

Traveling with Kids

By LIBBY CARTY MCNAMEE

Wonders of the Smithsonian museums

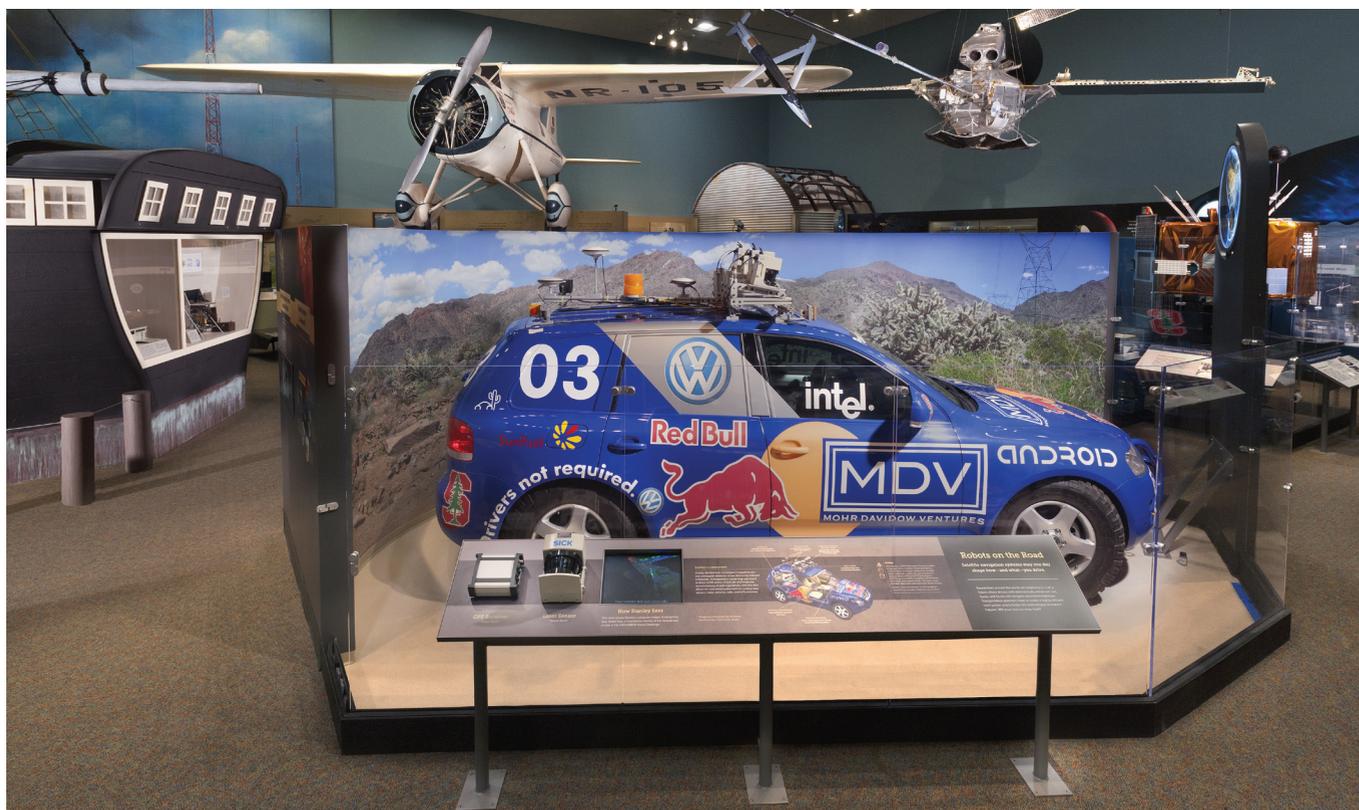
As Richmonders we are fortunate to have the treasures of Washington, D.C. so close to explore with our children. We also have the added bonus of not having to deal with the daily stresses of actually living there. It's a win-win proposition to head there for a weekend or even an action-packed day trip.

