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Washington, D.C., hotel upgrades and new lodgings are a winning ticket

The W, Jefferson and Dupont offer nods to the past with green party features.

By Andrew Bender, Reporting from Washington, D.C.
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Some things about our nation's capital are eternal: stately monuments, infighting, wilting summer humidity, confounding street grid and, mysteriously, hotels by and large unbecoming of the most powerful capital city on Earth.

The monuments are as grand as ever, the politicians are still politicizing and the grid hasn't changed, but this fall travelers have something to celebrate besides the end to mugginess: a host of new lodgings that add allure to a D.C. stay.

Hype and hoopla envelop the W Washington D.C., which opened in June with mod rooms and a swank bar overlooking the White House and the National Mall. The 1917 Beaux Arts building's landmark status meant the new owners had to keep the original "Hotel Washington" sign on the exterior, though they were permitted to add the W.

[Los Angeles](#)-based designer Dianna Wong has cleverly insinuated politics throughout the hotel. In the lobby, glossy lipstick-red sofas snuggle alongside navy-blue-pinstripe armchairs, evoking the dualities on which this town thrives: seduction and power, female and male, intrigue and lucre.

Hotel rooms in 1917 were smaller, so the renovation required knocking down walls, reducing the room count from 400 to 317. Pocket doors and shiny white bathrooms with eco-friendly toilets and frosted glass showers add to the illusion of space.

Famed [New York](#) chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's J&G Steakhouse is the hotel's lobby restaurant, though the biggest buzz goes to POV, the rooftop bar that instantly achieved Sky Bar status for its sightlines to Chez Obama. Often the sights inside the bar are just as interesting -- the Real Madrid soccer team was there just before my visit.

No such hoopla awaits at the Jefferson -- no doubt the well-heeled guests want it that way. Instead of a bustling front counter, staff members greet guests at a sedate office-style desk or, for the utmost in discretion, escort you to your room and check you in using a hand-held computer.

President Jefferson, our Renaissance man, was never far from the minds of the renovators of this hotel, built in 1923. During my tour shortly before it opened in August, the results bordered on shrine-like. Door frames, Greek revival columns and parquet floors are patterned after Jefferson's designs for Monticello,

his Virginia home. The wood-paneled book room -- that's what he called his library -- is filled with tomes by and about him and his contemporaries, including Alexander Hamilton and Voltaire.

References in the 99 rooms are subtler, including sketches of Monticello printed on headboards and curtains, and bath products incorporating herbs that he grew there. On windows facing the noisier street-side of the building, glass sound-barrier panels are etched with the Declaration of Independence. Concessions to the 21st century include wireless Internet, Bose speakers and televisions hidden behind bathroom mirrors.

Jefferson was also credited with being the first to grow wine grapes in America, and the hotel's wine cellar boasts more than 1,000 labels. About the only non-classical design element is the backlit, curved glass bar, Quill, where mixologists sling sidecars and Manhattans alongside cocktails concocted with alcohols, bitters and tonics made in-house.

If the W is hip and the Jefferson heritage, the Dupont Hotel, which opened this spring, hides in plain sight. From the outside, the former Jurys Washington Hotel looks like a midcentury D.C. condo. Perhaps that's part of its appeal to diplomats visiting nearby embassies -- there's a sales manager handling just their business.

The rest of us can enjoy it too. A \$50-million renovation by the Irish Doyle Hotel Group has left the Dupont chic, sleek, minimalist and modernist. Enter through a glass box of a lobby to a fishbowl of a bar with floor-to-ceiling windows tailor-made for people-watching on busy Dupont Circle.

Standard rooms don't break size records, but their open floor plan helps. Striped carpets draw the eye to wall-to-wall windows, plantation shutters keep out most light and the HVAC system dulls most sound, though car horns do manage to get through. Bathrooms feature European-style showers.

Top-floor concierge rooms feature snacks much of the day and terraces offering views across the city's rooftops.

Travelers without the resources of a nation behind them might choose the Eldon Luxury Suites hotel, which opened in March near the convention center. An arrangement of orchids and roses flanked the front lobby on my visit, a nod to the Vietnamese investors who renovated this former apartment building.

Generous one-, two- and three-bedroom suites (the smallest is about 650 square feet) boast marble floors, full kitchens, hand-painted washbasins, eco-friendly toilets, techie-looking clock radios, bath products made with herbs and aromatic extracts, and *trés* Asiatique floral motifs on cushions. Rates also include continental breakfast.

The Eldon calls its units "Luxury Suites," though I beg to differ. They're interestingly designed, spotless, a great value and even semi-chic, but the prefab wire shelving in the closets is more Home Depot than Armani Casa.

And although the convention center is just a block away, that block features boarded-up brownstones and an empty lot. Long-term plans call for another hotel and condo complex, perhaps to become Washington's next great addition.

Following are other worthy Washingtonians. . . .

Hotel George

Hip, attitude-free and two minutes on foot from Union Station (D.C.'s main train depot), the George was the first modern boutique property in the city (2000) and still has a strong sense of place. In the white marble lobby, Warhol-esque images of the Father of Our Country flank a baby grand piano, while mini-bars feature offbeat treats like Clif bars and Toblerone. Its Bistro Bis here was a regular haunt of Barack Obama when he still answered to "Senator" (his usual: steak *frites*). If the George is full, its sister Hotel Palomar, near Dupont Circle, has a similar freewheeling vibe.

Hay-Adams

A White House view is old news to the Hay-Adams. John Hay, President Lincoln's personal secretary, and Henry Adams, a descendant of those Adamases, were famous friends living in adjacent homes facing Lafayette Park, the White House's de facto backyard. On the site, which became the hotel in 1928, they hosted literary salons for guests including Mark Twain, Theodore Roosevelt and other guests. Some might call the rooms, with their wooden doors, creaky hinges and original plumbing "antique"; others would say "aging." But scores of guests would doubtless protest if it were to change.

Mandarin Oriental

The Mandarin opened in 2003, which apparently is still new enough that its street doesn't appear on maps inside Washington's transit system. After you're there, though, this [Hong Kong](#)-flavored hotel has great sightlines to some of D.C.'s biggest highlights -- the Potomac River, Jefferson Memorial, Washington Monument, Pentagon and the Tidal Basin -- and walls lined with fine reproductions from the Smithsonian's Asian collections.

Willard InterContinental

The Willard is to Washington what the Waldorf-Astoria is to New York and the Biltmore is to Los Angeles: posh, plush and timeless. Its damask-curtained, gilt-ceilinged, columned, potted-planted, Victorian furniture-filled halls look as if they've barely changed in a century. It's hosted every U.S. president since Franklin Pierce was elected in 1852, so who are we to argue?



Washington, D.C. hotels

(Moshe Zusman Photography)

The concierge floor is called Level 9.



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(Hotel Dupont)

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(Moshe Zusman Photography)

Top-floor concierge rooms at the Dupont feature terraces offering views across the city's rooftops.