

# Beyond politics

In Washington DC, as across the country, residents are adjusting to the new Trump administration. But there is more to the US capital than monuments and government, discovers **Jenny Southan**

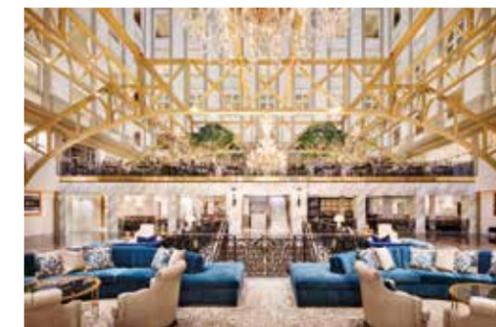
**T**he lobby lounge of the new Trump hotel in Washington DC is filled with people seated on blue velvet couches under glittering chandeliers that would look at home in the Palace of Versailles. A bell rings, and, to a ripple of applause, a waiter slices the top off a bottle of champagne with a sabre. The glass-encased cork flies across the room and skids across the polished marble floor.

Opened last September, two months before Donald Trump's election as the 45th president of the United States, the hotel occupies the prestigious

Old Post Office on Pennsylvania Avenue. The location is prime, being on the street that connects the White House at one end to the US Capitol, home of Congress, at the other. Constructed in 1899, the building's pièce de résistance is its 96-metre clock tower, the third-tallest structure in DC.

Beneath a row of billowing Stars and Stripes flags, the main entrance is blocked off by metal barricades (access is from the side, on 11th Street). I see a man stop to stick his middle finger up at the gilded Trump International Hotel sign, and take a photo on his phone. The fact that the Trump Organisation is leasing this landmark from the government has caused controversy, but federal agency the General Services Administration says the agreement is valid.

For a city that is roughly 90 per cent Democrat (only 4 per cent of DC's votes went to the Republican party), Trump's win is a bitter pill to swallow, and the fact that his name is emblazoned on a historic building hasn't helped. One local tells me: "I will not set foot in that place; I will not give him one cent of my money." Despite rates starting from US\$550 a night, none of



**Left:** Trump hotel in the Old Post Office **Above:** its lobby lounge

this has prevented the hotel's 263 rooms from being sold out since opening. Still, Mickael Damelincourt, managing director of the Trump Washington DC, says other hotels, such as the Four Seasons in Georgetown, are doing well, too. "We don't have enough luxury hotels in Washington," he says.

With US\$200 million spent on renovations, the hotel is arranged around a nine-storey glass atrium, crisscrossed with 19th-century gold girders. There is a spa designed by Trump's daughter, Ivanka, a ballroom for 1,300 people, a Macallan whisky tasting room and a fine-dining steakhouse from David Burke.

Upstairs at the back is the US\$20,000-a-night presidential suite, the former office of the postmaster general. Damelincourt says: "All the buildings around us belong to the Internal Revenue Service and the FBI is across the road so this is very safe – secret service love this room when you have a head of state staying. There is no traffic and you can have snipers on the roof." Have any presidents stayed here yet? "No," he says. Not even Donald Trump. "He has a nice house down the road."

### NEW TEAM IN TOWN

It's commonly said one should avoid discussing politics in social situations, but in DC it's impossible to avoid. I visit Off the Record, a subterranean bar in the Hay Adams hotel that is popular with politicians, dignitaries and journalists, and order a Corruption IPA served on a coaster featuring a caricature of Trump. The free snacks are great, but the conversations you overhear are even better.

Alexandra Byrne is general manager of the 237-room Sofitel Washington DC Lafayette Square hotel, which is located just around the corner from the bar – and the White House. "We host a lot of Capitol Hill visitors, including international delegates, diplomats, lobbyists, activists and top executives of Fortune 500 businesses. This past election came as a surprise for everybody. The air is rife with differing opinions leading to interesting discussions and debates."

From my corner room at the Sofitel, I hear music blaring below on 15th Street NW. "From the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans white with foam, God bless America, my home sweet home." It's coming from an SUV pulling a float with a giant Trump sign on the back lit up in lights. The so-called "Trump Unity Bridge" is not the creation of a local, though – it's a hardcore fan from Michigan named Rob Cortis, who has taken it upon himself to drive the length and breadth of the country in a show of support.

Over on 14th Street NW, there are ongoing anti-Trump demonstrations. Brian Kenner, deputy mayor of planning and economic development, says: "We tend to be a little more progressive than typical US

cities – we were one of the first to legalise marijuana, for example – so [the election] was a little shocking, but I think that has done nothing but continue to galvanise the residents of the District of Columbia." He adds: "We want to make sure that whether you have been here five minutes, five years or five generations that you feel welcome."

### 51ST STATE?

Washington DC occupies a 177 sq km plot of land wedged between the states of Maryland and Virginia. It is a compact, low-rise city with grand neoclassical architecture arranged around the National Mall, which stretches between the Lincoln memorial in the west and the Capitol in the east. When it was founded in 1790 by George Washington, its four ten-mile borders created a neat square. It was designed as a federal entity distinct from the rest of US.

