

O beautiful for tourists' feet: getting lost, seeing a presidential motorcade, gawking at food prices, and taking in history on a trip to Washington, D.C.

We live so close to Washington, D.C., that it's a little embarrassing that we've never really taken our children there. So, when my father, sister, and her four children decided to make a day trip to D.C. on Thursday, our boys and I made a spur-of-the-moment decision to tag along.

Independence Day was coming, after all. And this is our nation's history.

My sister and I drove separately, but we parked in the same parking garage. Then we spent 20 minutes and several cell phone minutes trying to find one another.

"We're at 13th and Pennsylvania."

"You can't be. WE are at 13th and Pennsylvania."

"Well, see you later. Have a great day in D.C."

No trip to D.C. is complete without getting lost a few times.



For the record, this is where we were.

When we finally connected, my father gave a brief security talk. Every child needed to be with an adult. If he yelled, "Emergency," we would all respond immediately. We were going to have fun, he said. I was glad he was along—and not just because he was carrying the lunches.

On the sidewalk across from the White House, we pointed the president's residence out to the children—you could barely see it through the trees—and then stood waiting to cross the street.

But the light wasn't changing. Suddenly a police officer on the corner was moving us back from the curb. I realized helicopters had been circling overhead for the past 20 minutes. Then a string of motorcycles started coming out of the White House driveway.

"The president's coming," someone said. And, although we weren't as lucky as the people on the sidewalk who actually saw him through the tinted windows, we were there as he passed.



This is not the president's car. I was watching and not photographing when he passed.

So our boys—on their first real trip to Washington, D.C.—watched a presidential motorcade, something I had never seen before. It was exciting to watch the stream of vehicles. Who knew the president traveled with an ambulance? Probably everyone except me.

As I was trying to explain to our boys how lucky they were to see a presidential motorcade, I mentioned that I have only come close to a president once before—and he wasn't a president yet. It was when I was a reporter for the York Dispatch in York, Pa., and George W. Bush came to Gettysburg College on the campaign trail.

"Wait, Mama. You met George Washington?"

"No, no. I'm not that old. This was George W. Bush."

"And he was the president?"

"Well, he was the president, but not when I saw him. He wasn't the president yet then."

"So he's dead now?"

“No, he’s still alive. He’s just not president anymore.”

“But you met him?”

“No, I just got to take his picture and sort of wave at him. I was there because I was working as a newspaper reporter, and he came to town, so I got to....”

“WHAT? You were a NEWSPAPER REPORTER?”

It was an educational day all the way around.



We posed for a photo with the Washington Monument before we walked 5,000 miles or so—by Leo’s estimate—down the Mall to the National Museum of American History. By the time we got there, it was time to eat the lunch we had packed, and lunch—especially with all the drinks we brought—was heavy. So we went straight to the museum’s cafe.

As we passed out the sandwiches, we realized there were a few objections to the menu. Somehow my sister and I ended up giving our sandwiches to others. She said that was fine, but I know that if the mothers are hungry, it’s not likely to be a good day. So I went to buy a little food.

How much do you think this lovely tray of food—no drinks, mind you—cost in the museum café?



Yes, I know the museum is free and absolutely amazing. But I still think the cost of the food is astounding. Check out the receipt.



Nothing mattered, though, because the museum was magnificent. We watched a band play in the lobby—and a couple was even ballroom dancing on the floor near the stage. I told our boys it reminded me of watching people dance in the parks in China.



The girls enjoyed the display of the First Ladies' dresses and Dorothy's ruby slippers, while the boys especially liked the Army jeep, the Vietnam helicopter, and the gunboat. Everyone liked hitting the gift shop.



My 8-year-old niece is a serious Muppets enthusiast, but somehow we all handled our disappointment over the fact that Kermit the Frog is no longer on display.

Of course, we had to check out the section focused on military history.



Daniel is watching Vietnam War-era TV

The exhibits were more interactive and colorful than I remembered.



We saw George Washington's clothes and read snippets of the history related to what happened in 1776.



We stopped at exhibits on freedom and independence, and I did feel a rush of gratitude and pride in our nation. Even with all of its challenges and struggles and deep divisions, it's the land that I love. And I'm both humbled and proud to be able to raise our children here.



Still, I couldn't stand there with my eyes getting misty because while the rest of our group was exploring other parts of the museum, I happened to be in charge of four very independent young men between the ages of 5 and 10.



I may have been about to wave the flag of surrender when my fellow commanding officers arrived.

When we left the American History museum, my father—brilliant man that he is—handed Oreo cookies to the children. Then we found the longest possible path from the museum to our car, just to see if we could wear out the children and maybe even get lost. It wouldn't be educational and fun and memorable if there weren't at least a little whining and a few scraped knees.



At long last, we made it back to our cars and our boys and I headed home while their cousins headed to the Jefferson Memorial.

Our family saved that for another day. And, let's be honest, it will probably only happen someday when we have out-of-town visitors who want to see it, and with my rose-colored glasses fully intact, I'll jump at the chance to tag along.



We'll get lost yet again, eat overpriced food, and almost certainly whine about all the walking.

I can't wait.

Happy Independence Day!