

Check it Out!

Day trips from some of the country's more populous military installations

by Victoria Pressley

Forsyth Park in Savannah, photo by Katt Green

Ahh Summer! The sun is hot, school is out and it's PCS season. When you're exhausted from moving, it can be tough to find the energy to check out a new location. There's unpacking to do, change-of-address cards to send, the Internet and phone need connecting ... exploring your new surroundings is probably last on your list. But getting your family out of the house and away from that list can help inspire some love for your new locale.

The Pentagon and Military District of Washington

The metropolitan Washington area is home to countless military installations — from the Pentagon and historic Fort Myer to the ever-expanding Fort Belvoir and Quantico. There is so much to do in the area, but travel time may vary, as going 10 miles around D.C. can take five times as long as it can in other, less crowded places in

the country. Traffic is a major issue to deal with — rush “hour” can last from 5:30-9:30 a.m. and from 3-7 p.m. in the afternoons (or longer...) — so try to plan your trips accordingly, or park and take the extensive mass transit system when possible. The cool thing about DC is that you are just a few hours' drive (car, train or bus) to cities including Philadelphia and New York, so there is always something to do on the weekends.

Washington, D.C.

What to do: Visit a museum or national monument — there is something for everyone in our nation's capital. Most attractions are free to the public, but do go early to get in line for the limited number of tickets handed out each morning for the Washington Monument and tours of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The National Zoo is another can't miss attraction — especially with its expanded Panda exhibit. The Kennedy Center is home to the Washington National Opera, the National Symphony Orchestra and traveling Broadway shows.

Where to eat: You can hobnob with the politically famous at establishments including the Old Ebbitt Grill near the White House and at the large number of restaurants in the Chinatown, Georgetown and Adams Morgan neighborhoods. There are scores of ethnic restaurants in this embassy mecca, so whether you feel like Vietnam-

ese, Ethiopian or Greek, you'll find something to suit your taste. For cheap eats, be sure to check out Zaytinya near Chinatown, Pete's New Haven Style Apizza or Julia's Empanadas in various locations.

Insider's Tip: The absolute best time to visit popular attractions including the National Archives or the Air and Space Museum is in the dead of winter, when blustery conditions deter the crowds, says military spouse Jennifer Williams, who has lived in the D.C. area for a total of eight years. If you must go during the busy tourist season, she adds, try to visit the museums first thing in the morning or in late afternoon, when crowds are lighter.

Virginia

What to Do: From Arlington and its National Cemetery, only a few miles from the Pentagon, to Alexandria and Mount Vernon 30 minutes south and historic Fredericksburg, about an hour south, history abounds in the state of Virginia. You can hardly move without coming upon a place where our founding fathers walked, slept or ate. The Potomac River snakes south of town, offering boating and fishing opportunities. The George Washington Parkway and the accompanying Mount Vernon Trail follow the river from Theodore Roosevelt Island down to Mount Vernon, with 18 miles of biking or hiking trails. The Old Town areas of Alexandria and Fredericksburg boasts some stunning architecture and some of the best restaurants around. Like to shop? The Tysons Corner area is for you. From Tiffany's and Chanel to Old Navy and Target, you literally can find any store you can think of here — not to mention the recently opened American Girl Store.

What to Eat: Home to the original Five Guys, with its award-winning, handmade burgers and fries, Virginia also offers several locations for the Hard Times Café and its famous chili. Union Street

Pub near the Potomac in Alexandria is always a safe bet. For a real experience, visit The Inn at Little Washington, consistently ranked among the very best restaurants in the region — but it is usually reserved for very special occasions: dinner there can set you back about \$150 per person.

Insider's Tip: There are so many historical sites, it can be hard to squeeze in everything you want to see. Try to break it up into areas to explore on each excursion, says Williams. Pick Mount Vernon and its recently opened Grist Mill and Distillery near Fort Belvoir one day and historic Williamsburg and Busch Gardens or Virginia Beach for a weekend getaway. Potomac Point Winery opened a few years ago just south of Quantico, and offers a surprisingly tranquil escape from the otherwise hectic pace of the area — enjoy a light dinner from the Bistro and glass of wine while sitting on their veranda.

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

Fort Leavenworth is the oldest active army post west of Washington, D.C. Rich in history and populated by friendly folk, the area offers a wealth of family fun opportunities, within a short drive away.

Kansas City (20 to 40 minutes)

What to Do: There are several large malls around Kansas City. The closest, The Legends, is home to the Kansas City Speedway, the Kansas City Wizards (and their brand new soccer stadium), and the minor league baseball team — the T-Bones. Legends also boasts outlets, a movie theater and enough stores to keep your older kids busy until their money runs out. Younger kids will love poking fingers and toes in the fountain.

Where to Eat: Barbeque is serious business in KC. The most

famous, Gates and Arthur Bryant's, had their battle for the best KC BBQ title featured on the travel channel. Personally, our family votes for Oklahoma Joes!