Even today, when every one of America's 50 states has a democratic voice in the form of representation in Congress, the capital's 670,000 citizens do not. It



is part of no state and has limited home rule. It has never had a senator and it wasn't until the 1960s that people were given the right to vote in elections. All DC has is a non-voting delegate, Eleanor Holmes Norton, who serves exclusively in the House of Representatives but is not allowed to vote on the issues of the day. As a consequence, residents have little say on issues related to healthcare, the environment, social security or gun laws.

It's no surprise to hear that locals have been campaigning for Washington DC to gain statehood. The cause has most recently been spearheaded by Democratic mayor Muriel Bowser. After a meeting with President Trump in December, she said: "He is a supporter of the District of Columbia, he's familiar with the District of Columbia and he wants to be supportive." But whether or not he is

Above: Jefferson memorial



willing to consider granting her wish remains to be seen. Until then, cars will continue to drive around Washington with licence plates reading: "Taxation without representation."

This sense of disenfranchisement has no doubt affected Washingtonians over the decades, and has only been heightened since a return to Republican authority. Kenner explains there has never been a Republican mayor of DC. "We have always been under one party – and that is the case today," he says.

With this in mind, you can understand why it has been a necessity for the city to forge its own identity, separate from politics. "Washington DC's energy can be felt in multiple forms – we actually operate fairly well regardless of who the president is," Kenner says. Elliott Ferguson, president and chief executive of Destination DC, agrees: "Politics are separate from the Washington DC that we promote."

### CITY LIVING

Up until 20 years ago, Kenner says DC was "very much a federal town driven by federal jobs". But over the past seven years, job growth has solely been driven by the private sector and, in the past five years, statistics suggest up to 1,000 people a month

(many of them young, unmarried and educated) are moving here from other parts of the US. "If you were to call us a state, we would be one of the fastest-growing states in the country," he says.

DC is one of the wealthiest parts of the country but is seeking to diversify its economy away from the public sector. While the government is a key employer, accounting for 14 per cent of jobs, Trump's talk of "draining the swamp" could mean cutting a fifth of the federal workforce.

Tourism is a major earner – more than 21 million visitors came in 2015, spending US\$7 billion. New opportunities are also opening up in high-tech, healthcare, education, green tech and media. "We have a very active start-up scene," Kenner says.

I meet local Instagrammer Laurie Collins (otherwise known as @dccitygirl with 42,000 followers) on a sunrise photography tour of the cherry trees – a gift from Tokyo in 1912 – around the Tidal Basin reservoir. Through the lens of her camera, Collins manages to capture a great deal of beauty in DC: the Jefferson memorial framed by pink blossomed boughs; a reflection of the wedding-cake dome of the US Capitol; and the peppermint vaulted

ceiling of Union Station, which is undergoing a US\$7 billion revamp, to be completed by 2020.

Collins says: "DC has changed in so many ways. Certain neighbourhoods you would never be caught dead in are becoming revitalised. People are making the effort to raise their children here, rather than moving them out to the suburbs once they reach school age. Others are investing in neighbourhoods by bringing their business into the city, making it easier for us to shop, eat and enjoy local entertainment here in our own backyard." A major new attraction is the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened on the National Mall in September.

Alongside established areas such as quaint Georgetown and upmarket Kalorama, where the

Obamas now live, there is the Beverly Hills-style City Centre retail complex, unveiled in 2014 (before this there were no designer stores, people tell me). The biggest upcoming project is new-build "waterfront city" the Wharf (wharfdc.com), just south of the National Mall – phase one will be complete this autumn. Eventually there will be 1,400 apartments, a yacht club, three hotels, a concert hall, four piers, 75 restaurants and shops, a conference centre and a mile-long promenade.

Meanwhile, hotspots such as H Street NW and Shaw are now home to trendy ventures such as All Purpose pizza (allpurposedc.com), cocktail bar Columbia Room (columbiaroomdc.com) and Kinship restaurant (kinshipdc.com), which serves inventive New American cuisine.

Kenner says: "People are finding an authentic Washington experience that did not exist a few years ago – people are not demanding Starbucks coffee but local chain Compass. When they go to bars, they don't tend to order a Miller Light; they want a DC Brau."

This is exactly what I do when taking a seat at the W hotel's rooftop bar, POV. The sun is going down and there is a perfect view of the White House and the needle-shaped Washington monument. I think of the Latin inscription painted inside the dome of the Capitol: *E pluribus unum* – "Out of many, one" – and wonder how long it might be until a 51st star is added to the US flag.

■ Visit [businessstraveller.com/tried-and-tested](http://businessstraveller.com/tried-and-tested) for a review of the Sofitel Washington DC Lafayette Square. [sofitel.com](http://sofitel.com), [washington.org](http://washington.org)



**Right:** View of the White House from POV bar at the W hotel