

The Capital Cities of the UK & USA: London & Washington D.C.



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About London

London is the capital city of England and the whole of the UK. It is located in the south-east of the country, covers an area of 1,580 square kilometres and lies on the River Thames. The city has a population of almost 9 million people and over 12 million people live in its conurbation making it extremely densely populated. London is made up of the City of London (sometimes referred to as the "Square Mile") and 32 boroughs, including Kensington and Chelsea, the City of Westminster and Camden. London is the seat of the Monarchy, the Parliament, the Government and the Supreme Court. The Prime Meridian of the World runs across Greenwich in the east of London.



London has a fantastic transport system, Transport for London. The quickest and cheapest way to travel around London is by underground, often referred to as "the tube", which is thought to be the oldest in the world. There are also more than 8000 buses and 700 bus routes in London. The busiest place for bus traffic is Trafalgar Square. There are three types of buses: the recognisable red double-deckers, quick single deck Red Arrow buses and Green Line buses which connect the City with many places in the London area. In addition, there are the famous black taxis and river buses. If you wish to travel further afield, there are long distance buses called coaches which depart from Victoria Coach Station. Furthermore, London has 15 central train stations with connections to other places in England, Scotland and Wales. The Eurostar which departs from St Pancras travels to overseas countries such as France and Belgium. There are five airports in the London area, the largest of which are Heathrow situated in the west and Gatwick in the south.



The Houses of Parliament, Big Ben & red double-decker buses

The History of London



London has a very long and interesting history. The Celts settled there as early as 800 BCE but even earlier it was inhabited during the Stone Age. The site was occupied by the Romans in 55 BCE and they established Roman Londonium in 43 AD. The Romans left the British Isles in the 5th century but London was still considered the capital of the Britons.

This status was maintained during Anglo-Saxon times and later during the reign of the Danish kings in the 10th and 11th centuries. William the Conqueror marked the beginning of the 12th-century reign of the Norman kings when the royal court moved from Winchester, the former capital, to London forever. The city continued to grow and flourish and gradually extended beyond its walls to absorb the originally separate Westminster. The 16th-century establishment of the trading companies and the Royal Exchange contributed to the rapid economic rise of London.

The 17th century brought much suffering to London. In 1665 more than 75,000 people died from a plague epidemic and in 1666, the Great Fire of London destroyed four-fifths of the city.

In the following decades, hectic building activity rebuilt the whole town. Sir Christopher Wren was appointed the main architect and he designed about 50 churches and some other public buildings, including St. Paul's Cathedral.

In the latter half of the 17th century, Lloyd's Insurance Company was established, in 1694 the Bank of England and in 1773, the Stock Exchange.

The port had always been important for London but during the first three decades of the 19th century, it became the biggest in the UK.

In the Victorian Age (1837-1901) London acquired its current architectural appearance. Many public buildings sprang up, including the larger part of the Houses of Parliament, the Covent Garden Opera House and the Crystal Palace. The creation of the railway and the underground led to the creation of the city's suburbs, many of which were built in the typical Victorian style of red brick. The Blitz (bombing) during World War II caused serious damage to London but this is no longer apparent in the present day.

Things to see in London



London's parks cover almost one-third of the city and used to be described as the lungs of London. Hyde Park is the largest, famous for its Speakers' corner where people stand on chairs or boxes and make speeches on anything they want. St. James's Park is one of the oldest green spaces in London. In the 16th century, Henry VIII transformed the area into a hunting domain. The park (next to Buckingham Palace) has a lake, black swans and colourful flowerbeds. Buckingham Palace has been used as a royal residence since 1837 when Queen Victoria ascended the throne. A statue of Queen Victoria was erected in front of the palace and is surrounded by allegorical statues representing Victorian values such as Maternity, Justice, Truth and Courage. The clock tower on the northwest corner of the Houses of Parliament has become a symbol of the city itself. Completed in 1858, at almost 100 metres high, it is believed to be one of the most accurate clocks in the world (it loses only two-tenths of a second every 118 days). The large bell, weighing 13 tons is widely known as Big Ben in honour of Sir Benjamin Hall, who was responsible for the work when the clock was installed. Tower Bridge is a characteristic landmark of London. Built between 1886 and 1894, it is named after the Tower of London that stands next to it. Two fixed sections ground the towers to the river bank and a hydraulic mechanism can raise and lower the bridge to permit the passage of tall ships. St. Paul's Cathedral has existed for 14 centuries. The present building is the fifth to bear the name of the patron saint of London. It was this church that Londoners tried to save during the Great Fire of 1666. After the fire, the architect Christopher Wren reconstructed it as a cathedral which is second in size only to St. Peter's in Rome. Trafalgar Square is considered the centre and busiest part of London. Tourists flock there to see Nelson's Column, named after Lord Nelson's victory over Napoleon at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. London is also famed for its museums, such as the Natural History Museum and Tate Modern. Many people go to London to attend plays and musicals in London's West End. Shakespeare plays are shown at the Globe theatre. People who love shopping may go to the famous department store, Harrods. Foodies can buy something delicious to eat at Borough Market or Camden Market. Covent Garden is also a popular spot for tourists. Those with a head for heights may enjoy a ride on the London Eye.

