

Capitol Blossoms

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FOOD, TRAVEL & ENTERTAINING

FARROKH KHAMBATA'S PROGRESSIVE FOOD, PEACH BLOSSOM IN WASHINGTON, FLOWERY BLISS, EMMA SAWKO'S CHRISTMAS TABLE, AL HABTOOR CITY PARTY, GUCCI BAG

PHOTO COURTESY OF GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI

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Washington DC has a classical profile; it is a city with an undeniable swag. The US capital exudes a sense of power from every pore. Known familiarly as just DC, this is a capital unlike any other in the world. But, naturally, for it is the heartbeat of the most powerful nation on the planet and the rudder of the country rests there. Indeed what happens in Washington has a domino effect across the world.

The national flag, affectionately called the Stars and Stripes, flaps and whips in the breeze atop grandiose pillared monuments as though to underscore the fact that this city is the capital of the world and not to be trifled with. If you put your ear to the sun-warmed stones of its iconic monuments – the White House, Capitol Hill, the memorials to Lincoln, Jefferson, Martin Luther King and Roosevelt and the gorgeous Smithsonian museums – they seem to speak of a tumultuous past; of battles lost and won; of betrayal and redemption, of past and present and a future brimming with hope.

And that promise of hope is renewed each spring in the city's heart, the pedestrian-friendly, tree-lined boulevard called the National Mall where 3,000 cherry blossom trees, gifted by Japan, bloom in a symphony of pink hues. It is almost as though the city unfurls a welcome carpet for tourists and locals who respond enthusiastically to the clarion call: "The cherry blossoms have bloomed."

The cherry blossoms flower between end-March and early April and we happened to be in Washington at the

1. Jefferson Memorial and cherry blossoms
2. Martin Luther King Jr Memorial
3. Capitol Hill - reflection pool
4. Stroll through spring blooms
5. Washington Memorial
6. White House
7. Administrative building at sunset
8. Tree laden with cherry blossom

time, by accident rather than design. This made treading on a floral carpet even more magical – a carpet woven in lace-like shades of pink as well as the snow-flake-white of apple blossoms that spread in the parks edging the city's grand monuments. Washington DC which often comes across as hard-nosed and cynical acquires a delicate feminine aura in cherry blossom season; almost like that of a beautiful woman made of tempered steel!

We ambled across this city of granite and marble from our hotel in the spiffy neighbourhood of Georgetown; walked past Billy Martin's Tavern where the late President John Kennedy had proposed marriage to his future wife Jacqueline. On a subway to the National Mall area, we were surrounded by a smorgasbord of Washingtonians – elegant women in stilettos who seemed to have powered their way to somewhere near the top of the corporate ladder; earnest looking political interns; tattooed students, psychics bearing doomsday placards and activist types... Washington wears its live-and-let-live philosophy on its sleeve; it bubbles and boils in sidewalk cafes and restaurants and this was also evident in the excited exodus that we were a part of... to the National Mall, the scene of the cherry blossom spectacle.

The 1.9 mile long green stretch is anchored at one end by the Lincoln Memorial, on the other by Capitol Hill, intersected by a reflecting pool, the World War II memorial and the Washington Monument, a 555-ft needle-sharp

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obelisk, which seems to follow you everywhere. We moved with the crowd, a joyous tide of people revelling in the fresh crisp air and the fragrance of cherry blossoms that enveloped all of us in a perfumed cloud. Even the birds trilled happily as dads hoisted kids on their shoulders and contented mamas pushed strollers through overhanging floral pink and white curtains. Families picnicked in convivial circles of warmth and joggers sweated as they powered past leisurely walkers.

There were others who did yoga asanas with the enthusiasm of the recently converted to India's ancient fitness regimen while the lazier ones slept on the grass with beatific smiles, revelling in the sheer sensuality of the moment. People drifted in paddle boats around the Tidal Basin (an artificial water body) for the views of the flowering trees

are reportedly stunning from that angle. Everyone appeared to be oblivious to the real world, which seemed to pulse a planet away – a toxic mass of war, strife and cruelty.

The cherry trees were gifted to the US in 1912 to honour the friendship between Japan and the US. The first batch of 2,000 which arrived in 1910 was diseased, but the second lot in 1912 flourished. The US responded with a gift of dogwood trees and, today, the National Cherry Blossom Festival (launched in 1927) in DC is one of the most anticipated spring events in the city and the country, drawing 1.5 million visitors every year.

We had clocked ourselves that day and discovered that we had walked for nearly 12 hours. We returned to the Park Hyatt, not limp with exhaustion, but buoyed by the eye-engorging sights. Visiting museums, gazing at the memorials, awestruck by imposing edifices like the Supreme Court where a group of locals sang hymns, their voices taking flight like the birds that we had seen swooping and flitting in graceful arcs over the cherry blossoms. ❖

FACT FILE

Washington, DC is well connected by air, road and rail (Amtrak) with the rest of the country. In terms of accommodation, the capital has luxury hotels as well as mid-range accommodation, B&Bs, guest houses etc. Washington has a lively restaurant scene and neighbourhoods such as Dupont Circle, Adams Morgan and U Street become party zones at night. For more information, visit: www.washington.org or Brand USA at: www.thebrandusa.com



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