

FELLOWSHIP HOUSING 101

(by Felix A. Martinez, Class of 2003)

The purpose of this guide is not to tell you where to live but to help you make the decision yourself... wisely!

First, the timing of placement week and the beginning of the fellowship year are unfortunately too far apart to effectively search for and secure a place that week. If you are not familiar with DC, you should take that week as an opportunity to learn about the city and its environs so you can decide where in general you would like to live for that year.

Another important thing is that if you do not come from a major metro area, be prepared for rental sticker shock. Your \$800 dollar, two bedroom apartment in Smallville, USA is a cardboard shack by the Greyhound depot in DC.

Important facts to newcomers: buying wine and beer is cheaper in DC than in Maryland and Virginia but overall, taxes are higher in D.C. The cheapest income tax rate is Virginia, then Maryland. Sales tax in VA and MD is the same (5%).

The three most important considerations when you look for housing should be:

- 1) How easy is it to get to work?
- 2) Will you treasure going out regularly in the evenings?
- 3) How much open space do you need?

We will try to tackle these first and then give some general tips on finding that place of your dreams!

The Commute

Where you choose to work should weigh heavily into where you live. Moving around the metro area is not really that bad as long as your commute does not involve driving on the beltway. However, parking for your car once you get to work can be scarce and very expensive. The best advice is to live within walking or biking distance. The DC area is not bike friendly per se, but it is also not bike hostile. Most office complexes will have some sort of gym/exercise room where you could shower (better yet workout!) before work if need be.

Come winter, biking might get tricky so the metro will be your next best friend. The metro is very accessible from most of the cool neighborhoods to live in DC, but you need to consider that it does get crowded during rush hour. If you do not like enclosed places with lots of people, flashing lights, and noise, the metro will give you panic attacks! (At least it's not remotely as bad as in Japan!). Best bet is to minimize the number of stops you will need to take to get to work. On the other hand, if none of those things bother you, it would be a nice place to sit (if you start from one of the first stops) and read a book or the newspaper.

Note:

- *Many people in downtown (even up at Silver Spring) do not own a car. You can always take a cab from the grocery store or rent a car if you want to get away for the weekend.*
- *Motorcycles can park for free in the SS campus parking lot. E-mail Felix for more info if you are planning on riding to work (felix.martinez@noaa.gov).*

Going Out in the Evenings

If you are interested in experiencing the culture of DC, you need to be wise about where you move to. The perfect example is if you work at NOAA in Silver Spring (SS) it makes sense to live nearby to minimize the commute and take advantage of cheaper housing than in DC proper. However, you will most likely miss most of the nightlife. Getting out of work at 5:00 to head downtown for happy hour in the middle of the rush and then head back later “happy” but tired to the suburbs to wake up early the next morning will get old fast. Even on the weekends, after a weeklong worth of bureaucracy, the trek down to DC will be unappealing. Guaranteed you will only visit DC when some relative or friend visits you from out of town!

Open Space

Given the rental rates in the DC area, space can be a major consideration. Rents for 1-2 bedrooms in DC can range from ~ \$1500 to well over \$2000 in a luxury place. Cheaper places in DC can be found in the form of studios and “English Basements” (more on this later). However, you will be hard pressed to find anything for less than \$1000 in the nicer neighborhoods.

If you need space you will most likely need roommates to get a large place. You can then find places for \$850-\$1200 per person. Living out in the suburbs is an option to find more affordable larger places, but then you need to consider the commute and social life issues.

A word of caution when looking for a place with roommates is that a limiting factor is not *bedrooms* but *bathrooms*. A 3 bedroom house or apartment will most likely only have 2 full bathrooms, so you must be prepared to share!

The typical dwellings in DC are apartment buildings and row-houses that are either single homes or are split into apartments. Out in the ‘burbs you can find a larger selection of apartment types, town-homes, and single family homes. To put rents in perspective, you can pay outside the beltway for a 3-4 bedroom single house what you pay downtown for a 1 bedroom apartment!!

