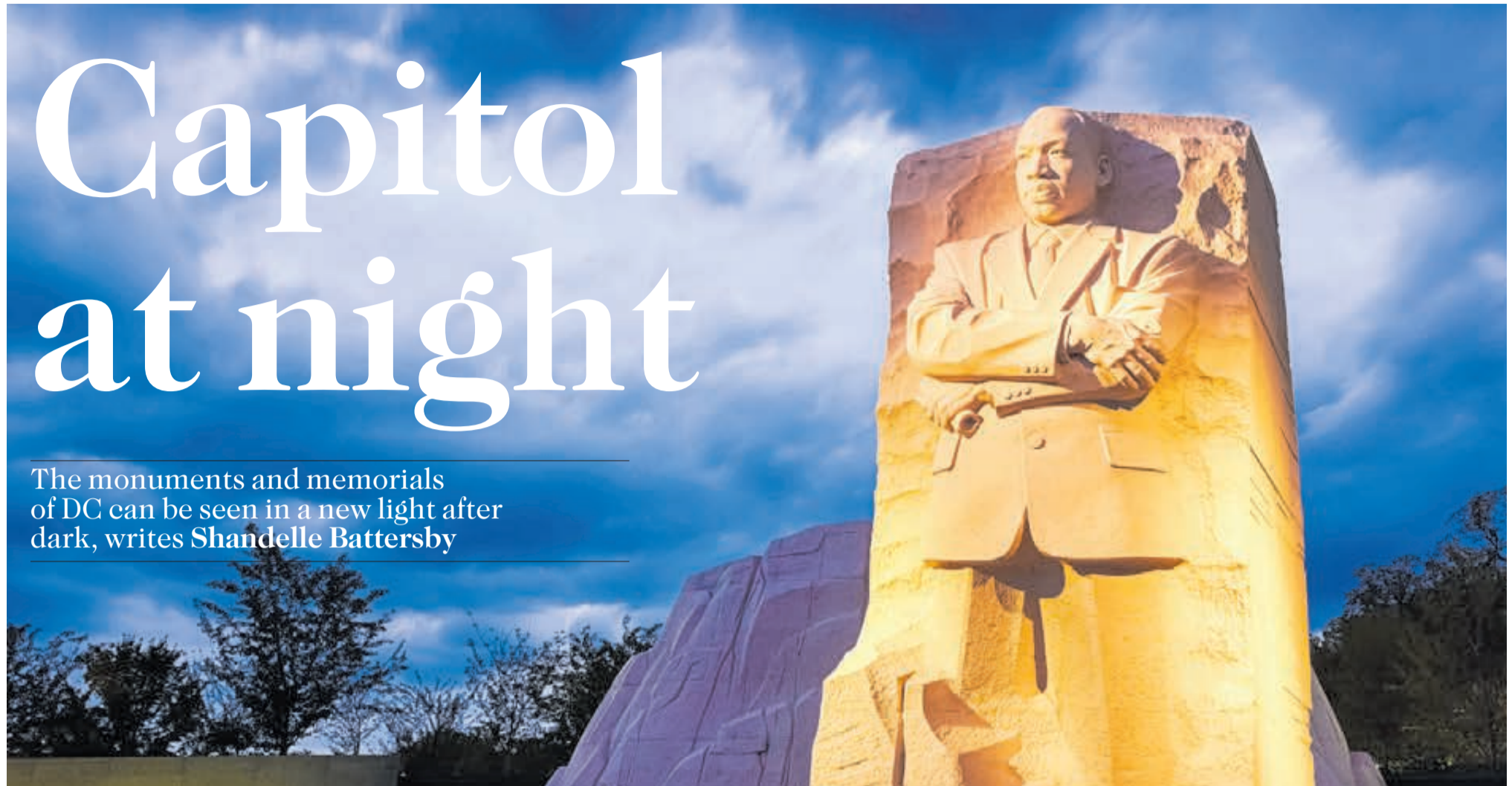


USA »



Capitol at night

The monuments and memorials of DC can be seen in a new light after dark, writes **Shandelle Battersby**

You may feel you've seen the iconic buildings and monuments of Washington DC dozens of times in photographs, TV shows and movies, but visiting them after the sun goes down gives an entirely

different perspective. Each has its own unique look thanks to clever lighting that adds atmosphere and mood; there are fewer tourists around meaning you can get closer; and, perhaps best of all, in the middle of a ferocious DC summer, a night tour is much cooler.

