

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

DC hotels prepare for tense Inauguration

January 14, 2021



The Presidential Suite at the Mandarin Oriental in Washington. Image credit: Mandarin Oriental

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Luxury hotels in Washington are bracing for an unprecedented Inauguration Day tinged by a deadly pandemic and threats of violence.

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Traditionally, presidential inaugurations which occur every four years on Jan. 20 have been an opportunity for luxury hotels to attract elite guests with lavish packages and programs. With COVID-19 restrictions in place and cases rising, the city's hospitality sector was already adapting to mitigating circumstances which have since worsened since a deadly assault on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 ([see story](#)).

"This year, between the pandemic and now everything going on, it's basically all the air is out of the tire," said Damon Banks, editor and managing partner at [LuxeGetaways](#), Washington, DC. "Between the pandemic not allowing you to have the parade, the actual ceremonies and everything else going on with Trump, there is just no excitement [around the inauguration]."

"There is more fear than excitement," he said.

Understated inauguration

Inaugural festivities had already been scaled back due to the pandemic. Instead, many events including meet-and-greets, receptions, parades and balls will go virtual. Hotels have adjusted their expectations, with some opting not to promote the lavish inaugural offerings seen in the past.

In recent days, however, it has become clear that Washington is facing threats more serious than smaller crowds.

"It's not a place you really want to be right now," Mr. Banks said. "I think most of the people that are trying to get into town are ones that are not here for the right reasons."

Citing credible threats of violence circulating online, local and federal officials have ramped up security efforts, including fencing, around the White House and Capitol, where President-elect Joseph R. Biden is set to take the oath of office.



The first inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009. Image credit: Wikimedia

Up to 20,000 National Guard troops are expected to be present around the District, while an enhanced security perimeter goes into effect on Jan. 14. The Washington Monument is closed to visitors through Jan. 24, and metro stations and certain roads will also be shut down through Inauguration Day.

In light of these developments, home-sharing platform Airbnb made the move to block and cancel all reservations in the DC metropolitan area ahead of the transfer of power ([see story](#)).

"Airbnb's work continues to be informed by inputs from our local host community as well as Washington, DC officials, Metro Police and members of Congress throughout this week," the company said in a [statement](#). "In particular, Mayor [Muriel] Bowser, Governor [Larry] Hogan and Governor [Ralph] Northam have been clear that visitors should not travel to the DC metro area for the Inauguration.

"Additionally, we are aware of reports emerging yesterday afternoon regarding armed militias and known hate groups that are attempting to travel and disrupt the Inauguration."

Labor union Unite Here Local 25 which represents more than 7,200 hotel workers in the Washington metro area including employees of the St. Regis, Mandarin Oriental, Trump International and other luxury brands is calling for hotels to close ahead of the Inauguration if they cannot protect workers.

"Given the danger and fluidity of this situation, the best way to guarantee the safety of hotel workers and District residents is to keep these groups out of the city and out of its hotels," said John Boardman, executive secretary-treasurer of Local 25, in a [statement](#). "That is why, unless hotels in the immediate metro area are hosting the National Guard or other security personnel, they should close immediately.

"When workers are safe, the public is safe," he said. "That is why we urge every hotel in the region to do their part in protecting us all."

For now, however, some of Washington's luxury hotels are still accepting online reservations.



The Trump International Hotel in Washington, DC is for sale. Image credit: Trump Hotels

The [Trump International Hotel](#) and [St. Regis](#) still have suites available throughout the week of the inaugural, while the [Four Seasons](#) has limited availability with a minimum four-night stay.

Meanwhile, the [Ritz-Carlton](#) in downtown Washington is scheduled to reopen on April 1. However, Ritz-Carlton locations in Georgetown and northern Virginia are still taking reservations.

For \$60,000, the entire 18th floor of the Ritz-Carlton Pentagon City can be booked for three nights as part of the "Level Up for Inauguration" package. Up to 25 guests can enjoy a private inaugural party complete with a Champagne toast.

When reached, the [Mandarin Oriental](#) Washington DC confirmed it still had availability for the event but reiterated guests from out-of-town must be tested for COVID-19 within 72 hours of traveling to the District.

The Mandarin Oriental also has a "Vice President Inauguration Celebration" package, which requires a minimum three-night stay from Jan. 18 through Jan. 21. At a nightly rate of more than \$15,300, up to five guests can stay at the property's Presidential Suite and enjoy a custom three-hour "Women in History" tour, one day's use of a chauffeured SUV and other inauguration keepsakes.

Glamour of inaugurations past

Even under the safest circumstances, hotels will be hard-pressed to match the success of recent inaugurations which drew millions to Washington.

"The inauguration packages were always over the top, with Champagne, great room promotions, customized shirts, plates and all kinds of just very unique items," Mr. Banks said.

In January 2017, The Ritz-Carlton, Embassy Row and Kimpton Hotel Palomar were a few of the hotels to provide special programs, packages, decorations and themed events to celebrate the changing presidents. Hotels also offered professional hair and makeup services for guests attending the inaugural balls ([see story](#)).

The event has also typically led to a boost in private aviation traffic.

During the 2009 inauguration, almost 700 private planes landed in Washington, even as the nation was in the midst of a recession. This broke the record previously held during President Bush's inauguration in 2004 during which 300 private planes parked at Dulles International Airport ([see story](#)).

This year, safety will take priority over extravagance as Washington remains on high alert.

"Brands should focus on internal communications in their teams and the safety of their staff and guests, and look forward to better times," Mr. Banks said.

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