About Washington D.C.

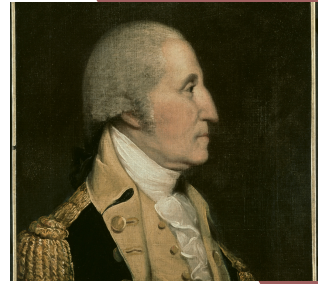


Washington D.C. is the capital city of the USA. It is named after the first president of the United States, George Washington. "D.C." stands for the "District of Columbia" which is a federal district coextensive with the city of Washington.

Washington, D.C. is commonly referred to as D.C., the District or simply Washington. Historically it was also known as the Federal City or Washington City. It is easily confused with the state of Washington, located in the Northwest of the USA. Therefore, the city is often called "D.C." and the state "Washington State". Washington D.C. is located on the Potomac River, about 90 miles inland from the Atlantic ocean. The District of Columbia is the seat of the US federal government. 360,000 people living in the metropolitan area are employed by the Federal Government. All of them work in government buildings which occupy 40% of the city. The city's area was originally taken from the states of Maryland and Virginia but Virginia's portion south of the river was given back to the state in 1846. The city covers an area of 180 km² and has a population of 623,000 (the metropolitan area around 3,750,000). Its racial mix is roughly 50% black and 40% white. The federal district was designed by Pierre Charles L'Enfant and features monumental avenues, major streets, and traffic circles providing vistas towards important landmarks and buildings. The initial plan for the federal district was a diamond measuring 10 miles (16 km) on each side, and totalling 100 square miles (256 km²). The site was chosen by George Washington, perhaps for its location on the river, which would become a great waterway despite being too shallow to allow large cargo-carrying vessels to enter the city. The city was officially named "Washington" on September 9, 1791. George Washington preferred to call it "the Federal City." Despite choosing the site and living nearby, he rarely visited the city. D.C. is served by three major airports: Washington National Airport located across the Potomac in Virginia; Dulles International Airport situated in Loudoun County, Virginia; and Baltimore Washington International Airport located 18 miles north of Washington and 8 miles south of Baltimore. Washington's only train station is the Beaux-Arts style Union Station. Bus services include the Greyhound-Trailways for long-distance trips and city buses known as Metrobuses. The subway system, the "Metro" has five lines: Red, Blue, Orange, Green and Yellow. There are also taxis available in Washington.

The History of Washington D.C.

The District of Columbia was established by the Act of Congress in 1790. The site was chosen by President Washington, who was familiar with the area as his own plantation, Mount Vernon (where George Washington and his wife are now buried), is located a mere 16 miles down the Potomac River. The capital was designed by the French engineer Pierre L'Enfant (1754-1825), who was assisted by Thomas Jefferson who would go on to become the third president of the USA. Although several other architects were involved in designing the town, L'Enfant's original vision was always respected. Streets and avenues were laid out in a grid scheme. The former were numbered and the latter were named after the states of the Union. The city was divided into four quadrants (Northwest NW, Southwest SW, Northeast NE, Southeast SE) with the Capitol as the centre. The city was first used as the seat of Congress in 1800 but it took many years before Washington D.C. could be called a city. In 1910 the Height Buildings Act stated that structures could not exceed 15 floors ensuring that D.C. would remain a horizontal and spacious city.



The Capitol



George Washington on a dollar bill

Things to see in Washington D.C.

D.C. is one of the most visited cities in the USA. There are numerous museums, memorials and famous buildings to visit. Most of these are located on the National Mall usually known simply as the Mall, a park and boulevard between the Capitol and the Washington Monument.

The Lincoln Memorial pays homage to Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the USA. Lincoln, who opposed slavery and was president at the time of the American Civil War, was assassinated while watching a play at Ford Theater in Washington D.C.. This monument, in the style of a Greek temple, was the site of Martin Luther-King's famous "I have a dream" speech.



The White House is the official residence and workplace of the president of the USA (currently Joe Biden). It was built between 1792 and 1800. In fact, the White House was not always white. The building was set on fire by the British during the War of 1812 and so it was then restored and painted white.



The Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial is the newest memorial on the Mall and is the only monument paying homage to an African-American and not dedicated to a president or war. Dr King was a pastor who led peaceful protests against racial inequality and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 35, the youngest person ever to have done so. He was assassinated in Memphis in 1968. .



The Washington Monument was built in honour of George Washington, the first president of the United States of America. At 170 metres high, this monument is the tallest stone structure in the world and can be seen from almost anywhere in Washington D.C.. It was constructed using 36,000 blocks of marble and granite.



The Jefferson Memorial was built in memory of Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the USA and famed for his contributions to the Declaration of Independence. This memorial can be found on the banks of the river and became a popular swimming spot during the late 1800s.

The Smithsonian Institution, founded in 1846, operates the National Zoo and 19 museums in Washington D.C. including the National Postal Museum and the National Air and Space Museum. It is the largest museum, education and research complex in the world.



The Smithsonian Institution Building

In addition to its monuments and museums, Washington D.C. is well-known for its parks and green spaces. About 7,000 acres of the city is considered public parkland. The most attractive parks are the West and East Potomac Parks and Constitution Gardens.

