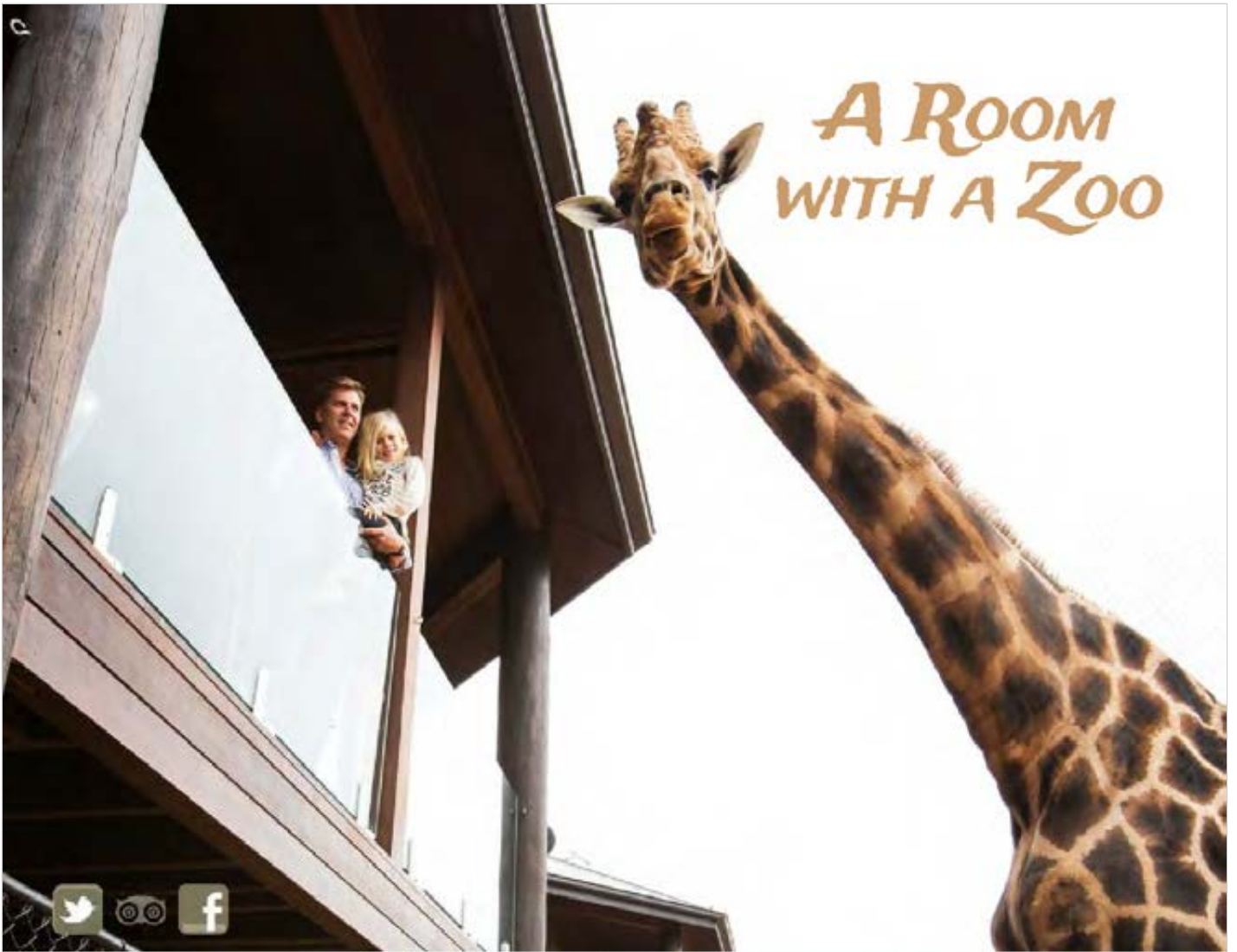
galleries, before its mood explodes into a meaningful celebration of how African Americans have shaped the nation in its galleries on the third and fourth floors. It’s here that a hall of ‘game changers’ champions African American sporting stars, while rocker Chuck Berry’s red Cadillac Eldorado awaits your Instagram feed. Every detail of the museum – from the metal lattice that enshrines the building, evoking the intricate ironwork crafted by slaves in the Southern United States, to the cafe, which serves dishes curated by region (try the spicy jambalaya from the Creole Coast station) – has been carefully thought through.

While the Contemplative Court is the centrepiece of the building, a smaller, less grand room holds a similar power. In this small alcove, partitioned off like a chapel on a lower level, is the original casket in which the body of Emmett Till – a teenager lynched in Mississippi for offending a white woman while he was visiting from Chicago in 1955 – was placed. Crane your neck and you can see a photograph of Till’s unrecognisably mutilated face inside the casket. Till’s mother, Mamie, insisted on an open casket funeral so people would see, unfiltered, the full effect of racism in America. A video of Mamie describing her son’s dead body plays on a wall.

No pictures are allowed in this room, and nobody talks or texts as they file through. For several minutes, it feels as if the whole of the world, and the nation, is shut off, and everyone inside this makeshift chapel is united in silence. 📵

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