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SPOTLIGHT

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24 Hours

WASHINGTON, D.C.'S U STREET NEIGHBORHOOD

Catching a deeper glimpse of American history.

BY ELIZABETH ZACH

Though it's remained a magnet for local, national and global leaders for centuries, Washington, D.C., is no longer just a government town. With hundreds of attractions — ranging from the Smithsonian siblings, to the elegant memorials gracing the National Mall, to the somber landscape of Arlington National Cemetery — there's plenty to see and do; visitors looking for a deeper understanding of the nation's history, however, might consider veering northeastward off the tourist path and toward The Shaw/U Street neighborhood.

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PHIL DE JONG JR. / JGM



SPOTLIGHT
24 Hours

How to get there >>
Ethiopian Airlines flies daily from Addis Ababa to Washington, D.C.

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This area has, perhaps more than any other in D.C., evolved through turn-of-the-century vibrancy, neglect and resurgence. A tidy neighborhood of brick townhouses and storefronts, it attracted African Americans following the Civil War and soon became one of the most remarkable and robust “black neighborhoods” in the country. Ella Fitzgerald, Thurgood Marshall, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Pearl Bailey — all at one time or another shopped, played or studied here. The rest of the city is filled with monuments to American ideals, but a tour of U Street will leave you reveling in what it meant to make those ideals a reality.

9 a.m. The capital city sees more than its share of arrivals and departures at its international airports, so it feels appropriate to start your day at the aviation-themed **1 Café St-Ex**. Its brunch menu is broken down into categories of “lighter,” “heavier,” “hangover” and “treats,” so take your pick from fried-green tomato benedict, slow-roasted pork belly or *huevos rancheros* (a traditionally Mexican dish of fried eggs upon crispy corn tortillas). Their *mimosa* cocktails (sparkling wine with orange juice) are also well-respected.

11 a.m. Café St-Ex is actually on 14th Street, just before it crosses U Street — convenient, as window-shopping along this boulevard is a definite treat. Just across from the café sits **2 Miss Pixie’s**, with shelves showcasing vintage lamps, 1950s model airplanes, and a kaleidoscope of embroidered pillows, dishes and postcards from around the globe. You can also pop into **3 Home Rule**, where you’ll find a cornucopia of kitchenware, aromatic soaps and lotions for sale.

12:30 p.m. If it’s Sunday (and even if you’re not particularly religious), consider heading to **4 St. Augustine Catholic Church** one block over. Washington’s oldest predominantly black Catholic congregation was founded in 1858, and in 1961 — in the midst of the American civil rights movement — it took the unusual step of merging with a white congregation, St. Paul’s. Every Sunday at 12:30 p.m., the choir puts on a rollicking interpretation of the Mass, fusing traditional African American spirituals and hymns with contemporary gospel music. If you go, wear your Sunday best.

Otherwise, walk two blocks north to **5 Meridian Hill Park** (also known as Malcolm X Park) — an urban oasis since 1912, complete with the longest cascading waterfall in North America, a grand promenade, and graceful statues throughout. In segregated Washington, the park straddled a mostly white community on the west and a mostly black community on the east; today, it remains a popular setting for concerts and afternoon strolls.

2 p.m. A landmark in a city of landmarks, **6 Ben’s Chili Bowl** is not to be missed for lunch. Opened in 1958 by Ben and Virginia Ali and family, it’s one of the few businesses on U Street to have survived the 1968 riots, following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Ben passed away in 2009, but his half-smoked hot dogs, dripping with mustard, and his namesake chili live on. Photos of celebrities adorn the walls — Michelle Obama, Bono, the Presidents Bush and plenty more have all been by here at one time or another.

3 p.m. Heading east, keep your eyes peeled for the secluded **7 African American Civil War Museum**. Housed in a former schoolhouse, the museum tells the tales of African American involvement during

the War Between the States. Particularly moving artifacts include rusted slave shackles, photographs of black troops and letters exchanged during wartime.

5 p.m. For a pre-dinner stretch, tour the campus of **8 Howard University** — the nation’s most respected traditionally African American institute for higher learning. Distinguished alumni include U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, and some 12,000 students attend the school today. Its Welcome Center on 7th Street NW will help arrange tours of the stately Founders’ Library and prestigious Howard University Gallery of Art.

6:30 p.m. Named for a Langston Hughes poem, **9 Busboys & Poets** is in the same

tradition as Ben’s Chili Bowl: a neighborhood institution that’s welcomed local movers and shakers, plus everyone in between. The café’s flagship location is especially cozy for sipping tea and people-watching, with plush couches and bookshelves about. The sandwiches, burgers and pizzas make for a yummy and reasonably priced dinner, too; or for something more satiating, walk across the street to **10 Eatonville**, a dreamy escape to Southern living with hearty catfish, grits and sweet-potato mash.

9 p.m. Once all settled at your hotel and ready for a nightcap, or even a game of pool or shuffleboard, stroll over to **11 Meridian Pint** and raise a glass of American craft beer — this pub’s specialty — to the nation’s ideals. **5**



Every Sunday afternoon, St. Augustine Catholic Church presents a lively version of the Mass — fusing traditional African American spirituals with contemporary gospel music.

TOM FROESE

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