

The Air in There; An Insider's Guide to the Big Three Local Airports [FINAL Edition]

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No matter what kind of traveler you are, you have to learn to deal with the Washington area's three airports. They are the outgoing portals through which everybody who wants out must first pass. Yes, we do feel blessed to have a bounty of local air facilities from which to choose: BWI, specializing in low-fare domestic and international travel; Ronald Reagan National Airport, the downtown-based, Metro-accessible domestic-flight workhorse and home to the hourly air shuttles to New York; and Dulles International, the Virginia-based international gateway that's taking on more low-fare and short-hop business as our region's demand for air travel grows. In gross terms, each accounts for about an equal share of area air traffic.

The problem is that learning to deal with the idiosyncrasies of three airports is a lot more demanding than learning just one. To help you out, we recently visited each of the three local airports repeatedly, at different times of day, to produce the following user's guides. We tell you where to find the decent food, where to seek quiet refuge, what techno-tools you'll find where, how to cope with parking and what unique features each may harbor.

BWI

By far, BWI is the best airport of the three to spend a lot of time in. There are at least three good places to sack out, read or meditate in semi-privacy--attractive for long delays or for those tidy folks who actually abide by the airline's suggestions and arrive several hours before departure time. BWI also allows smokers to light up in designated restaurants and bars. Finally, the airport has set up a large area for kids to romp in and a small aviation museum.

Most notable feature: Serenity spaces.

+ Serenity Space No. 1: Between the Burger King (which, like nearly all restaurants at BWI, is wisely walled off by Plexiglas to reduce noise seepage) and Wilson Leather you will find a roomy space decorated with big, cushy couches. Musical forest sounds pulse softly through hidden speakers. Warning: You cannot hear any airport cacophony, including flight announcements.

+ Serenity Space No. 2: At Pier E, the International Pier (Note: Concourses are called "piers" at BWI), you will find an enormous atrium, with dozens of benches (no back, but perhaps great for a nap), natural lighting, airport-chic white scaffolding and a distant hiss of wind soaring through a tunnel somewhere. You feel a little as if you have stepped into the astronaut's white bedroom at the end of the movie "2001."

+ Serenity Space No. 3: The Observation Gallery at the center of the main concourse has cushy chairs, piped-in music, a view of planes moving about and natural light from skylights above. Smear on the hemp lip balm that you bought at the Body Shop in Pier D, sip your cappuccino from the Flight Deck Cafe, lean back and listen to Mozart's Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra in A--the music Robert Redford played for Meryl Streep in "Out of Africa"--and imagine you are not, in fact, on your way to an insurance convention in Topeka. Again, watch your watch or you will miss your flight.

Best phones: Four roomy AT&T Public Phone 2000s line the wall near the couches in Serenity Space No. 1. Computerized screens give instructions in German, Spanish and French. Services for the impaired, including TDD and voice relay. Note: Throughout BWI you will find two different phones, those for local calls to Washington and local calls to Baltimore. Phones are clearly labeled.

Restrooms: 25 for men/25 for women. Those along the piers are larger; women's rooms average 20 regular stalls and two for the disabled. Purse shelves above toilets are handy. Bathrooms in main terminal average only four stalls.

Food: Thirteen restaurants. CK's, behind the American Airlines ticket counter, offers sit-down dinners that include eggs Benedict for \$7.95 or Maryland crab cakes at market price. Restaurants and bars behind the ticket counters offer the quietest, most restful dining. Businesses along the piers are noisier.

Bars: Six places to drink. Orioles bar near the entrance to Pier D seemed the most popular. Smoking is allowed there and in CK's and Wild Goose Ale House.

Shops: Seventeen places to buy Certs, a tie or a book. Self-serve, coin-operated, 24-hour kiosks sell carnations behind glass cases. Two well-stocked bookstores offer enough spiritual chicken soup to cure a million souls. There's a Body Shop and a Museum Shop (which sells van Gogh jigsaw puzzles, magnetic poetry kits and pretentious little brown-paper journals that look like the one Ralph Fiennes used in "The English Patient").

