

Road Trip! Destination: Cherry blossoms in D.C.

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More than 1.5 million people visit Washington, D.C., each year to admire the blossoming cherry trees and participate in diverse programming that heralds spring in the nation's capital.

The National Cherry Blossom Festival, now in its 102nd year, celebrates the gift of cherry trees and the enduring friendship between the people of the United States and Japan. The blooming buds create a breathtaking view — a welcome sight after such a harsh winter.

The festival, which runs through April 13, has 25 days of events — most free and open to the public — around the nation's capital from fireworks to a parade with lavish floats, giant helium balloons and bands. Details: www.washington.org

Fun florals

The peak bloom date of the cherry blossoms varies year to year depending on weather. In 2013, peak bloom occurred April 9. In 2012, blossoms peaked March 20. The average peak bloom date from 1992 through 2013 is March 31.

The National Park Service announced that peak bloom for this year — defined as when 70 percent of blossoms are open — will be April 8 to 12.

The National Park Service's website (www.nps.gov) offers a link to the [Blossom Cam](#). The park service has teamed with [EarthCam](#) to offer a sweeping tour of the country's capital, with stops at some of the most iconic landmarks and memorials. Front and center is the Tidal Basin, where you will see people paddle boating as they are surrounded by the trees.

The Yoshino trees typically bloom for a period of several days. Cool, calm weather can extend the length of the bloom, and a rainy, windy day can bring an abrupt end to the blossoms. A late frost can prevent the trees from blooming at all.

The festival commemorates the gift of trees from Mayor Yukio Ozaki of Tokyo to the city of Washington, D.C. The first cherry trees were ceremonially planted by first lady Helen Taft and Japanese Viscountess Iwa Chinda, wife of the Japanese ambassador, on March 27, 1912, on the north bank of the Tidal Basin in West Potomac Park. There are 3,020 trees planted throughout the National Mall and Memorial Parks.

In Japan, the flowering cherry tree or "sakura" is an exalted plant. Details: www.nationalcherryblossomfestival.org

Thomas Jefferson Memorial

The Thomas Jefferson Memorial, part of the National Mall and Memorial Parks, sits prominently along the southern edge of the Tidal Basin with views toward many of the other presidential sites. The memorial is open 24 hours a day, and free daily tours run from 10 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Details: 202-426-6841, www.nps.gov/thje/index.htm

Go boating

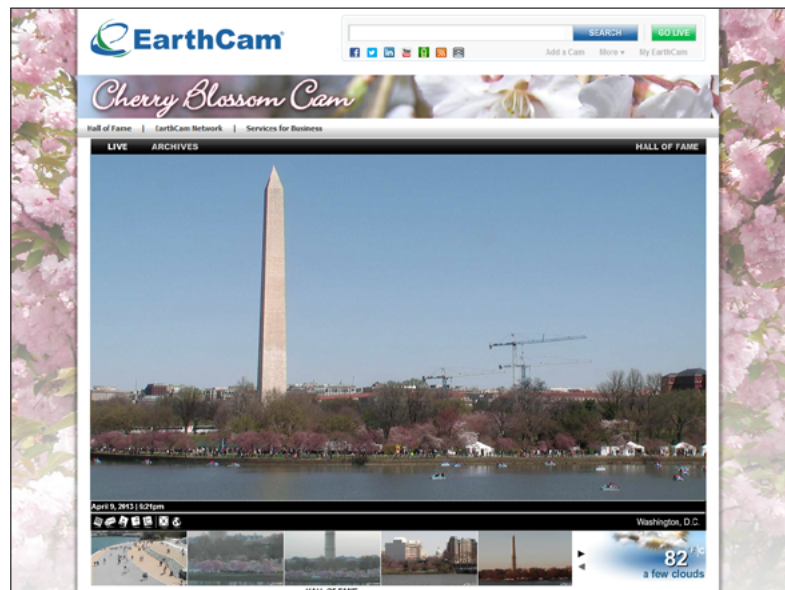
View the Jefferson Memorial and the Japanese cherry trees from the water. Take a break from touring and soak up some sun in a Tidal Basin paddle boat. Visitors may make advance paddleboat reservations for the duration of the festival. At least one person must be at least 16 years of age. The boathouse supplies life vests for individuals over age 18 months or 25 pounds. Cost is \$14 per hour for a two-passenger boat and \$22 for a four-passenger boat.

There also are lantern walks, a two-hour, two-mile evening tour around the Tidal Basin. Details: 202-479-2426, www.tidalbasinpaddleboats.com

Washington Monument

The Washington Monument — closed for the final stages of restoration from the earthquake of 2011 — is due to reopen May 12.

Although the interior remains closed, the world's tallest stone structure is still a dominating site on the National Mall. The world's tallest obelisk, at more than 555 feet above the ground, weighs 81,120 tons. It sits east of a vast reflecting pool about one mile from the Lincoln Memorial.



Plans for a national monument began as early as 1783 when Congress proposed that a statue of George Washington be erected. After decades of delays, the monument was completed in 1884 and was opened to the public Oct. 9, 1888.

Visitors to the observation level of the monument are met with sweeping views of Washington, with visibility up to 40 miles in all directions. Details: www.nps.gov/wamo/index.htm

For art lovers

The Smithsonian American Art Museum, the nation's first collection of American art, captures key aspects of America's rich artistic and cultural history from the colonial period to today. More than 7,000 artists are represented. The American Art Museum has the largest collection of New Deal art and collections of contemporary craft, Impressionist paintings and masterpieces from the Gilded Age.

Other pioneering collections include photography, modern folk art, work by African-American and Latino artists, images of Western expansion and realist art from the first half of the 20th century. In recent years, the museum has focused on strengthening its contemporary-art collection.

The museum's main building, a National Historic Landmark located in the heart of Washington's downtown cultural district, has been renovated with expanded permanent-collection art and the first visible art storage and study center in Washington. It adjoins the Lunder Conservation Center, which is shared with the National Portrait Gallery, the first art-conservation facility to allow the public permanent behind-the-scenes views of the preservation work of museums.

On April 12, visitors can participate in floral-theme craft activities, live music and a gardening demonstration and talks about the Japanese tea ceremony and see contemporary teapots in the museum collection.

Admission is free. Hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Details: 202-633-1000, www.americanart.si.edu