American Dreams

After landing at Dulles airport in Washington DC we spent the night in the home of a student from Columbia University in New York City who spent a semester abroad at Queen Mary. Our friend, Samantha, had organised us travel and accommodation in New York City and (being very familiar with Manhattan) was our guide as well. After a nights stay in Samantha’s home, we made our way up to New York City on the coach where we then checked into our hotel located close by the United Nation’s Headquarters. From here we proceeded to explore the area of New York City known as Manhattan, the smallest and yet the most urbanized borough of New York City. It wasn’t long before we came to our first spectacle, the Flat Iron building. It’s unusual shape made it easy to find, the flat iron building was the first skyscraper to be built and it shows how much the modern world has progressed as it was surrounded by many buildings that were much larger in its vicinity.

One of the highlights of New York was the famous Times Square, filled with its flashing lights and buzzing atmosphere, it was lively both in the day and the night with plenty of things to do, Times Square makes its London equivalent of Piccadilly Circus appear miniscule. The beauty of Manhattan is that it is a densely populated area and yet it has a large selection of parks, the largest being Central Park. Walking around Central Park gave me us a whole new perspective on New York, it was a sharp contrast on the urbanized world with its park benches, green surroundings and views over the lake.

Our New York adventure continued with the Empire State building, we had a tour of the famous building and headed to the top where we enjoyed the views of New York City in the night. The day after Samantha showed us around Columbia University, an impressive campus with both modern and classical buildings. We ended the second day roaming around the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which displayed exhibits ranging from art collections from many cultures and ages. We began the final day of our trip to New York by looking at exploring the southern part of Manhattan Island. We headed towards Battery Park where we saw the statue of the bull, a large metal sculpture of a bull which was highly popular amongst the tourists. As well as this we saw the famous Wall Street, the home of modern day economics, the street was rammed with tourists trying to get a look at the American Stock Exchange.

Although we were unable to see the statue of liberty up close, it was still exciting to be able to see it nevertheless. The tablet that she holds bears the date of the declaration of independence and the statue itself has become a symbol of freedom in the United States. Despite the statue being a gift from the French in 1886, over a hundred years after the declaration itself, I feel that the trip to New York harbour was vital to understanding the impact of the declaration upon the United States.

Our visit to the Smithsonian Art Museum gave us an opportunity to soak up cultures that we had never before been exposed to. For instance, African Art had been completely foreign to me prior to my visit to America, but the collection at the museum was both diverse and usual and gave me a good flavour of what African Art was about. Other opportunities to take in other cultures included our visit to China town in New York where we had the best tasting dumplings for only $1, as well as a cultural event including: Mexican, Asian and Indian at ‘the Mall’ located near Washington Monument. The large event included dance performances and speeches.
The Korean and Vietnamese war memorials were both particularly relevant to our ‘The American Century 1900 onwards’. While the memorials were sombre, they crucially brought to life the Cold War: the struggle against communism. Even today Korea remains divided, with the South as capitalist and the North remains determinedly communist. The memorial includes over 2,500 images of air, sea and land troops sand-blasted onto a granite wall, 19 larger than life steel statues of troops and a ‘Pool of Remembrance’.

We were particularly grateful to have seen the Statue of Abraham Lincoln. The Lincoln memorial is famous not solely because of Abraham Lincoln’s honesty, humanity and integrity, but because the site has featured some monumental Civil rights events. The Washington March for jobs and freedom and Martin Luther King Junior’s ‘I have a dream’ speech took place in 1963 before the memorial of the President who issued the Emancipation Proclamation. The Washington monument was also a highpoint of the trip – it being the tallest structure upon its completion in 1888 and dedicated to America’s father: George Washington.

The Washington Monument is a spectacle that can only be truly admired through one’s own eyes. Its sheer size is overwhelming and amid the massive crowds of thousands of people in the Washington Mall, the Washington Memorial stands tall and proud, and can be seen as far as the eye can stretch. The 4th of July fireworks celebration was definitely a highlight of the trip. The fireworks were amazing and would put any British bonfire works display to shame. With dazzling fireworks flying over the Washington Monument we all felt a bit patriotic -despite being British - irony at its best!

We also visited The White House but sadly only caught a glimpse with no sign of Obama. Security was extremely tight with an unusually large amount of officers. Everywhere you looked there was either a group of police cars or a group of patrolling officers. The locals paid no attention, but being a tourist you couldn’t help but stare. The Capitol was also met with security equalling airport standards, with bags going through scanners and belts and shoes having to be taken off. What we did like about Washington was how easy it was to navigate and how close in proximity all the touristic places were, such as the museums and art galleries. Both the Natural History Museum and Air and Space Museum had an incredible display ranging from planes made from the Wright Brothers and dinosaurs to modern day fighter jets, space satellites and African animals. It easily took us at least two hours to get through everything in a single museum.

However, the lack of clothing and gift shops was disappointing. Georgetown, a quaint little town turned high street was only a short bus ride away costing $2. It’s highly recommended place to visit, selling designer clothes at low prices and offering many other shops. Another disappointment was that although we walked past the National Archive many times, we never got the chance to go in there and see The Declaration of Independence for ourselves. The Queues ranged from being an hour to two hours long each time we tried. One morning when we left early, waking up at 6am, the queue was already an hour and a half long. The National Zoo was an enjoyable experience. We saw the pandas that are considered famous in Washington as they were a gift from China, as well as a large range of other mammals, sea life and insects.

Overall our experience in America was one we shall never forget and highly grateful to have had.

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