



Summer crowds outside Saks Fifth Avenue.



Views across Central Park from the Top of the Rock.



Cartier's Fifth Avenue store.

STARS & STRIPES

For a first-time venture to the USA, New York City and Washington DC are about as cool as it gets, writes Tess Paterson

Diving headlong into NYC is quite simply a monumental assault on the senses. Everyone talks about the hype, the energy, the impatience, the skyscrapers. It's all those things, trumped up (as it were) on a serious dose of steroids.

My initial mission was to check out the Kate Spade handbags, get a fix of great art, and see a Broadway show that wasn't *Porgy and Bess*. Looking back, it's a series of vivid mental snapshots: the

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS TESS PATERSON

sourdough tang of everything bagels, the haunting poignancy of Ground Zero, the hiss of *Excuse me!* spat out like a weapon should you hesitate at a pedestrian crossing.

Grand Central Terminal steals my heart right from the start. Hopping off a train in a crush of smart suits and expensive haircuts, the dingy platform morphs into a light-filled wonder. Hard working and supremely elegant, it's besieged by over 750 000 commuters each day. Part Paris Opera House, part upmarket mall, it's got marble floors and brass door plates and a towering cerulean ceiling that's bound to put you in a good mood. Grab an almond croissant from Zaro's, gird yourself for crowdsville and head into the streets.

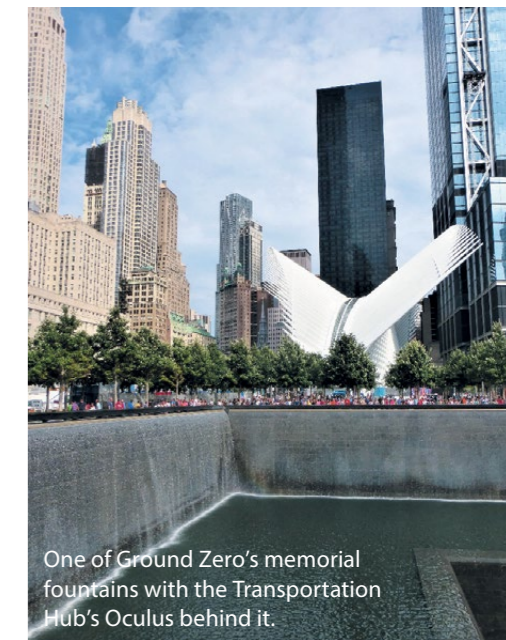
At the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), we're surrounded by French tourists. They're discussing some of the gems with their effortlessly chic children – Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy*, Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, and my favourite, Dali's *Persistence of Memory*, which surprises

me by being not much bigger than a laptop screen. In the gift shop there's a beautiful scarf – a wisp of silk so eye-wateringly expensive that I think they've mistakenly added two extra zeros to the price. A short subway ride away, the Comme des Garçons retrospective has set The Metropolitan Museum of Art abuzz. A masterclass in the avant-garde, it's an offbeat mix of art and fashion.

To get a grip on the madness, head to the Top of the Rock at Rockefeller Centre. Seventy floors up, buffeted >



Comme des Garçons stunning retrospective at The Met.



One of Ground Zero's memorial fountains with the Transportation Hub's Oculus behind it.

TESS'S TRAVEL TIPS

GOOD TO KNOW Washington DC's Smithsonian museums all offer free entry. [washington.org/Smithsonian](http://www.washington.org/Smithsonian); NYC's Metropolitan Museum of Art allows entry by donation. [metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)

MUST-SEE SIGHT The New York water taxis are a brilliant way to see the sights of Manhattan and Brooklyn. [nywatertaxi.com](http://www.nywatertaxi.com)

FAVOURITE BITE Siroc in downtown DC for superb quality Italian and low-key elegance. [sirocrestaurant.com](http://www.sirocrestaurant.com)



PLANNING YOUR TRIP

WHERE TO STAY The Sofitel DC Lafayette Square is stylish, well located and close to good restaurants. accorhotels.com; in NYC, The Row near Times Square for its position, slick decor and free Wi-Fi. rownyc.com

CURRENCY At the time of going to print USD1=R15,85. A cup of coffee averages USD3-4 (about R60). A main course USD15-18 (around R270).

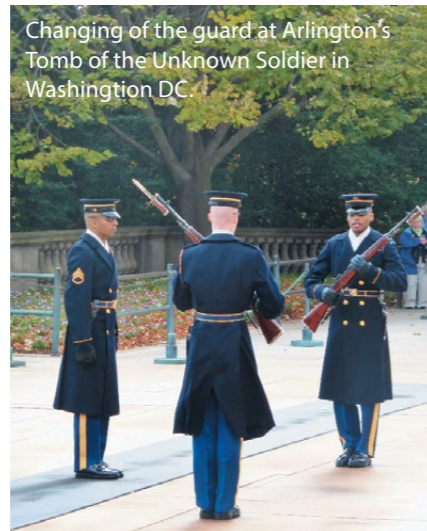
VISAS South Africans need a tourist visa for the USA. Apply at za.usembassy.gov

by wind, it's a 360-degree skyscraper fest, anchored by the deep green lung of Central Park. Standing out like a super-skinny Lego tower, 432 Park Avenue is a whopping 426m-high, testament to the vertical mastery of a restricted, priceless site.