Recreation/entertainment: BWI wins first place for keeping kids busy. The Observation Gallery and Museum (open 8 a.m.-9 p.m.) includes a slice of a mid-section of a Fu Boeing 737-200, diagrams of jet streams, and an explanation of how omnidirectional radio signals (VORs) work. The Smithsonian Museum Shop and Flight Deck Cafe are adjacent. Below the gallery, your toddlers can romp in the playroom, filled with chunky, plastic structures they can climb on and through. BWI also boasts the BWI Trail, a 12.6-mile outdoor track for hikers, joggers and cyclists. Construction of its final phase will be done this fall.

Percentage of flights on time in month of June: 72.7 (to compare, Los Angeles International came in at 66.4 percent, Chicago O'Hare, 67.5 percent)

Parking: Four types of parking:

+ Hourly parking garage: Across from the main terminal. First half-hour is free, \$2 each half-hour thereafter, \$12 per day maximum (lowered in April from \$15 a day to encourage more use and discourage use of overcrowded long-term parking).

+ ESP Parking: Express parking allows you to park close and be driven directly to your ticket counter in an on-demand shuttle. \$4 per hour; \$12 maximum per day.

+ Park 'N Walk: On the left as you approach the main terminal. No shuttle, but a moving walkway through the garage gets you to ticket counters. \$2 per hour; \$9 maximum per day. + Satellite Parking: Three lots for long-term parking. \$1 per hour; \$7 maximum per day. Every seventh day is free. Shuttle buses take you to main terminal. Time from parked car to main terminal: nine minutes. Early flights work best. By 4 p.m. on a Wednesday, lots were full.

Number of passengers served per year: 14 million

Getting there: BWI is about 30 miles north of Washington (a 45-minute drive) and 10 miles south of Baltimore.

+ By car: Take the Baltimore-Washington Parkway--it's more scenic, less traffic, no trucks--and follow signs to airport. Leaving the airport is a bit trickier. Signs for I-95 are more clearly marked than signs for the parkway. Be alert. Driving east out of the airport, the parkway comes before I-95.

+ By train: MARC and Amtrak trains run between the airport and Washington's Union Station (about a 30-minute ride) and Baltimore's Penn Station. One hundred daily trains. MARC schedules and fare: 1-800-325-7245. Amtrak: 1-800-872-7245. Shuttle buses take you from the BWI Rail Station to the airport terminal.

+ By bus: Supershuttle offers door-to-door service from most homes, offices or hotels. One-way fares range from \$28 to \$30. Each additional passenger is \$5. Service from the airport to your home or office or hotel departs within 60 minutes of your request from the lower level of Pier C. Scheduled service departs from 1517 K St. NW every 30 minutes from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. and from BWI to K Street from 6 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. \$21 one way, \$34 round trip per person.

+ Taxi service: From downtown Washington to the airport, about \$45 and 45 minutes.

Little annoyances: Baggage claim, on the first floor, is cramped and quite crowded. Railings separate visitors from those getting their luggage, so you can't chat while you wait. Also, the curve of the ticketing counter obstructs your view of the airline location signs, making you feel a little disoriented.

Contact: 1-800-435-9294. Parking lots and garage: 410-859-9230. Internet: <http://www.bwiairport.com>

DULLES

Yes, we know that it's undergoing extensive renovation (with the completion date undetermined), but does it have to be this bad? All the structures for modern amenities are in place, but none of them is in use, making you feel as if you've stepped into a developing country. In the main terminal, shops are boarded up, information kiosks are closed or unmanned, security gates are closed off with plywood, circular metal and Formica tables surrounded by cinder block walls look as though they haven't been used in years, and only one out of six foreign exchange booths was open on a Thursday afternoon. There are few places to sit and little to eat and even less to buy. In a word, it's depressing.

Most notable feature: The swoop of Dulles' concrete-encased, cable-suspended, catenary roof is worth the 35-minute drive from downtown Washington. Gawk at the Eero Saarinen's 1962, early-Michael Crichton architecture and design. The lettering above the restrooms is straight out of "The Andromeda Strain." And something about the airport's emptiness lends itself to the eerie, lonely, mission-to-Jupiter feel.

Secret: Get out of the main terminal ASAP. Hop onto a mobile lounge and go to your concourse. Time elapsed on mobile lounge from main terminal to Concourse C: seven minutes. The concourses are newer, lighter (B has atrium ceilings) and offer more shopping options.

Sacking out: Nowhere. Concourse C is virtually empty, but rather than relaxing there you might find yourself sinking into some sort of late-20th-century techno- depression.