What in the world is an “English Basement”? Many row-houses in downtown DC have large walk-in basements that are half sunken in. They are typically converted into separate rental units. They are either studio or 1 bedroom units. Most will have plenty of

windows and depending on their location some will get plenty of light. Although they are set for one person, their rent rates tend to be fairly high for the nice ones.

So what is the best strategy?

First sit down and be honest with what your priorities are.

Do not let actual rent be the main consideration (a \$1800 apartment where you will not have to commute will in the end be cheaper than a \$1500 that requires daily metro rides and / or driving).

Search in the web for ads a few days before coming for placement week so you are familiar with what your choices might be.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/realestate/rent/>

<http://washingtondc.craigslist.org/>

Stay a couple of days after placement week to look around the areas you might be interested in.

You should plan on coming back at least once more to finalize your search. Driving around is not a good strategy. Very few places post “For Rent” signs. Visit first a real estate office with a leasing division in the area you might like to live in and ask for their listing. They will ask the type of place and budget and give you a listing before they take you out. Most agencies do not post their rental properties on their websites. You will have to go in personally and ask.

Note: If you know a real estate agent in your hometown, they might be able to tap into the “Multiple Listing Service” and find out information for you ahead of time. The MLS listing will have a description of the house, most often a photo, and the contact info of the agent.

You could also take advantage of the “calls for roommates” from people in the fellows loop. You will soon start getting some of those forwarded to you by Miguel.

The down and dirty

So where are the good places to live in DC?

Like any big city, the DC metro area has both good and bad neighborhoods. They are also much intertwined. Rule of thumb is visit, look around and pay attention to what the neighbors’ places look like.

Buy a street guide of the DC area before you do anything else so you can write notes of the neighborhoods as you walk, drive around (Rand McNally’s Thomas Guide is the best). The guide will also come in handy when you start moving around DC to do things

What follows is not a comprehensive listing of desirable areas, but it should give you a good idea.

DC:

Capitol Hill – obviously close to the congressional offices. It is very neighborhoody with Victorian architecture and has many bars and restaurants to go out to. It is also the home of the Eastern Market (an eclectic place to shop). Somewhat safe but don't leave your bike outside, easy access to the Metro

Dupont Circle / Adams Morgan – this is a very hip area with lots of bars, boutiques, and restaurants. It has plenty of apartment buildings along the main streets and Victorian row-houses on the side streets, has relatively easy access to the Metro, close to the National Zoo and Rock Creek Park.

Woodley Park to Tenley Town (along the Red line) – these areas are similar to Dupont Circle, but not as hip and becoming more residential. It is safe to live, but starts getting far from most workplaces, calling for longer commutes.

Georgetown – the name says it all. Real cool place to live but a very pricey neighborhood. It is very eclectic with lots of things to do, but no direct access to metro. A cab or bus can take you to the closest metro stop. Will require a roommate!

Suburbs: (Maryland)

Silver Spring (SS) – around the NOAA campus there are several apartment buildings and condo/duplex type places within easy walking or biking distance. The immediate N and NW of SS downtown are relatively safe. As you move N and NW past the beltway, there are some nice oldish neighborhoods where retired folks are mixed with younger families (Kensington, Wheaton, Forest Glen). The Wheaton town center has lots of ethnic markets and mom and pop restaurants, but can get sketchy at night.

Takoma Park – just S of SS is this cool enclave of nice old homes. It is kind of artsy with a few restaurants and shops. Nice Farmer's Market Coop. Does have some sketchy areas so beware, visit first.

Bethesda / Chevy Chase – it starts getting to be a bit far from downtown DC and a long metro ride to SS (you need to loop down and around on the Red line). You could commute to SS by car, bus, or bike. It has a nice downtown to go to eat and an Art Film theater complex. It also has a cool Farmer's / Flea Market place to visit. It has two nice public pool places to swim, an outdoor complex and an indoor complex with an exercise room. The neighborhoods mostly single-family homes are nice, but pricey. There are some town-home complexes in the area.

