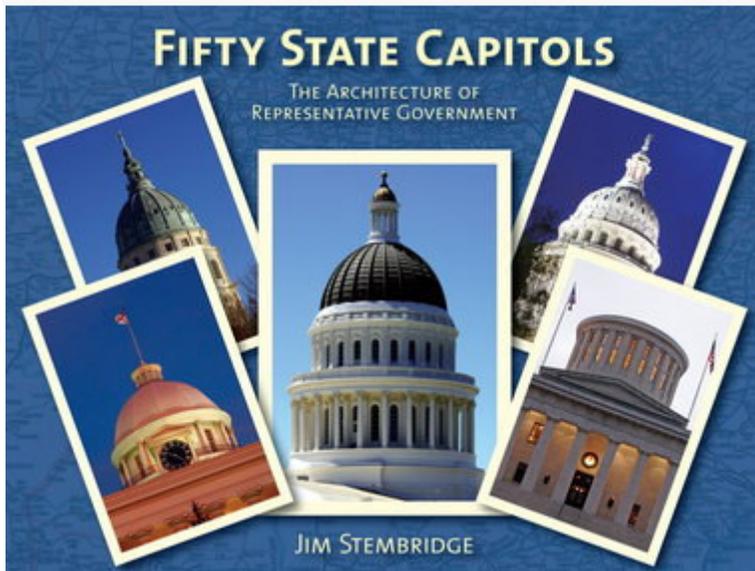


Capitol idea: Tours offer history, architecture and civics lessons



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Jim Stemberidge's book, "Fifty State Capitols: The Architecture of Representative Government," (\$27.95, ISBN 9780983029205) was published in June by Coho Publishing in Salem (cohopublishing.com).

The book's website is fiftystatecapitols.com. It is available at Powell's Books in Portland, the Oregon Capitol Gift Shop in Salem, Paulina Springs Books in Sisters and the Legislative Gift Center in Olympia.

State capitols are great destinations for vacation travelers. Great for individual travelers, groups and families. Entry is free, tours are free, photography opportunities are plentiful.

Any state capitol is a great place to learn about representative government, architecture and state history. You could write a book about them -- and I did, after visiting all 50 since fall 2007.

The best state capitols for tourists are set up with visitor centers, tours, reasonably priced restaurants and gift shops for books on state history and other memorabilia. All have public galleries overlooking the state's legislative chambers.

For visitors who arrive when the legislature is in session, public galleries allow in-person viewing. Visitors are sometimes directed through electronic screening or other security measures, but state capitols are otherwise surprisingly open and casual, welcoming visitors into the center of state government decision-making.

Also, most state capitols are easy to get to from a nearby interstate highway, with good directional signs. Free parking is often available.

All of the capitols listed below offer guided tours, or, for visitors in a hurry, self-guided tours. Check for tour times online. These 10 are among the best experiences:

Utah's Capitol in Salt Lake City has recently celebrated the completion of its renovation and earthquake retrofit. Majestic and airy as any, the building has lots of natural light, illuminating freshly polished marble and new rotunda statuary. Renovations included a visitor center and gift shop in the basement. With an extensive Utah tourist information center across the street, it is now one of the premier state capitols for tourism and civic education. Visitor parking is at the Tourist Information Center out front. Set your GPS for 350 North State St.

Nebraska's "Tower of the Plains" in Lincoln, the nation's first skyscraper state capitol, dates from 1932. Its elegant detail includes some 30 scenes depicting the history of democracy carved into the facing rock around the outside. Extensive on-street parking is behind the building. Set your GPS for 1445 K St.

The Texas Capitol in Austin is the country's largest state capitol in total area, including a huge 21-year-old underground addition. Corridor hallways intersect the massive rotunda on four levels. The light brown sandstone exterior turns bright white under the lights at night. A visitor center and gift shop occupy the old land office nearby. Parking is on side streets west of the Capitol; set your GPS for 1100 Congress Ave.

Virginia's Capitol in Richmond, designed by Thomas Jefferson (while on assignment as U.S. ambassador to France), still boasts the Roman portico (porch) envisioned by its designer. One of the nation's oldest capitols, its design is perhaps the most influential -- many of Jefferson's column, portico, pediment and other classical features are replicated in most state capitols. The new addition is inside the hill beneath the building. Four free public parking spaces are on the north side of Bank Street between 9th and 10th streets. Set your GPS for Bank Street at N. 10th St.

The Massachusetts State House is one of many stops along the "Freedom Trail" that take visitors on a route through Boston's historical sites. The State House itself includes the original front, with its Charles Bulfinch-designed golden dome, plus numerous additions and a mural depicting Paul Revere's famous ride warning colonists of the coming of British troops in 1775. Public parking is available a short distance away under the Boston Common; set your GPS for Beacon and Park streets.

Oklahoma's Capitol, in addition to having a working oil well (Petunia No. 1) out front, has a new dome (completed 2001), and boasts a wealth of brightly lit murals of historic scenes and portraits of famous Oklahomans (think Jim Thorpe, Woody Guthrie). Parking in one of the many lots out front; set your GPS for 2300 North Lincoln Blvd.

Louisiana's Capitol along the Mississippi River in Baton Rouge is a monument to former Gov. Huey Long, who was the prime instigator of Louisiana's new capitol when it was built in the 1930s. Of skyscraper design, it is the nation's tallest state capitol. The focus of the building's grounds is a fitting memorial to Long, who was assassinated in the building in 1935. Park out front at Spanish Town Road on-street meters. Set your GPS for Spanish Town Road and N. 4th St.

The Ohio Statehouse, in addition to its unique dome and historical artifacts, has some of the best-designed and neatly maintained grounds of any state capitol. Outdoor exhibits include monuments to Christopher Columbus, the state's participation in the Civil War, and William McKinley, one of four U.S. presidents from Ohio. Park under the building; set your GPS for East State and South High streets.

Maryland's State House, overlooking the harbor at Annapolis, is one of the earliest and most influential state capitols and the only one to also have served as the nation's capitol. The old Senate Chamber is where George Washington dramatically resigned his commission as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, a key event in the history of democracy. Although the building is undergoing renovations, visitors are welcome to view the ongoing historical preservation. On-street parking is limited, so use a city lot and ride the Circulator trolley. Set your GPS for 100 State Circle.

Oregon's Capitol in Salem has one of the best rotundas anywhere, a big open space under the dome with broad sweeping stairways, perfect for holiday choir concerts. During the summer, Oregon offers the public a climb to the top of the dome, 121 steps to a panoramic outdoor view of Salem. Recently remodeled legislator offices are particularly inviting. Set your GPS to 900 Court St. N.E. Metered on-street parking is available on every side of the building.

Eleventh is the capitol of your home state, if it is not listed here. Look it up online. Plan a visit. Take the tour. View the architecture. Soak in the history. Every state's capitol is well worth visiting.

-- Jim Stembridge