When the hooting yellow cabs, the subway crush, and your weak Rand get too much (and they will), hot foot it to the famed New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx. Exiting the station, disoriented and short on data, I accidentally detour via Fordham University campus. After the manic strip-mall street it's all verdant Ivy League, with handsome footballers shouting *hut-hut* across a well-groomed pitch. Denzel Washington attended Fordham, which gives an extra frisson to any morning out. But then so did Trump. So I depart speedily and cross the road to the Botanical Garden – a spectacle of high-summer loveliness.

Eating in NYC is a bit hit and miss and my biggest surprise is the dearth of really good coffee. Our one touristy spoil is a genteel sundowner at The Plaza's Palm Court with its cosseted conservatory vibe. Looking back, I think our waiter actually was asleep, given the narcoleptic expression and monumentally indifferent service.

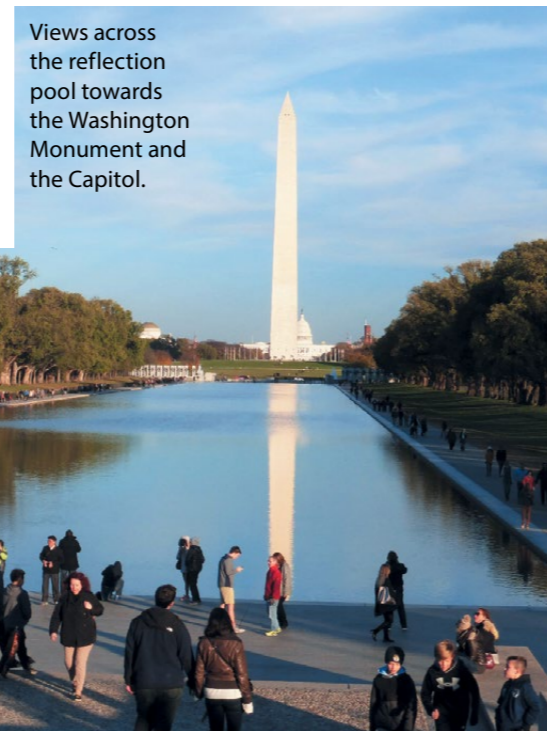
At the other end of the spectrum, Smorgasbord, the outdoor food market in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, is highly worthwhile and hosted by enthusiastic vendors. Fancy succulent smoked short rib, lobster tacos, or fresh mint ice cream topped with a brûléed marshmallow? This is your spot with



Changing of the guard at Arlington's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington DC.



Detail of the Capitol's rotunda, completed in 1824.



Views across the reflection pool towards the Washington Monument and the Capitol.



Manhattan views to boot.

From New York's Penn Station we board a train for Washington DC. In around three and a half hours we're at Union Station, a Beaux Art beauty dating to 1907 with a stunning barrel-vaulted ceiling and plenty of gold leaf. We've got just 48 hours to explore the place – where else to begin but The White House?

To be honest, I was expecting more overt security, perhaps a SWAT team or two keeping an eye on The Donald. No doubt the defences are substantial, but all we can see is a single police car and a couple of chilled-looking cops. The whole atmosphere is rather easy going, and a friendly tourist offers to take photos of us in front of the lawn. From the street, The White House appears



Fall colours along DC's National Mall.



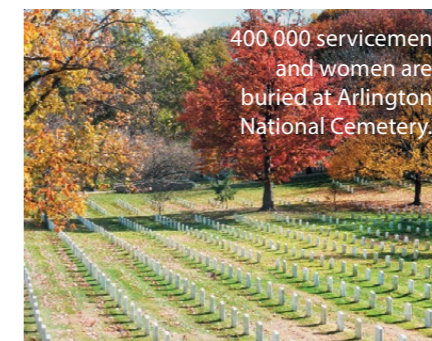
Obama souvenirs outside The White House.

smaller than it does on TV – strange to think it's got three lifts, 28 fireplaces and 35 bathrooms.

First impressions of DC, as most refer to the capital, is one of elegance and order. Downtown is immaculate and easy to navigate, with a sweeping layout that puts you in mind of Paris. Low-rise in comparison to NYC, the views between the Capitol and the Lincoln



Memorable pizza at DC's Woodward Table restaurant.



400 000 servicemen and women are buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Memorial are unforgettable. Walking the 4,5km between these classical gems is a must, in fact you could spend a couple of weeks on the National Mall: 11 of DC's 17 Smithsonian museums are found here, including the National Air and Space Museum.

On its completion in 1884, the Washington Monument was the tallest building in the world. (Clearly NYC

was having none of that). Encircled by American flags, the stone obelisk against the red, white and blue is quietly stunning. We move on to the reflection pool, meander left, and are stopped in our tracks by the Korean War Veterans Memorial. Against a backdrop of autumn colour, it's a haunting depiction of a squad of 19 soldiers out on patrol.

Food wise the city doesn't disappoint. From our downtown hotel it's a short hop to Woodward Table for a vast but exceptional pizza. On Friday night we join the buzz at Georgia Brown's for southern fried chicken.

And on the last day, after a breakfast of sugar-dusted beignets, we head across the Potomac River to Arlington National Cemetery. Set on 624 acres of hilly land, it's a sight of such poignancy that you can only wonder at man's endless capacity for conflict. Some 400 000 veterans and active duty soldiers are buried here; there are around 30 burials every week.

Utterly different yet constantly captivating, don't miss these two cities. Each reveals so much about the crazy, great, US of A. **GH**