

Going Out Guide

Tired of the Smithsonian? These small, quirky museums are worth a visit.

By **Fritz Hahn** April 5

Washington is known for its museums. But venture beyond the Mall, which is home to four of the 20 most-visited museums in the world, and you'll find plenty of smaller, quirkier institutions. Want to learn about great inventions, the history of horse racing in America or how drugs are smuggled across the border? You can, and it's free.

These nine museums are, for the most part, targeted at niche audiences, which means they don't get the crowds you'll find at, say, the National Museum of African American History and Culture. But you also don't need a full day to explore them: Even the ones that offer full, guided tours can take less than an hour to peruse. Think of these spots as entertaining and educational diversions — especially the ones that go out of their way to welcome kids. Check hours carefully, as most of these museums are not open daily.

DEA Museum

700 Army Navy Dr., Arlington.

The Drug Enforcement Administration was formed in 1973, but the history of drugs and drug abuse in America stretches back to the days when opiates were commonly used in children's medicine and cocaine gave Coca-Cola its kick. That's the story the DEA Museum tells, inside an anonymous office building in Pentagon City. The chronologically organized museum starts with 19th-century opium addiction, then it's off to the age of gangsters and jazz, roaring through the counterculture revolution of 1960s, the battles against cartels in the 1980s and '90s, and the abuse of prescription drugs today. (And yes, there are actual drugs on display.)

Much of the wall text is about as evenhanded as an elementary school D.A.R.E. class, but past the preachy tone, there's some interesting information here, especially the displays demonstrating how traffickers have tried to conceal drugs bound for the United States, inside shoes, tires and even cinder blocks. Don't miss the diamond-encrusted Colt .45 owned by Mexican cartel leader Rafael Caro Quintero, which on a recent visit drew exclamations of "cool!" from visitors of all ages — maybe not the reaction curators envisioned.

National Inventors Hall of Fame Museum

U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, 600 Dulany St., Alexandria.

The National Inventors Hall of Fame, inside the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, has a dual mission. Half of the museum is meant to inspire the next generation of creators, telling the stories of such inventors as Howard Head, who created the first aluminum skis, and then, in retirement, the oversize aluminum tennis racket. (Prototypes of the inventions bring the displays to life.) The section on patents and trademarks shows how technology has evolved: Get behind the wheel of a curious Ford Mustang — one half from 1965, one half from 2015 — to compare their features, or examine displays charting the changes to cellphones and cameras over decades.

Interactive games demonstrate how trademarks and copyrights work — there’s a quiz with trademarked sounds, such as Darth Vader’s breathing — and challenges to see if you can pick out which pair of name-brand shoes is a fake. Don’t be surprised if younger visitors want to pick up a science kit in the gift shop on the way out.

National Museum of Health and Medicine

2500 Linden Lane, Silver Spring.

The National Museum of Health and Medicine is not for the faint of heart or the weak of stomach. Here you can see the grotesquely swollen leg of a man with elephantiasis, shelves of bullet-ravaged skulls and bones from Civil War casualties, and fragments of Abraham Lincoln’s skull and James Garfield’s vertebrae.

But this Department of Defense-run museum is more than a morbid cabinet of curiosities: It demonstrates how the Army’s treatment of battlefield injuries has evolved, from gruesome Civil War amputations (see the scary-looking saws?) to the war in Iraq, where the trauma center at Balad had a 98 percent survival rate. The permanent collection of anatomical specimens and medical oddities is impressive, but the museum also hosts rotating exhibitions: Now it’s focused on World War I and the horrific effects of mustard gas, with sketches by John Singer Sargent and a copy of his famous, monumental painting “Gassed.”

National Museum of American Jewish Military History

1811 R St. NW.

The history of the United States military is long and complicated, but the National Museum of American Jewish Military History focuses on one area: the experience of Jews who’ve served in conflicts from the Revolutionary War to Operation Iraqi Freedom. Some of the displays feel a little formulaic — guns and helmets in cases — but where the museum succeeds is in the personal touches.

Touch screens allow visitors to scroll through dozens of candid snapshots taken during leisure time in Europe or the South Pacific; displays hold the flight jackets worn by pilots shot down over Berlin, a handmade ark used in Burma, and simple souvenirs, such as a coconut mailed home from Guam during World War II, or vases and belt buckles made from shell casings.

Listening stations with headphones play oral histories of service members who liberated concentration camps. A separate gallery holds pictures and details of every Jewish service member to receive the Medal of Honor, which makes for compelling and inspiring reading.

