

**Extraordinary treasures, amazing vistas, middling dining options, and horrible crowds.
The National Mall.**

Every weekday I walk into the East Building of the National Gallery of Art and am filled with pride at the beauty of the Mall and the museums and monuments that flank it—a feeling easily crushed by walls of tourist buses, droves of school groups, and no place to get a decent cup of coffee. Here are a few of the off-the-beaten path spots to see on the Mall. Thanks to fellow Mall rats that helped me compile this list.

--Anne Simmons, National Gallery of Art

FOOD:

If you want more than a hot dog and a Diet Coke, you might want to plan your visit a little bit. There are plenty of places north of the Mall in Chinatown and Penn Quarter to grab a bite to eat or something to go. All of the museums offer some sort of dining option, but the best are clustered toward the east end of the Mall, so try to land there around lunch or coffee hour. As you might expect from museum restaurants, prices are relatively high.

Food trucks at l'Enfant Plaza Metro (7th and D St. SW)

Yes, of course DC has food trucks! They park outside of the [L'Enfant Plaza metro station](#) located just south of the Mall on 7th Street and Maryland Avenue *during weekday lunch only*. This is probably your most economical option.

A daily truck listing can be found [here](#), but I think it's most fun to just go and be surprised. Try to arrive a little early to avoid the long lines of hungry federal employees.

[Sculpture Garden Pavilion Café](#) (700 Constitution Ave NW)

The Pavilion Café is one of the more lovely places to grab a salad, coffee, a little treat (or a giant chocolate chip cookie), or a glass of wine. The Art-Nouveau-inspired glass encased dining area offers nice views of the National Gallery of Art sculpture garden. There's also outdoor seating.

[Mitsitam Café](#) (4th St & Independence Ave SW)

Mitsitam Café is devoted to the foodways of the American Indian. While most museum cafes are blah, this is the exception. For example, there's *an entire cheese board selection*. The cafeteria-style restaurant is organized by region, so you can get anything from cedar-planked salmon (Northwest coast) to tamales (Mesoamerica). Located in the National Museum of the American Indian, expect your usual lunchtime tourist crowds. Entrées with two sides run around \$20, but you can get smaller portions of things for about \$7.

[Garden Café](#) (7th St. and Constitution NW)

Not to be confused with the Sculpture Garden Café, the Garden Café is yet another dining experience provided by the National Gallery of Art. And you won't have to worry about the weather, because this restaurant is actually indoors, nestled in the heart of the West Building. The menu is often created by local celebrity chefs and rotates with exhibitions. Enjoy the buffet with a glass of wine!

SIGHTS

[Peacock Room at the Freer/Sackler](#) (1000 Jefferson Dr SW)

Originally, James McNeill Whistler conceived this “harmony in blue and gold” as a showcase for the Chinese porcelain of British shipping magnate Frederick Leyland. Freer acquired the room in 1904, and upon moving it to his Detroit mansion, installed his own collection of pottery from Asia and the Middle East. The current installation presents Freer’s version of the room, and is a glorious assault of color and texture.

[Harry Winston Galleries at the Natural History Museum](#) (10th St. & Constitution Ave. NW)

Opals, amethysts, ametrines, fluorites, and a really awesome “natural fancy deep grayish-blue” (yes, that’s its technical color) stone, AKA the Hope Diamond, are all a part of our National Gem Collection at the Museum of Natural History.

[James Smithson Crypt](#) (Jefferson Dr. at 10th St., SW)

Cemetery tour sold out? Why not pay your respects to Smithsonian benefactor, James Smithson, whose remains are interred at the Smithsonian Castle.

[Julia Child’s Kitchen at the Museum of American History](#) (14th St and Constitution Ave, NW)

Julia Child donated the entire contents of her Cambridge, Massachusetts kitchen to the Smithsonian in 2001. There are more than 1,200 items in the kitchen itself, including an oven that could fit two turkeys, a paper towel holder, and a Marimekko printed tablecloth.

[First Ladies Exhibition at the Museum of American History](#) (14th St and Constitution Ave, NW)

Come for the dresses, stay for the china!

[Ulysses S. Grant Memorial](#)

This is one of the rare attractions that is actually better to see on a chilly, rainy day. Sculptor Henry Merwin Shrady brings the drama—transporting you to the front line of the Civil War, the cavalry and artillery rushing in—while Grant quietly observes the battlefield on horseback.

[Botanical Garden and Smithsonian Garden](#) (100 Maryland Ave. SW; Jefferson Dr. at 10th St., SW)

Nature lovers can escape the hubbub of the museums in these two serene oases right on the Mall. The Smithsonian Garden is located right behind the castle and is a nice place to park yourself for lunch. You can watch some carnivorous plants have their own lunch at the conservatory of the Botanical Garden, located at the foot of the Capitol.

[The Other FDR Memorial](#) (601 Pennsylvania Ave NW)

Since the modern art collection of the East Building is on loan during National Mall’s renovation, see a great example of minimalism right on Pennsylvania Avenue. During a conversation with Supreme Court Justice Frankfurter, FDR mentioned that, if he were to have a memorial in Washington, it should be a “block about the size of [his desk]” and placed in front of the National Archives. A real hidden gem of a presidential monument.

WHERE TO GET A COCKTAIL ON THE MALL

There are better places to get a drink near the hotel, but if proximity is imperative, these are your best bets.

[Capital Grille](#) (601 Pennsylvania Ave NW)

Yes, it's a chain, but this place feels like the real deal. Oak panels, taxidermy, and authentic DC fat cats. Bring three friends, get an overpriced cocktail, and split the grand plateau.

[Aria Pizzeria & Bar](#) (1300 Pennsylvania Ave NW)

I would *never* suggest this place if it wasn't five o'clock and we just left the First Ladies Exhibit desperate for a rail martini. Also—outdoor seating.

[Poste Moderne Brasserie](#) (555 8th St NW)

It's a few more blocks north, but this see-and-be-seen outdoor “brasserie” is in an enclosed piazza with comfortable chaise lounges, a garden, and cold gin and tonics.