

Columnists

The Baird Facts: Visiting D.C. post snowplosion

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BEVERLY, MASS. –

In the fall of 2008, my eldest daughter's preschool had a presidential election. Despite it being a preschool of predominately conservative families, my daughter, along with the majority of children, voted for Mr. Obama.

When he won the national election she was confident in the role she had played. As we watched the inauguration together in our living room, she cheered, "There he is! There's the president I voted for!"

So, when my Annapolis-based parents suggested that we go to Washington D.C. and visit the Museum of Natural History over this last school break, we all agreed.

"And," I added, "let's walk over to the Washington Monument. It's close to the Metro and there's a great view of the White House."

The morning of our field trip was sunny and clear, if perhaps a bit cold.

"Do you think we'll need to wear boots?" My husband asked in light of the recent snowplosion in D.C.

I laughed. "I'm sure that our nation's capital has managed to clear its sidewalks by now."

One Metro trip later our family emerged onto the Washington Mall where a vast expanse of snow met us, with nary a plowed inch in sight, and winds that threatened to blow us to patriotic pieces. I squinted across the ice sheet towards the Monument.

"Huh," I said. "It looked so close on Google earth."

But it wasn't close. At. All.

Nevertheless we set out, like Shackleton and his crew, bracing into the wind and sloshing through the snow in our inappropriate footwear. I wasn't going to let a minor arctic blast dampen my daughter's young democratic spirit. That said, the view, or lack thereof, might have squelched it just a bit.

Again, on Google earth, the White House had seemed quite viewable from the Monument. In person, it was . . . mostly invisible.

Still, I tried to make it thrilling. "Look sweetie, see that white spot way over there behind those trees? That's where President Obama lives!"

Our daughter, buried deep within her coat, peered out across the tundra as the wind roared around her. "Uh-huh."

My father quickly snapped a photo of our historic moment. Then we about-faced and trekked back to the museum in a chilly silence.

But it was all an icy memory once at the Museum of Natural History. With dinosaurs and lions and whales and diamonds and butterflies and meteorites and mummies it was impossible not to be dazzled. We stared at rocks that glowed and got lost in the Western Cultures hall; we pondered the bones exhibit and watched the fossil lab at work; we recoiled in horror at the skeleton of the Giant Tree Sloth and marveled at the creatures found in the deepest depths of the ocean.

We had such a wonderful time that our map – a simple office paper freebie – was getting crumpled and hard for our girls to share.

Fearing a map disaster, I asked our 5 year old to grab a second one at the information desk.

"Don't forget to say please!" I called.

Our daughter was met by a dour, scowling lady.

"The map is \$2." She barked holding up a glossy booklet.

"Oh," I smiled from where I stood. "Sorry, she means this free one." I waved the crinkled paper.

The lady deepened her scowl. "There is just one map per family."

I took a deep breath. "Hmm, it's just that both of my girls are enjoying themselves so much and this map," I waved it again for good measure, "is getting hard to share."

She huffed and picked up another apparently rare, yet easily photocopied, map and handed it to my daughter.

I forced a smile. "What do you say, sweetie?"

My daughter said thank you while simultaneously spinning in a delighted circle with her map. My 3-year-old danced in place with the first one.

I looked at the lady intending to bend over backwards in deep appreciation for this major infraction of the museum rules whereby she let both of my children, who actually wanted to learn, who loved exploring the exhibits, who had just trekked across the Kumba Ice field out of sheer patriotism in gale force winds, have their own inky map.

But before I could swoon in thanks, she looked at me and said, "She didn't."

"Excuse me?" I asked, confused.

"Your daughter, she *didn't* say thank you."

And since I wasn't sure if I was supposed to, in turn, thank her for that gem of mishearing, I simply walked off into the Hall of Mammals where I hoped to find a slightly friendlier creature, stuffed or otherwise.

The rest of our visit was a fun filled blur and when we collapsed on the Metro at the end of the day, we were already talking about returning this summer . . . obviously in the right shoes, and perhaps with pre-printed maps.

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