

With all the hoopla of the Inauguration competed, Washington will once again resume its popularity as one of the favored springtime travel destinations for seniors. It's never too early to start planning for your springtime visit. If you're not familiar with the city, there's an easy way to see the White House, observe Congress in session, explore all goodies of the Smithsonian, see the cherry trees in blossom, visit all the famous buildings. Your best choice may be to hook up with a professional DC tour guide company.



The one you select may depend on what you require. Are you a family from a foreign country and want a limo and a guide who speaks your language? Are you a busload of high school students who want to mix fun with history? Are you a four-bus convoy of ex-GIs on a reunion trip who plan to visit the Iwo Jima Statue, Arlington National Cemetery, the Pentagon and the Presidents' memorials?

Among the best and most experienced city tour companies that can accommodate any visitor's wishes in Washington include:

I must name the Martz Line first, now called Martz Gold Line/Gray Line/Trailways. Before my retirement, when I was an event planner for a major insurance company, I often hired Martz to take as many as ten 40-passenger busloads of our delegates at a time around Washington for both sightseeing and to attend events. The service was always prompt and reliable.

I also remember Martz from my boyhood before World War II, when its buses took our school's kids from Philly to camp in the Poconos every summer. Martz also drove our graduation class to Washington during WWII. The line's history goes back much earlier, when Frank Martz, Sr., of Plymouth PA, operated his first, self-designed tour bus in 1912.

The now-combined company is the largest sightseeing and transportation organization in D.C. The buses operate from the venerable Union Station, star of many movies. Remember James Stewart's look of awe when he first saw the Capitol Building through the station's windows in "Mrs. Smith Goes To Washington"?

This tour line offers just about every kind of sightseeing, entertainment and event planning experience. It provides services in Washington and surrounding areas of Maryland and Virginia, and its tours are in comfy limos, vans and buses, some double-deckers. If requested, guides

who speak several languages will accompany tours. Charter services to go beyond the Washington area are available, as are childrens' visits to the National Zoo and other special events. To contact Martz: (800) 862-1400; Email dsnyder@martzgroup.com; local: (301) 386-8300, Ext. 27. Info website: graylinedc.com.

U.S. Potomac Travel International has conducted tours throughout the Washington, Maryland, Virginia areas for the past 20 years. It also provides licensed guides who can converse and conduct tours in many languages, including Chinese, Dutch, English, French, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish.

U.S. Potomac can begin its services by meeting groups at incoming flights, as well as arranging hotel and restaurant reservations and many other services. Call in Washington: (202) 244-7105; Email: Potomactourguidesintl@rcn.com; for illustrated internet info: usatourist.com/english/places/dc/index.html.

Guide Service of Washington, Inc., has been a premier tour service in the Nation's Capital for the past 45 years. Its reps are called umbrella guides because the leaders are seen daily holding up their colorful and distinctive follow-me umbrellas in all of the Capital's tourist areas, marching at the front of tourist groups.

Guide Service provides all types of day excursions, and a typical night drive-by and/or stop-by visits could include memorials to Lincoln, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Iwo Jima; as well as the Kennedy Center, Capitol Hill and the White House. Local: (202) 628-2842; Email: sales@dctourguides.com; for complete info: dctourguides.com/contact.html

GEP Washington (Global Events Partners) produces special events for groups, families and associations. Its services encompass everything necessary from meeting incoming guests at airports, escort for return flights and everything else in between. GEP services include booking hotels and banquet facilities, restaurant reservations, entertainment programs and customized bus and limo tours of the Washington DC area. Call local: (202)777-7800; Email: mmackay@gepwashingtong.com; online contact gepwashingtong.com.

There are also many bus and tour companies that specialize in student group visits to the Washington area, as well as other areas of the US. The Capital Tours, Inc., is one of the best of its type. It offers fully-escorted student excursions designed for your middle school's or high school's students, parents and teachers. Whether a pre-packaged or custom designed itinerary, Capital Tours pledges that the student trip will be done right.

A typical three-day tour's highlights could include the Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson and other memorials, the Zoo, Ford's Theater, Capitol Hill, the White House and Arlington National Cemetery. Social events could include a moonlight dance cruise on the Potomac and theater at the Kennedy Center. Call local: (978) 373-9140; toll free (800) 323-1184; Email: office@capital-tours.com; and for online info: capital-tours.com.