

Explore Old Town Alexandria

A whole lot of art, a whole lot of history and a whole lot more await your perusal

Old Town Alexandria, the Torpedo Factory Art Center and the George Washington Masonic National Memorial

Where: For easiest access, take Interstate 95 North to the Springfield exit and jump on the Metro. The King Street Station is the closest stop. Look for the new free weekend "Dash About" shuttle service to Old Town. If you're driving, Alexandria is right off the Capital Beltway (Interstate 95 and I-495), which encircles the District of Columbia. Take Exit 1B off the Beltway and follow the signs to the Visitors Center.

Parking: If you do drive into the area, the best we found (\$2) was in the City Hall garage at the corner of King and Fairfax streets, across from the Alexandria Convention & Visitors Association. ACVA also provides free 24-hour passes for metered parking (license-plate number required).

Phone: Alexandria Convention & Visitors Association, Ramsay House, 221 King St., (800) 388-9119; Torpedo Factory Art Center, 105 N. Union St., (703) 838-4199; Alexandria Archaeology Museum, (703) 838-4399, George Washington Masonic National Memorial, 101 Callahan Drive, (703) 683-2007

Web sites: www.FunSide.com; www.torpedofactory.org; www.AlexandriaArchaeology.org; www.gwmemorial.org

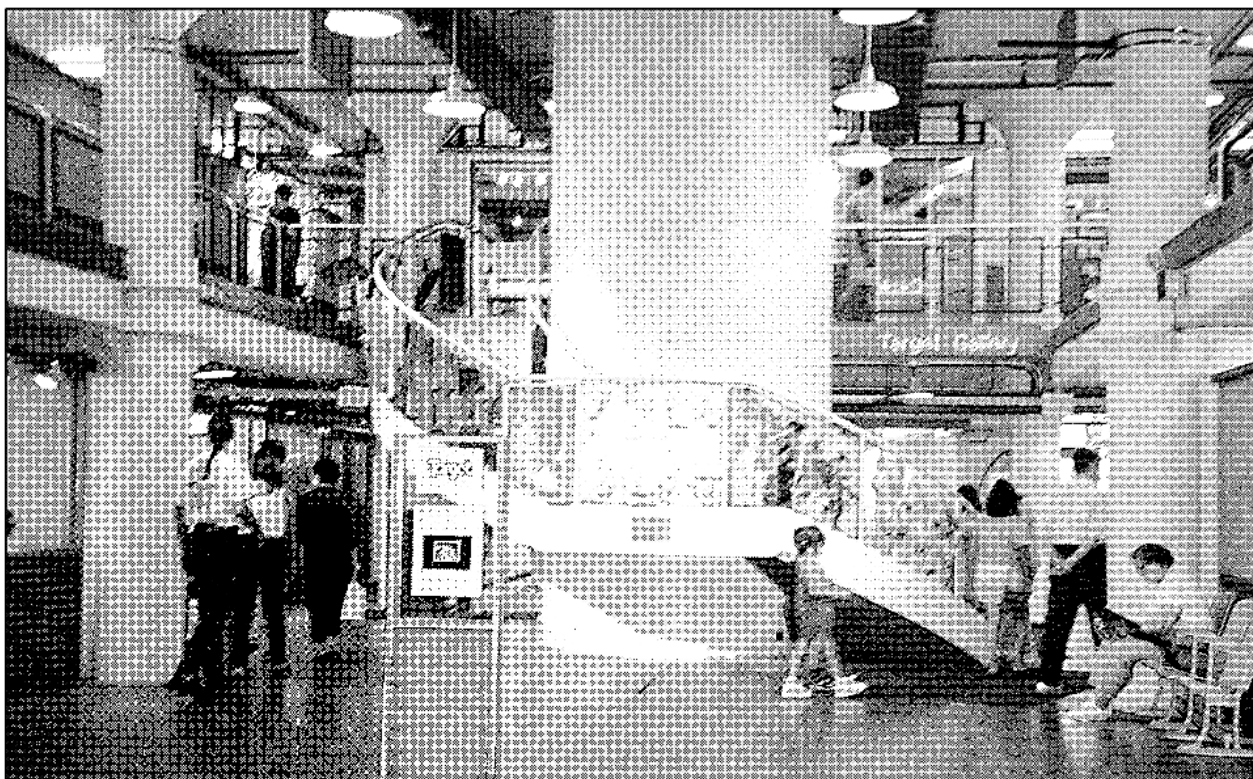
Hours: Shopping and dining in Old Town can last well into the evening, but shop hours vary. The Torpedo Factory is open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. The memorial is open for tours 9 a.m.-4 p.m. daily. Tours run about every two hours; call for specific times.

