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December 5, 2005

## DCist Book Review: The NFT Guide to Washington, D.C.

Moving to a new city can present a daunting challenge to even the most well-worn of urbanites -- how to quickly and painlessly learn of the city's neighborhoods and nightlife without resorting to an embarrassing and attention-grabbing tourist guidebook. Into that void steps the [Not For Tourists](#) guidebooks, which describe themselves as such:

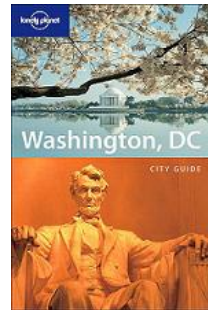


Our philosophy is simple: people need to use the cities they live in, commute into, or travel to effectively. They need to use their city's transportation systems; its governmental infrastructure; its shops, restaurants, and nightspots—and they need all of this information while they're on the move in a format that's more accessible than the Yellow Pages, more informative than Zagat's, and more useful than any tourist's guide.

The first NFT guidebook was released in 2000 and covered Manhattan; since then guides have been added for [Boston](#), [Philadelphia](#), [Atlanta](#), [Chicago](#), [San Francisco](#), [Los Angeles](#), and, in its second year, the [District](#).

DCist managed to get its grubby little hands on a complimentary copy (we're not that special; 300 of them were handed out at NFT's launch party last week at Local 16), and we dove right in, not knowing what to expect but excited to find out. By way of brief conclusion, the District's NFT guide tries more than it succeeds in breaking the mold of the traditional tourist guide, while suffering from one surprising omission that may well throw into question its status as the more urbane and well-informed alternative.

From the outside in, the NFT guide purposely tries to set itself apart from the competition. Its 350-pages are bound by a plain black cover, a welcome departure from the tired practice of plastering tourist guides with stock pictures of Washington memorials and monuments (such as the [Lonely Planet](#) guide, at right). The guide's introduction sets the tone for the information and maps contained within, noting:



This book is not meant for people who sport fanny packs and visors, order overpriced sandwiches, and ask people how to get to "Foggy Bottoms." However, if you're a newbie to the area and are eager to jump in with both feet; if you're a capitol city veteran who wants to elevate to the rank of insider; even if you're a (we cringe to use the word) *tourist* who wouldn't mind breaking away from mom, dad and sis to step into the shoes of the movers, shakers, hipsters and rockers that make this city the most powerful -- and one of the most dynamic -- in the world, then this book is for you.

To that end, the guide contains 46 maps covering different areas of the District, Maryland, and Northern Virginia. Each map is prefaced by a brief, hipster-sounding description of the neighborhood in question (Dupont Circle is described as having an "undeniable European vibe," while Columbia Heights is identified as the District's "long-blighted Latin quarter"), and followed by a corresponding list of local bars, restaurants, businesses, and attractions. The guide's latter 150-pages features more specific information on local parks, universities, venues, transit options, hotels, history, and government.

The guide is comprehensive, easily accessible, and best of all, fun to read. It attempts to present the District and the surrounding area as something more than just a federal city packed with state-funded memorials, monuments, and museums (ironically enough, though, the first map is of the National Mall), and it quickly becomes clear that those providing the majority of the fodder for it are both informative and self-deprecating. The guide falls short in how it approaches the city's many neighborhoods, though. While it dares to include some areas that other guidebooks are yet learning exist (Trinidad in Northeast, for one), its brief blurbs probably won't be of much use to those using it to house-hunt or become more acquainted with the different personalities that make up the District's urban fabric. The more DCist flipped through it, the more the guide seemed like a traditional guidebook with less filler and sharper presentation.

Probably most damaging to the guide's claim to being something other than traditional is its complete omission of neighborhoods across the the Anacostia River. Spare a narrow slice of Southeast across from where the new stadium is to be built, the majority of Wards 7 and 8, encompassing the city's eastern-most fringes, are nowhere to be found, as if Maryland had swallowed them whole. For a guidebook that pays lip service to the District's stark socioeconomic divisions, its failure to include two wards (pictured at right, in orange and green) whose 140,000 residents are by-and-large African-American and from which the city's most famous (and infamous) mayor, Marion Barry, rose is telling. How can a guidebook purporting to offer readers an insight into the "real Washington" so spectacularly fail to present the city in its entirety? How would we react to a comprehensive guide to American history that excluded the period of slavery?



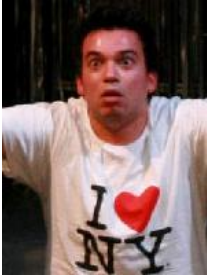
If you need a handy guide to the District that doesn't instantly pin you down as a fanny-pack wearing tourist ripe for pick-pocketing, the NFT guide is for you. It's not a dramatic alternative to traditional guidebooks; it's just less overtly decorated and less stuffed with needless factoids on monuments and memorials to America's presidents than the competition. If you want better inside information on the city from people who live in it, you can, well, keep visiting us. Yes, we know, shameless plug.

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