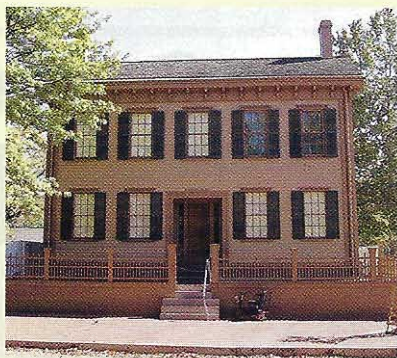


If You Go

Springfield, Ill., is on Interstate 55, 200 miles southwest of Chicago and 100 miles northeast of St. Louis. Here are some additional suggestions for a visit to the city (consult relevant websites for hours; not all places are open Sundays).

The Lincoln Home (at right)

nps.gov/liho; 413 South Eighth St.; (217) 391-3226.



Grand Army of the Republic Memorial Museum

springfield-il.com/attract/grandarmy.html; 629 South 7th St.; (217) 522-4373.

Daughters of Union Veterans of the Civil War Museum

springfield-il.com/attract/duv.html; 503 South Walnut; (217) 544-0616.

Shea's Gas Station Museum

visit-springfieldillinois.com/Route66/kicks.asp; 2075 Peoria Road; (217) 522-0475.

New Salem

lincolnsnewsalem.com; 15588 History Lane, Petersburg, Ill.; (217) 632-4000.

Amtrak

amtrak.com/servlet/ContentServer?pagename=Amtrak/am2Station/Station_Page&code=SPI; East Washington and North Third Streets; (217) 753-2013, serves Springfield. The train stops three blocks from the museum.

Lodging

There are several good hotels on South Dirksen Parkway, including a Crowne Plaza and a Holiday Inn Express. The Northfield Inn is just off I-55.

2006 book *Looking for Lincoln*, relentlessly skewers the place, writing, "What does [Lincoln] stand for? You could spend hours in the museum without finding an answer."

Others disagree. Historian Keith A. Erikson writes in *The Indiana Magazine of History* that the museum is successful in "informing and inspiring a broad public audience." Historian John R. Decker in *The Journal of American History* notes the "Disneyesque" elements, but adds, "The [museum] intelligently and compellingly uses visual culture to meet its mission ... The museum fulfills the primary mission of any pedagogical institution—it transmits knowledge, inspires inquiry, and opens the discourse to a multiplicity of voices and opinions." In short: Thumbs up.

Visitors to the library and museum walk through a series of "journeys" depicting aspects of Lincoln's life—his boy-

hood, the lawyer years, the White House, etc. A few highlights:

The museum powerfully communicates the agony of the slave trade. Kids get the message, but aren't overwhelmed. Recently, 6-year-old Rachel Dirck carefully examined a realistic, mannequin-based exhibit of a slave family being ripped asunder. She became still and solemn. She turned to her father, Brian, and said, "Daddy, that was wrong." Brian said later, "I'd say that is the sort of thing a museum like this is supposed to do."

The Civil War gets its full due, including a spectacular mural of Gettysburg, a 40-foot-wide painting that depicts not only the battle but also the burying of the dead and Lincoln's address.

Students of museum lighting will study this place for years to come. As you walk from room to room, from exhibit to exhibit, the lighting changes constantly,

from dim to bright, from pinpoint spotlights to boisterous chandeliers, from blues to reds, and so on. It's a delightful experience for the eye.

The use of sound is superb. For example, in the "Whispering Gallery," hidden voices whisper some of the personal attacks made on the Lincolns during the Civil War. Also: music of the era, cannon fire, birds chirping, crackling fires, exuberant political crowds, etc.

Up to 100 historical artifacts are on display at any given time, such as letters in Lincoln's hand.

The volunteer guides are friendly and knowledgeable. Signage is good, including reading suggestions. The bookstore-gift shop is very fine.

The library and museum's focus on rich multimedia environments represents a "major trend" in museums, says Ford Bell, president of the American Association of Museums. "As technology has become more available over the last 10 years, it's being embraced by larger history museums, science and technology museums, art museums." Bell adds, "Still, for history museums, the actual, authentic object—the rifle that was used, the document—remains an essential component."

Mount Vernon, the estate of George Washington in Virginia, opened a multimedia-based educational facility in 2006, while preserving the familiar home and gardens. The site drew 1.1 million visitors in 2008 compared to 790,000 in 2003, says executive director Jim Rees. "I think we're a much better experience for families now than before," he says.

Annual attendance at the Lincoln museum is 400,000 to 500,000, impressive for a facility in a small city. It's "actually pretty cool," says a 10-year-old visitor named Wesley Thrall. Coolness aside, what about learning? Is Wesley more interested in Lincoln now than before his visit, perhaps more willing to read about the bearded geezer and his fellow denizens of 150 years ago? "Yeah," says the boy, "the history of his life is sort of more alive now. It's about people. I like that."

BOB FROST wrote about the plot to steal Abraham Lincoln's body in the January/February 2009 issue of the magazine.