Carter G. Woodson Home

1538 Ninth St. NW.

The Shaw townhouse where famed historian Carter G. Woodson wrote and edited the *Journal of Negro History* and the *Negro History Bulletin* from the 1920s until his death in 1950 became a national historic landmark in the 1970s. But it was vacant, home only to squatters, in the 1990s, and in such bad shape that walls collapsed during the 2011 earthquake. The National Park Service opened the home to the public in 2017, and much of the three-story building is empty — even the office and Woodson’s bedroom.

Instead, rangers who lead the Thursday, Saturday and Sunday tours bring Woodson to life through stories about his prodigious work habits, his relationships with educator Mary McLeod Bethune and poet Langston Hughes, the creation of Negro History Week (now known as Black History Month) and daily life in the house. The free hour-long tours are currently the only way to see the house, so make reservations online, or just walk in.

Belmont-Paul Women’s Equality National Monument

144 Constitution Ave. NE.

Forced-feedings of prisoners on hunger strike. Assaults on participants in a nonviolent protest. Mass arrests of picketers outside the White House. These stories are often whitewashed from the popular narrative about women’s suffrage, but they’re front and center at the Belmont-Paul House on Capitol Hill. Since 1929, this historic home has been the headquarters of the National Women’s Party, whose leader, Alice Paul, helped organize the radical protests that drew public attention to their cause in the early 1900s.

The house is a memorial to the NWP, decorated with framed banners that were carried on marches (“The Young Are at the Gates”; “Forward Out of Darkness, Leave Behind the Night, Forward Out of Error, Forward Into Light”) and busts of the party’s founders. (The NWP is now a nonprofit educational organization.) Exhibits detail the background of the suffrage movement and the passage of the 19th Amendment, and the gift shop is the perfect place to pick up a “Votes for Women” tote bag or a kid-size “Feminist” T-shirt.

Belair Stable Museum

2835 Belair Dr., Bowie.

Kentucky has Churchill Downs, but it can’t claim to be the cradle of American thoroughbred racing: That’s in a suburban neighborhood in Prince George’s County. Maryland governor Samuel Ogle set up stables he called the Belair Stud at his

mansion in what is now Bowie in the 1740s, and he ran the first English-style horse race. Almost two centuries later, Belair Stud became one of the most famous training centers in America, home to father-and-son Triple Crown winners Gallant Fox (1930) and Omaha (1935), and Nashua, who became a star in the 1950s.

Though much of the Belair estate has disappeared, stables from 1907 still stand amid 1960s tract houses. The stalls where Gallant Fox and Nashua were raised have been turned into a museum, which displays racing silks, trophies and carriages used on the estate. Bales of hay and recordings of horse whinnying set the atmosphere. For those who prefer history to horses, the museum has decorated the stable master's lodgings, which look out onto the grassy exercise paddock, with 1920s furniture and appliances. Kids can borrow hobby horses to ride through the museum and stables.

USDA Forest Service Information Center

201 14th St. SW.

It might be a stretch to call the USDA Forest Service Information Center a museum. The main exhibit space, decorated to look like a western lodge, includes displays of Forest Service blankets and equipment, including wooden skis; videos and photos produced by the Forest Service; and a large touch-screen map showing all the forests and parks in the country.

The primary reason to visit the Sidney R. Yates Federal Building at 14th Street and Independence Avenue SW sits right behind the front desk, eyes closed, feet up on the furniture. Walk in, and he'll wake with a start. "Well, hello there!" booms Smokey Bear. "Remember, only you can prevent forest fires!" The life-size, animatronic Smokey is the star here, so much so that on a recent visit, the ranger on duty had to trigger Smokey a few times in a row to entertain a group of children. There's plenty of free swag that will appeal to kids (and adults), including 1960s-era Smokey Bear comic books, magnets and posters.

German-American Heritage Museum of the U.S.A.

719 Sixth St. NW.

The German-American Heritage Foundation hosts movie nights and beer tastings at its Chinatown headquarters and has a small shop selling sundry items, including traditional egg noodles, mustards and sausages, and books about famous German Americans. Its museum tells the story of Germans in this country from the arrival of 13 Mennonite families from North Rhine-Westphalia in Pennsylvania in 1683. (Today, the Census Bureau reports that 45 million Americans claim German heritage — more than any other ethnic group.)

Wall texts and videos discuss Redemptioners — Germans who endured a system of indentured servitude to pay for their voyage to America — and the German intellectuals who flocked to America after the German Revolution of 1848, and again before and after World Wars. The displays can be a little dry, but they're informative. Pick up stein-shaped pasta on the way out.

 **51 Comments**

Fritz Hahn has covered bars, drinks and nightlife for The Washington Post's Weekend section since 2003, but he also writes about a variety of other subjects, including Civil War battlefields and sailing classes.

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