Weston (10 to 15 minutes)

What to Do: Once the second largest port on the Missouri river, Weston is now a small but charming community — and there's always something going on! Weston throws several festivals during the year, including the Apple Festival in fall. Throughout summer many of the shops offer free tastings on the first Saturday of the month from local restaurants.

Where to Eat: Don't miss the live entertainment in the cellar of O'Malley's Irish Pub.

Independence (1 hour)

What to Do: Explore the historic district, laden with historic markers. See where former President Harry Truman met his wife, went to school, worked, lived, played poker and drank whiskey.

The restored Truman Courthouse, where he worked for county government is open for tours and home to the Jackson County Historical Society. Visit the Truman home (Harry S. Truman National Historic Site) and the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum. Both exhibit memorabilia from Truman's life.

Where to Eat: Step back in time at Clinton's Soda Fountain on the Independence Square.

Insider Tip: Kristina Light, Web Editor for Kansas City Parent Magazine and Mom of three, says don't miss "the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Walk over the Kauffman Gardens for great photos and head to the Plaza for Bar-B-Q at Jack Stack where they have the best BBQ in KC!"

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Fort Stewart and Hunter Army Airfield Georgia

As the largest Army installation in the eastern United States, chances are you may see Fort Stewart at some stage in your career as a Soldier.

Savannah (1 hour)

What to do: Savannah's nickname "The Jewel of the South" is no stretch. With its quirky history, pre-civil war architecture and creepy Spanish moss, walking through Savannah's squares and along River Street is like walking through a painting.

Try a ghost tour, pub tour or city tour. All are great fun, just choose whether you want to walk around the city, cruise in a trolley, or ride in a Hearst or a horse-drawn carriage.

Where to Eat: Stop by Paula Deans Lady and Sons Restaurant to savor the flavors of the South. It's first-come first-serve though so get there early. Vinny Van Go-Go's serves amazing pizza and don't miss the Pirate House.

Tybee Island (1 to 1 ½ hours)

What to do: Cruise around Tybee and you'll notice remains of old fortifications and historical plaques in front of old buildings and homes. These were once part of an old coastal artillery battery. Drive down Officers Row and imagine how nice it would've been to score a multi-million dollar, beach-front mansion for government housing.

Fort Pulaski, an old Civil War Fort that saw some action, is now a well-preserved (and must see) National Park. Don't let kids stray too far; there are gators in the moat!

Where to eat: Uncle Bubbas Oyster House (Paula Dean's

brother's restaurant) is a must. The Peach and Blackberry Cobbler at the North Beach Grill is scrumptious, not just because of the live music or the location — right on the sand.

Insider Tips: Sarah Slone, military spouse and mother of two, recommends you visit St Simons Island. The "beaches are clean and family friendly with plenty of parking and shaded, beach-side playgrounds."

We took all our visitors to the Shrimp Docks At Sunbury restaurant, to watch the sunset silhouette the shrimp boats while eating fresh and fantastic seafood!

Fort Hood, Texas

Nicknamed The Great Place, Fort Hood, is well-known as a great posting for the single Soldier and for family-friendly fun.

Belton Lake Outdoor Recreation Area - BLORA (5 to 10 minutes)

What to do: Rent a jet ski, a boat, or a cottage. Go swimming, camping, mountain biking, or play paintball. Hit the beach, the spray park or the water slides. Or just hang out and fish or admire the wildflowers. Nestled against Belton Lake this 89 acre recreational facility is just off post and offers a multitude of recreational options.

Where to eat: Bring a picnic. You can rent a pavilion for large parties or snag a picnic table near a playground for your family.

Austin (1 ½ hours)

What to do: What isn't there to do in Austin?! This capital city, and home to the University of Texas, is nicknamed the Live Music Capital of the World with a dynamic nightlife, from comedy clubs to piano clubs and outstanding pub bands.

Got a family? *Parenting Magazine*

recently listed Austin as the second best city in the country for families. Have fun together tubing on the river or enjoy a refreshing dip in the spring-fed Barton Springs Pool. Stop by Bridge and watch a noisy, black cloud of bats take off for the night.

Where to eat: Taking on Travel Channels the Man Versus Food challenges around Austin is fun (especially the giant donuts) but while in Texas you have to try their BBQ.

San Antonio (2 ½ to 3 hours)

What to do: This year marks the 175th anniversary of the Battle of the Alamo. Home to the Alamo, San Antonio is the most visited city in Texas. Several other historic Spanish missions also dot this area.

Get a map from the Visitor Center and take a self-guided tour of the Texas Star Trail in historic downtown. Or use your smart phone to explore the River Walk. 12 points along the tree-lined walk offer scanable narration.

If you're the more adventurous type, go climbing and rappelling in Texas' largest cavern 180 feet below the surface.

Where to eat: The River Walk offers countless fabulous eateries, many offering live music. Stoll along perusing menus and musicians until the right combination strikes you.

Insider Tips: Major Chris Pressley says "Don't miss Austin. The undiscovered, up-and-coming bands and diverse foods can't be beat."

Happy Travels!

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