Best phones: No news here. The usual coin-operated variety. The airport is in the process of installing newer, state-of-the-art phones.

Restrooms: 15 for men/15 for women. Most are large, with women's rooms having 10 sinks, 10 regular stalls and one stall for the disabled. A wall-to-wall tiled baby nursing room has nothing in it--not even a chair.

Smoking lounges: One in each concourse. In the main terminal, you must go outside.

Food: Only one kiosk serves the entire main terminal, selling bagels with cream cheese, hot dogs and doughnuts. One or two newsstands sell Kit Kats and Certs. Through security and into Concourse A you'll find a Starbucks, and places to buy pizzas, yogurt and French pastries. Seating is cramped and hurried. Key: Walk all the way to the back of the terminal, behind the TCBY stand, and you will find eight or so booths with a view of the airfield and those funky mobile lounges. A small TGI Friday's serves sandwiches. Concourses D and B offer more, with B being the best and the brightest. Selections include a Ben & Jerry's ice cream kiosk.

Bars: Old Dominion Brewery (Concourse C and kiosk at Main Terminal) and Sam Adam's Bar (Concourse D).

Shops: Mostly kiosks selling Washington, D.C., key chains, men's white shirts or emergency diaper packages. Concourse B has the best shopping, including a Brookstone, Wilsons Leather Express, and World News.

Recreation/entertainment: A few old video games along a wall in the main terminal and a few historical airport photos with captions in Concourse B. The National Air and Space Museum is reviewing plans for a \$130 million, 700,000-square-foot aviation and space flight museum called the Dulles Center. More than 180 aircraft and 100 spacecraft will be on display, including the Space Shuttle Enterprise. Projected completion date: Dec. 17, 2003, the 100th anniversary of the Wright Brothers' first flight.

Percentage of flights on time in month of June: 68

Parking: Four types of parking:

+ Hourly: Lot in front of main terminal. \$3 for first hour or fraction thereof; \$4 per hour for second through seventh hour; \$27 per day maximum. No charge if you exit within first 20 minutes.

+ Daily: Two lots near main terminal. \$5 per hour; \$10 per day maximum. No charge if you exit within first 20 minutes.

+ Long term/Economy: Three lots. \$1 per hour; \$5 per day maximum. No charge if you exit within first 20 minutes. Shuttle buses take you to main terminal. Time from parked car to main terminal: 15 minutes.

+ Valet: For people in a hurry. Go to main parking lot, hourly entrance, and follow signs to the Valet Service Center. \$20 for first 24 hours; \$12 each additional day.

Number of passengers served per year: 14 million

Getting there: Dulles is about 28 miles west of downtown Washington (35-minute drive).

+ By car: Take I-66 west to exit 67; follow signs to airport; about 16 miles from Exit 67. Or, take Dulles Access and Toll Road off the Beltway.

+ By Metrorail: A Washington Flyer Express bus links the airport to the West Falls Church Metrorail station. Take the Orange Line to West Falls Church. Express buses leave between 6:30 a.m. and 11 p.m. weekdays, and 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. weekends. One-way, \$8. Time from Metro Center, about one hour. Metrorail operates 5:30 a.m. until midnight, weekdays, and 8 a.m. until midnight, weekends. Bus service to airport every 30 minutes. 202-637-7000.

+ Washington Flyer Taxi: Prices range from \$35 to \$47, one way, to any destination in metropolitan Washington and suburban Maryland. 703-685-1400.

+ Washington Flyer Bus: Service every half-hour from 1517 K St. NW, \$16, one-way. Time, about one hour. 703-685-1400.

+ Supershuttle: Supershuttle offers door-to-door service from homes, offices, hotels and 1517 K St. NW. 1-800-258-3826.

+ Taxi service: From downtown Washington to airport, about \$45 and 35 minutes.

Little annoyances: The sense that you are in a time warp, that the building might close at any minute due to a coup.

