

A fresh view of yesterday's news

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WASHINGTON— I was overwhelmed. Here it was nearly two hours after starting my self-paced tour of the Newseum, a spectacular space that's creating quite the buzz in the nation's capital, and I was barely halfway through. It was my own fault for stopping at too many exhibits and examining too many display cases.

The Smithsonian may have Dorothy's ruby slippers from "The Wizard of Oz," but the nearby Newseum has Helen Thomas' red dress from presidential press conferences and the Italian leather jacket worn by NBC's Arthur Kent, aka the first Gulf War's "Scud Stud." Not to mention the door with the famously taped latch from the Watergate complex, some of Bob Woodward's notes, Edward R. Murrow's ration books from World War II and 6,200-plus other artifacts.

I make my living from the daily news. Maybe that makes me biased as a judge of this brand-new museum in Washington, D.C., which replaces the version 1.0 Newseum that closed in nearby Arlington, Va., six years ago. If journalism is one of the world's most self-obsessed trades, as many of its practitioners believe, then the Newseum's 250,000 square feet of museum space could be considered an exercise in narcissism.

Would anyone else get a chuckle out of an old TRS-80 computer, better known — accurately so — as the "Trash-80"? Would the general public examine historic newspapers not only for the headlines ("Marilyn Monroe Dies, Blame Pills," Los Angeles Times, Aug. 6, 1962) but also for the leads, or opening paragraphs? ("John Fitzgerald Kennedy was elected president of the United States yesterday, and a new generation has its chance," Boston Globe, Nov. 9, 1960.)

I couldn't help it.

Then there was Don Bolles' dynamited Datsun. Macabre? Maybe, but the investigative reporter's 1976 murder by gangsters in Phoenix preceded my arrival in journalism school in Arizona by only two months, and it was a big story.

There was a larger message, anyway, presented throughout the Newseum: Some journalists risk their lives to keep you informed.

History as seen through journalists' eyes

This big, glassy, \$450 million museum, next to the Canadian Embassy and with a view of the nearby U.S. Capitol, chronicles so much history through the media's lens, particularly from World War II forward. Newseum president Peter Prichard, in remarks before a press preview, called it "a first-draft-of-history museum" where visitors can remember many key experiences in their lives.

That includes film, video, newspapers and artifacts from stories that can be emotionally painful: heartbreaking network television coverage of New York families searching for loved ones after 9/11. An exhibit on the Roanoke Times' coverage of the massacre at Virginia Tech. Pulitzer-Prize-winning photographs, including Huynh Cong Ut's 1972 shot of the Vietnamese girl running from napalm fire and John Filo's 1970 photo of the girl kneeling over a student's body at Kent State University.

There's the giant television antenna salvaged from the wreckage of the World Trade Center. There's a guard tower and eight sections of the Berlin Wall, gloriously defaced with graffiti on the west side and practically spotless — the better for guards to pick out would-be escapists — on the East Berlin side.

So much stuff, all brought to you courtesy of an admission fee, deep-pocketed journalism foundations (in an era when many news organizations are cutting staffs) and a free media. Long live the First Amendment — which is chiseled in marble on the building's facade.

Considering the admission, no rush to leave



Touches of sanctimony aside, that's the problem: all this stuff. You'll want to soak it up, seeing at least several of the many films (23 hours worth if you viewed them all) in the 15 theaters. You'll want to spend the better part of a vacation day at the Newseum.

And your children might not want to. I guarantee that my children would not.

Since you'll spend \$20 apiece to get in — in a city where you could go to the fabulous Smithsonian for free (though you're paying for the Smithsonian through your taxes) — you really don't want to rush it.

Will people be willing to pay? The International Spy Museum, only a few blocks away, charges \$18 and gets a reported 750,000 visitors a year. When I asked visitors there if they'd pay \$20 for the Newseum, their answers were mixed. But noting that the free National Gallery of Art, across the street from the Newseum, attracts 4 million people a year, Newseum CEO Charles Overby said, "We just want to get their crumbs."

Admission is cheaper for those over 65 (\$18) and children ages 7 to 12 (\$13) and free for those 6 or younger. But think twice before taking kids under 12. They'll want to leave before you're ready.

How entertaining for the kids?

This is a mild criticism, really. I spent nearly five hours at the Newseum, including time in the "4-D" movie theater wearing 3-D glasses and feeling the mild whip of "rat's tails" on my ankles while Nellie Bly, the first female investigative reporter, exposed what a rancid place an insane asylum was. On another floor, for an extra \$8, kids can play make-believe TV reporter doing a live stand-up; they can download the clip at home later

and post it on the Web.

Nearly midway through my visit, I ran into James Polshek, the museum architect (and an Akron native who went to Case Western Reserve University to study premed before deciding his calling was elsewhere). How on earth, I asked, would you occupy a kid while going through such a place — and how would he recommend going through it? "The intensity is part of the experience," he said.

He called it "a multiring circus," and recommended you do a walk-through first to get oriented and decide how you want to spend your time. He said that some kids could spend hours alone on Level 2, with its Interactive Newsroom.

I'm skeptical. That's the parent in me, not the journalist. Another journalist I know, also with teens at home, thought the same after visiting on a different day. The Newseum boasts that it is the most interactive museum on the planet, but "interactive" is a fancy word for "computer." Unless your child is a budding Clark Kent or Lois Lane, he or she might not be amused for that long.

For adults, though, or worldly teens or anyone who appreciates history or is a news junkie, the Newseum is worth visiting. The cafeteria, called The Food Section, presented by Wolfgang Puck Catering, is quite good, with enough variety (pastas, pizzas, paninis, burgers) to satisfy adults and children. If you can get a reservation, you can dine at Wolfgang Puck's newest restaurant, The Source, next door.

Just don't rush things. Deadlines are for newspapers, not vacations.

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Part of the tower that broadcast radio and TV signals from the World Trade Center is in a Newseum exhibit about coverage of Sept. 11, 2001.