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Start your campaign ASAP to be in D.C. for the inauguration

By Jayne Clark and Laura Bly

Two months before Barack Obama's historic inauguration, Washington-area hotels are posting no-vacancy signs, airfares to the city are sky-high and would-be attendees are scrambling for tickets they probably won't get.

But that probably won't deter record crowds from descending on the National Mall on Tuesday, Jan. 20, when Obama is sworn in as the 44th president. Officials predict the event, which follows Monday's Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, will far exceed the largest previous gathering on the Mall: 1.2 million at Lyndon Johnson's inauguration in 1965.

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Festivities include the Inauguration Day parade, swearing-in ceremony and various official and unofficial Inaugural Balls. All except the parade require tickets. The number of parade-route bleacher seats (which also require tickets) have been greatly reduced from the 2004 inauguration to allow more standing room for the ticketless masses. Additional standing room may be opened on the Mall east of the Washington Monument, with giant TV screens positioned along the parade route and Mall to give a better view of the action.

The situation could change — Obama's inaugural committee hasn't even been formed yet. But if you're hoping to witness history, make plans now. And don't forget your woolies: January is the city's coldest month, with an average high of 42 and low of 27. Some specifics:

Tickets

Members of Congress have 240,000 free tickets to dispense for the swearing-in ceremony, but most have been besieged by queries. Some offices have stopped taking requests; others are planning lotteries. Tickets won't be released until days before the event and must be picked up in person. Sites such as eBay and StubHub have agreed to ban ticket reselling, and California Sen. Dianne Feinstein sponsored legislation to make such sales a federal crime. (Information: inaugural.senate.gov.)



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Lodging

If you have \$70,000 to burn for four nights in a swank hotel, you're in luck. The Park Hyatt Washington's "American Talents" package is still available. But its plain old \$899-a-night rooms are sold out, as are many Washington-area lodgings.

Tourism officials expect some inventory to become available as blocked rooms are released, but that will happen on a rolling basis. Best to check directly with hotels (as opposed to online booking sites) and expect four-night minimum stays and rates averaging \$500 a night at closer-in hotels. Rates, restrictions and availability ease somewhat in the suburbs and beyond. But some hotels in cities as far away as Richmond, Va., and York, Pa., both about two hours away, report sold-out reservations.

"We didn't have time to boost the rates, they went so quickly," says Katie Landis of the York Holiday Inn Express, where Internet rates around the inauguration started at \$120.

Area residents are opening their doors to out-of-towners. For a price.

Washington listings on Viscap.com, a new vacation rental/social networking site, have gone from two to about 50, ranging from \$82 to \$3,300 a night. Another rental site, AirBedandBreakfast.com, features inauguration listings on its home page — 53 as of this week, ranging from \$10 a night for a couch in suburban Silver Spring, Md., to \$3,000 a night for a two-bedroom D.C. apartment three blocks from a Metro stop.

Craigslist.com traffic has been building, too, with 1,000 inauguration-related housing offers posted Tuesday alone, from a \$20,000 Georgetown townhouse to \$300 for a bring-your-own-sleeping-bag "rustic" cabin in Gettysburg, Pa. (sleeps six). The site doesn't track how many actual deals have been made, but as spokeswoman Susan MacTavish Best notes: "Obviously, there's a lot of excitement. People want to go. People want to make money."

Transportation to D.C.

Flights into and out of Reagan National, Dulles and Baltimore-Washington already are reflecting an "inauguration surcharge," says FareCompare.com's CEO Rick Seaney.

"The prices we're seeing for non-stops are amazing," Seaney says: Round-trip flights between Los Angeles and the D.C. area are running up to \$1,600 in coach, 400% higher than they would cost the week before. Saturday-Wednesday trips to D.C. over the Jan. 20 inauguration average \$645 round trip, up from \$262 the same period last year, Farecast.com's Joel Grus says.

In response, AirTran, JetBlue and Virgin America have added flights to Washington. This week, fares were still available for \$259 each way on JetBlue's special non-stop from Chicago's O'Hare to Dulles, departing Jan. 18 and returning Jan. 21.

Amtrak also reports heavy bookings. Sixteen East Coast trains are sold out for trips into and out of Washington on Jan. 20.



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•For updates on inaugural events and area lodging: 800-889-5344 or washington.org.



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