Admission: All free; bring spending money for shopping and ice cream.

Overview: Old Town Alexandria, with its wealth of shops, restaurants and historic buildings, is a popular destination. Whether you want to watch street performers, buy shoes and hats, or just sit by the Potomac and dream of boats, this is your place.

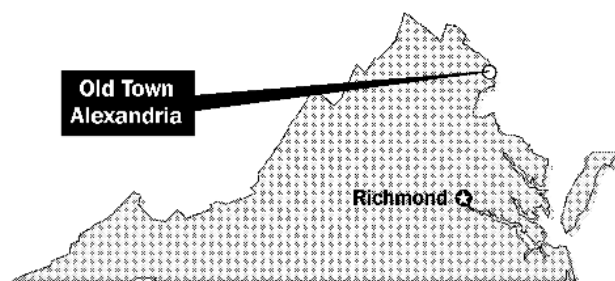
The Torpedo Factory Art Center in Old Town features "three floors of art to explore," including artists' studios where you can see works in progress and five galleries of changing exhibits. Art is available for both purchase and inspiration. The center also houses the small, yet interactive, Alexandria Archaeology Museum. Hands-on activities are available, and public digs are planned in advance.

The George Washington Masonic National Memorial is about three miles up Duke Street from Old Town. This six-floor, towerlike building explores the history and continued mission of the Masons. The site was built in honor of George Washington, not only our first president but also a man known as a prominent and Grand Master Mason. The tours, with guides and audio commentary, highlight the Masonic tradition. If you've always wanted to know the distinction between the terms "Freemasons," "Scottish Rite" and "Shriners" and where the Eastern theme and donning of fezzes originated, this is the perfect opportunity. Questions are encouraged, although, one guide said the key to finding "all the secrets" is doing research in the library (check for times). Otherwise, the meanings and purpose of symbols found in the Cryptic Room,



ROBIN SILBERMAN

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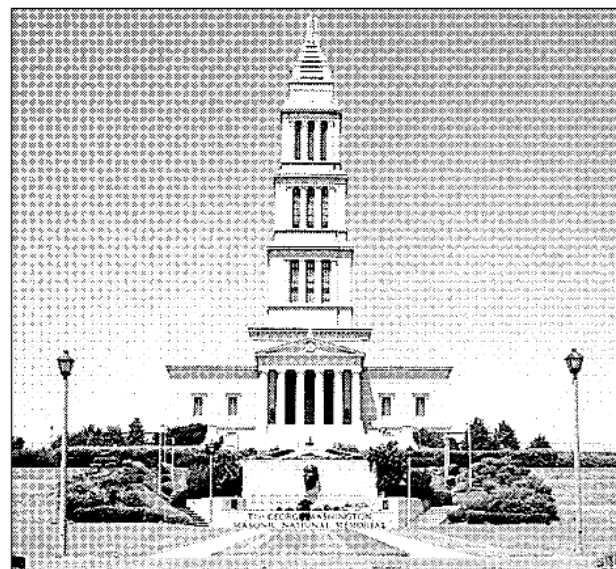
Coming Sunday

In Travel: Three inns west of Asheville, N.C., are worth checking out.

the Grotto Room and the rest of the memorial may remain a mystery. Some interesting features are The Royal Arch Room, which includes a reproduction of the Ark of The Covenant, hidden behind a curtain that stays open only for 15 seconds; the Tall Cedars Room, with a cedar floor; the reproduction of King Solomon's throne; an outdoor observation deck; and The Shrine Rooms, showcasing the charity work of the Shriners, complete with a large mechanized model parade and a display-case full of fezzes.

Don't miss: At the Torpedo Factory — Studio No. 311, the ceramics of Robert Rosselle, with dreamlike interior scenes viewed through small apertures. At the memorial — the animatronic and eloquent George Washington, found on the first floor.

Short on time: If you only have a few hours to spare, the Masonic memorial tour will suit your time constraints; parking



The George Washington Masonic National Memorial explores the history and mission of the Masons.

is on-site and free.

Where to stay: Call the Alexandria Hotel Association at (800) 296-1000; stop by the ACVA for promotional discounts.

Where to eat: Choose a place while strolling the streets of Old Town. I recommend the more-than-filling Barbacoa burrito, available at the flashy and fresh Chipotle grill, on the corner of King and St. Asaph streets. A side of guacamole must not be forgotten!

— Robin Silberman