Contact: 703-572-2700, <http://www.metwashairports.com/Dulles>

REAGAN NATIONAL

The recently renamed Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport is a bit like a giant wedding cake: beautifully, elegantly decorated and three layers high. First layer, baggage claim; second layer, shops and gates; third layer, ticketing, which looks over the second level, balcony-style. You get your bearings here quickly. The compact simplicity of a stacked airport makes perfect travel sense. Note: Terminals B and C make up the main terminal. They are connected, and act as one unit. Concourses are called Piers. (Note: The old Terminal A is still open, serving Midway, Northwest, TWA and TWA Express. Kiosks sell beer, cappuccinos, pastries. Cramped seating at gates.)

Most notable feature: In most airports, low ceilings and too many signs and lights and beeping carts unnerve us, make us claustrophobic and cranky. But the new National, with its Jeffersonian domes, 58-foot-tall riverside windows, murals, sculptures and friezes, lifts us into travel like an aria. Also, National is supremely convenient. The Metrorail is connected to the terminal by a walkway. It's a three-minute walk from baggage claim to Metrorail.

Sacking out: No good place, really, to escape. On the third floor, facing the ticket counters, there's a Cheesecake Factory with small cafe tables that tend to be vacant. Smokers and others should know about the outdoor terrace at the north and south ends of Level Three. The benches and vine-covered trellises are nice, but traffic noise and wafts of jet fuel might send you back inside.

Best phones: There are 28 standard phones in a row in the main terminal. All are equipped with volume control and hearing-aid compatibilities, and have Braille and raised numbers. One TDD phone in each bank. The South Pier (Gates 15-22) includes phones with data ports for your laptop.

Restrooms: Seven for men/seven for women. Largest restrooms are along main terminal, averaging 12 regular and two stalls for the disabled for women.

Food: Here, Reagan National shines. The only airport that offers California rolls (Charlie Chaing's Kwai--middle pier). Six sit-down restaurants, including Legal Sea Foods. Twelve places to get a quick meal, including Primo Cappuccino and Koo Koo Roo. Six places for snacks and sweet stuff, such as Cinnabon.

Bars: You can get a beer or drink at most sit-down restaurants.

Shops: National wants to be a mall. It houses 11 fashion and accessory stores, including the Gap; 13 gift, book and newsstand shops, and eight sporting goods and hobby shops, such as National Geographic Store and PGA Tour Shop.

Recreation/entertainment: Shopping and superior airport dining. Video games in Terminal A.

Percentage of flights on time in month of June: 68

Parking: Three types of parking:

+ Hourly: \$2 for each half hour for the first two hours or fraction thereof; \$4 per hour thereafter; \$28 per day maximum.

+ Daily: \$2 for each hour or fraction thereof; \$12 per day max.

+ Remote parking (long-term): \$1 per hour or fraction thereof; \$8 per day maximum. Shuttle buses take you to main terminal. Time from parked car to terminal arrival: five minutes.

Leaving the airport: Reagan National wins for best entrance into the city, hands down, with views of the Potomac, the Capitol, the Jefferson Memorial, the Washington Monument. Your heart swells; you feel you are entering greatness. Then reality hits, somewhere around New York Avenue and 395.

Number of passengers served per year: About 16 million.

Getting there: National is in Arlington, just south of the city along the Potomac River.

+ By car: From Washington, take 395 south and follow signs; from eastern Maryland, take the Baltimore Washington Parkway to 50 West (New York Avenue) to 395 and follow signs; from western Maryland and Virginia, take the George Washington Parkway or Route 66 and follow signs.

+ By Metrorail: Take the Yellow or Blue lines. 202-637-7000.

+ By Metrobus: Bus service to areas not served by Metrorail. 202-638-3780.

+ By taxi: From downtown Washington to airport, about \$9 and 20 minutes.

+ By Shuttle bus: Supershuttle offers door-to-door service from homes, offices, hotels and 1517 K St. NW. From College Park, about \$19 and \$8 each additional person; from K street, \$8. 1-800-258-3826.

Little annoyances: No quiet place to escape to for long delays.

Contact: 703-417-8000, <http://www.metwashairports.com> /National

THE BIG PICTURE

Dulles: Best for historical perspective of the '60s; BUT rundown, nothing to do. We're looking forward to an end to the renovation.

National: Best for aesthetics, one-of-a-kind in airport ambiance; close to city; cheap cab ride; fast Metro ride; BUT no quiet place to retreat.

BWI: Best for hanging out; best for kids; BUT expensive to get to, and long-term parking often fills up.

[Illustration]

Map,,Twp

Credit: Special to The Washington Post

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