College Park – home of U. of Maryland, has somewhat of a college town feel and the rents are lower. There is an REI store and a cool organic foods grocery store. It is, however, a longish commute to both DC and SS.

Hyattsville – between DC and College Park, this town is an up-and-coming area. Houses are still a bit cheaper than the rest of the other suburbs (but not likely to last too long). It has a few nice places to grab a bite and beer (i.e., Frankiln's). The commute is shorter than from College Park.

Rockville – typical suburban area with lots of brand new housing, malls, etc. It's the end of the line for the Red line and quite a long commute on the metro. Bus and car, as well as MARC train, commuting is possible to SS.

Suburbs: (Virginia)

Alexandria / Arlington – both are for the most part commuter heavens for DC. Both are serviced easily by the metro but will be long (time wise) commutes (get some good books!). They have plenty of shopping / restaurant districts. Alexandria has a quaint historic district.

Where NOT to go

As we said before, like in all big cities some areas of DC can be really sketchy. East of Capitol Hill as you go beyond the Eastern Market neighborhoods, things go downhill pretty quick.

The same thing happens as you go north / northeast from the Capitol up to Walter Reed Army Hospital. Along the way, areas around Rhode Island Ave., Catholic U., Columbia Heights pretty much up to Takoma (DC side) can get pretty darn scary even in daylight.

It is only fair to say that lately, there have been active neighborhood renovation projects in DC so that some areas traditionally labeled as bad are not anymore, with the benefit of prices being still comparatively low.

In the end...

Don't sweat too much finding a place, keep an open mind and think that you can move somewhere else later. However, don't choose to quickly, not getting along with your roommate and / or a crappy place can make a year seem to last a lifetime!!

Pleasant surprises...

If you like to take in some greenery or exercise to detox from the urban madness, there are plenty of things to do right after work, especially in the extended summer hours.

- Brookside Gardens in the Wheaton Regional Park has a very beautiful collection of trees, flowers, and aquatic plants, with benches to sit down and let your karma

- re-energize. The Park itself has a few trails to run or hike as you wish in relative safety. For more info on the park go to: <http://www.mc-mncppc.org/parks/brookside/>.
- Rock Creek Park is a National Park in DC proper with miles of trails to hike and ride, but safety can be more of an issue here. For more info on the park go to: <http://www.nps.gov/rocr/>.
 - The Patuxent Wildlife Research Center is also within drivable distance for a nice hike. The north tract is “wilder” and popular with bird watchers but the trails are restricted because it used to be part of Ft. Meade. For more info on the park go to: <http://patuxent.fws.gov/>.
 - The C&O Canal offers plenty of miles of trails (easy and strenuous) plus kayaking in the Potomac (both flat and white water). For more info on the park go to: <http://www.nps.gov/choh/>.
 - Great Falls Park (Virginia side) has good trails and decent rock climbing. There is also a very active kayaking community that paddles here. For more info on the park go to: <http://www.nps.gov/gwmp/grfa/>.
 - There is an active cycling community in DC with daily rides along Rock Creek Park or out in the country during the weekends. For more info on cycling go to: <http://www.waba.org/>.
 - There are also plenty of masters swim clubs throughout the area, but workouts are mostly late at night (~ 8:30ish). Terrapin Masters (my team!) at U. of Maryland has reasonable evening workouts (6:30PM). To check out all team go to the USMS website: <http://www.usms.org/links/usmsclubs.htm>.
 - Glen Echo Park, although a National Park, is oriented towards the arts. It offers classes during four terms yearly on everything: ceramics, jewelry, photography, drawing, painting, and dancing. The catalog is available on their website. For more info on the park go to: <http://www.nps.gov/glec/>.