Our first look at the US capital was in the dark, as part of an extra with tour director Todd Geist on Insight Vacations' Best of Eastern Canada and USA tour from Toronto to New York City. The night tour took in the big guns: the Thomas Jefferson, Martin Luther King,

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The Martin Luther King Memorial in Washington DC (left) is impressive at night, as is the Korean War Veterans Memorial (below). Photos / Getty Images



Bite of the Big Apple

Our last stop was one of the craziest places in the world, the heart of Times Square, New York City baby (pictured). Two nights in NYC with Insight is enough time to get a taste of the Big Apple – you'll head out on the water to see the Statue of Liberty, visit the memorial site where the World Trade Center towers once stood, check out a couple of highlights in Central Park, get a birds-eye view from the Top of the Rock observation deck, have a look around Grand Central Station and visit the Highline Park above the city streets. This might be enough for some; for others it will leave you wanting a whole lot more. Tack on an extra couple of days if you think you'll want to do some exploring on your own.



Checklist USA

GETTING THERE
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Having just visited the Pentagon memorial, the constant stream of aircraft above our heads in the capital was slightly alarming – busy Reagan National Airport is nearby, and the flight path for planes runs in the skies above the Potomac River. Add to that Secret Service and decoy choppers (the US President flies in a convoy of up to six machines when he travels by helicopter), and you have a lot of movement in the skies.

The next day we retraced most of our steps on a city tour with local expert Louann Filadelfo and although the monuments and buildings were still impressive, they lacked the same impact in daylight. It was sobering, however, to see a group of Honor Flight military veterans at the World War II memorial, paying tribute to their former comrades.

We had a good old stickybeak at the White House from its north front (there is no back door, just north and south fronts) and were surprised at how close you can get to it – right up to the fence – before the Secret Service agents start giving you The Look.

Along the way Filadelfo told us about the mood at Obama's inauguration ("everyone was almost too frightened to breathe in case they broke the spell").

We had the afternoon free to try to get around at least a couple of the Smithsonian museums that lie along the National Mall and are free to visit, although you could spend a day at each and still not see half of their collections.

I ran quickly around the National Air and Space Museum (where the collection features items for Nasa and the Wright Brothers' Flyer), before heading for the American History Museum, where you can see original Bert and Ernie puppets, Muhammad Ali's boxing gloves, the top hat Lincoln was wearing when he was assassinated, one of the first Apple computers, Julia Childs' kitchen, Judy Garland's ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), memorabilia owned by the Founding Fathers, and a boom box used by Fab 5 Freddy in the 1980s, to name but a few highlights of its extraordinary collection.

Two nights in the capital sounded like more than enough from back home in New Zealand but we'd barely scratched Washington DC's fascinating surface. I can't wait to go back.



Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, World War II, Vietnam Veterans and Korean War Veterans memorials, as well as the rooftop patio at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

We also did a drive-by of the most famous house in America at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave, and the Capitol building where the US Congress sits – the flags were up indicating it was in session, despite it being late in the evening by the time we got there.

The powerful, evocative MLK memorial may have been the most memorable for me, though they all left an impression.

Positioned on the Tidal Basin in between Jefferson and Lincoln (where he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech), the 9m tall statue features the great man's resolute frame emerging from the Stone of Hope, which sits detached from two large boulders, known as the Mountain of Despair.

The statue was inspired by a line in the famous speech: "Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

"Freedom is not free" says an inscription at the nearby Korean War Veterans memorial beside the stainless steel statues of 19 US soldiers making their way through an interpretation of the Korean countryside on patrol. Each has a unique expression, all look terrified and exhausted, hunched over and vulnerable.

At night, illuminated from below, the scene is particularly haunting; whereas the 2000 etched faces from actual photographs of support workers on an adjacent black granite wall loom out at you like ghosts.

We'd travelled to DC earlier that day from Philadelphia via the states of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia.

At the latter we'd made a stop to see the imposing Pentagon and its moving 9/11 memorial, which pays tribute to the 184 killed in the 2001 terror attacks when one of the hijacked planes was flown into the building.

We also paid our respects at the Iwo Jima Memorial and the impressive United States Air Force Memorial near Arlington National Cemetery, which features three enormous spires designed to resemble the contrails of three jets performing a "bomb burst" manoeuvre.



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Kingston: See the old buildings, churches and fortifications.

Ottawa: See the Parliament building, City Hall and National Gallery of Canada.

Quebec: Visit the Montmorency Falls.

Bar Harbor: Experience the natural beauty of Acadia National Park.

Kennebunkport: Stroll along the shops and historic buildings.

Boston: Follow part of Boston's red-brick Freedom Trail which brings the story of the American Revolution to life.

Philadelphia: View Independence Hall and visit the Liberty Bell.

Washington, D.C.: View the sites of this historic capital including the White House and Capitol Hill. Visit the Lincoln Memorial.

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