

Right at Home Under the Dome

Capitol Visitor Center Opens Doors to Tourists, Who Pronounce It a Success

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[Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid](#) knows there are some things he should not say in public. For instance: "In the summertime, because it gets so hot here, you could literally smell the tourists coming."

The Nevada Democrat, who has seen millions of summer tourists amble through "the People's House," made that observation yesterday in remarks at the opening ceremony of the \$621 million [U.S. Capitol](#) Visitor Center, which will serve as a gateway for an estimated 3 million tourists a year.

And they probably won't be as sweaty, because instead of standing in long lines in Washington's sweltering summer, they can wait in air-conditioned comfort for a tour of the Capitol.

After Reid and other congressional leaders addressed a crowd of colleagues, staff members and invited guests, they let the first regular people into the subterranean building. About 1,100 visitors toured the center on the first afternoon it was open to the public.

The center, which was planned as a three-year, \$368 million project when construction began in 2002, is two-thirds the size of the Capitol, with theaters, exhibits, shops, a restaurant and 26 restrooms. It can shelter and entertain as many as 4,000 visitors as they await tours of the Capitol, replacing block-long lines that snaked outside, exposing tourists to rain, snow or summer sun.

"We've been waiting for this for years," visitor Karl Phillips said. "In the summer, it gets so hot here, and you could stand in the steaming heat and pouring rain for hours. For people who don't live here, it's not something they're going to give up on, so they just stood and waited."

Phillips and his wife, Kathleen, pulled their two boys, Ryan, 11, and Sean, 12, out of school in Leesburg yesterday for the center's opening.

"We've seen all the construction for years," he said. "Now we're one of the first families to see this."

The center provides far more than shelter from the elements. It is lined with statues of prominent Americans -- some famous, some not.

They include Philo T. Farnsworth of Utah, who invented the television; Po'pay of New Mexico, who helped the Pueblo tribe survive; and John M. Clayton of Delaware, who held many offices

but is most noted for negotiating the agreement for a canal linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

The center also has two theaters that provide a cinematic introduction to the Capitol and a 16,500-foot exhibition hall full of historic documents and displays. Among them are [Thomas Jefferson](#)'s justification for funding the Lewis and Clark expedition, [George Washington](#)'s letter informing Congress of the victory at Yorktown and a ceremonial copy of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery signed by [Abraham Lincoln](#).

Denise Ajello was one of the first visitors to be admitted when the doors opened to the public at 1 p.m.

"I hadn't been in the Capitol for many years, and I didn't even realize that you could get in anymore," said Ajello, who lives in Washington.

"I thought it was fantastic," she said after emerging more than two hours later. "It's one of the most important buildings in the world, and one of the most majestic. This is a perfect place to start the tour. It was expensive [to build] but probably worth it."

Her only criticism: the long, sloping entrance way mars the overall beauty of the Capitol building.

Not everyone in the first group to troop through the doors was caught up in the hubbub of opening day.

"My parents took me here when I was a kid, and I wanted to take the boys," said John Pacini, who was visiting from Albany, N.Y., with his wife, Cathy, and sons Nicholas, 8, and Anthony, 7. "This is new? I didn't know that. What was there before? You never know when you visit the Capitol."

After almost three hours under the dome, the Pacini family emerged impressed.

"The movie was great; the place was very classy; the exhibit hall was very impressive," John Pacini said.

Beginning today, the center will implement a system intended to reduce the lines and waiting for people who want to tour the Capitol. Advance reservations can be made at <http://visithethecapitol.gov> or by contacting the office of a member of Congress.

No reservation is need to visit the center and its exhibits. The center is open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday except for Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day and Inauguration Day.