A great place to start your expedition is at the glorious National Mall, home to 11 Smithsonian museums, all catering to kids and offering free admission.

The National Air and Space Museum is the most popular of all the museums for many good reasons. Within a span of a couple of hours, your kids can see a real moon rock, the world's first airplane in the Wright Flyer, Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis that first crossed the Atlantic, the original Apollo 11 Command Module, and actual space uniforms. It also contains many interactive activities, historical galleries and videos, as well as a three-story gift shop and a McDonald's large enough to be its own airplane hangar. Be prepared for lines and crowds, but it is well worth it even for non-space fans. Please note there are individual fees for the IMAX theater planetarium, and simulators. There is a companion facility near Dulles Airport, the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center.

Directly across the Mall, the National Museum of Natural History tells the story of the world and life on it. With such a wide range of items, there is bound to be something to fascinate everyone. It is bursting with gargantuan fossils of dinosaurs, models of large sea life including a whale, and an extensive mammal exhibit. Feast your eyes on the Hope Diamond and other precious gems and minerals. Enter a room full of butterflies and then observe live insects. Also stroll through the mummies, meteorites, and recreations of early evolving humans. On the lower level there is a large gift shop and family-friendly cafeteria.

Right next door lies the National Museum of American History, devoted to America's cultural, scientific, social, technological, and political development. There are



"Time and Navigation: The Untold Story of Getting from Here to There" opened in April at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Photo by Eric Long.

thousands of iconic objects -- the massive Star Spangled Banner, the Star Wars costumes for R2-D2 and C-3PO, the First Ladies' dresses, the infamous Greensboro Lunch Counter, Dorothy's ruby slippers, the Wicked Witch of West, Archie Bunker's armchair, Kermit the Frog, and the enormous Doll Family Doll House. Other major exhibits include the history of U.S. military conflicts dating from the Revolutionary War, the development of transportation, and the American Presidency. There is a new cafeteria below and four gift shops located throughout the museum.

If you are considering a guidebook, "Awesome Adventures at the Smithsonian" is the way to go. It is chock-full of interesting facts about these museums with a fun layout appealing to kids and adults alike. Available on Amazon.com, this resource will enhance the overall experience immeasurably, helping you come up with a plan long before heading to the Mall.

Let's face it. The hardest part of a trip to our nation's capital is just getting there without losing your mind and/or half your day in northern Virginia's unpredictable traffic.

Unless you have a private helicopter, your options are either taking the train or driving. Before you dismiss Amtrak from the get-go as too unreliable, the service on this route has improved significantly over the last couple of years, making it an excellent choice for \$33 each way.

The train stops at the downtown Main Street Station, at Staples Mill, and in Ashland. Then something beautiful happens. You can sit back and relax while the train zips you into Union Station with its own food court, shops, and Metro stop on the Red Line. Another advantage is being able to walk or take a short cab ride to the Capitol and National Mall. Kids under age 2 ride Amtrak for free, and kids up to age 15 ride for half price.

Parking downtown can be extremely pricey, but parking at Metro stations is free on the weekends. When taking the Metro, buy round-trip fare upfront to avoid waiting in line to buy a return ticket. Avoid rush hour when fares are higher and the trains are packed. Children under age 5 ride for free. Consider purchasing the SmarTrip card for \$10 with \$5 already on it if you are planning to stay more than one day.

Otherwise there is a \$1 surcharge on each ride. **RPM**

Libby McNamee is a local writer, lawyer, and mommy but not in that order. She loves to visit DC but is even happier to return home to Richmond.

WANT TO GO?

Air and Space Museum

Address: 7th Street and Independence Avenue, SW
Metro: Smithsonian
Website: <http://airandspace.si.edu>

Museum of Natural History

Address: 10th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW
Metro: Smithsonian
Website: <http://www.mnh.si.edu>

Museum of American History

Address: 14th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW
Metro: Smithsonian
Website: <http://americanhistory.si.edu>

Amtrak

Website: www.Amtrak.com
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