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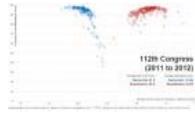
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## What riding on Air Force One is really like

BY **KATIE ZEZIMA**  April 12 at 1:01 pm



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I started covering the White House for The Washington Post about a month ago. But Friday was my first trip with the president -- and on Air Force One -- as he (and I) jetted to New York to deliver a speech (and for a date night with first lady Michelle Obama).



Air Force One (Katie Zezima)

It turns out that riding Air Force One is, in lots of ways, like flying commercial. You need to get there hours early. You send your items through a metal detector and get wanded down. The inside of the cabin is, well, the cabin of a plane, but with some much

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nicer touches, like real towels and hand lotion in the bathroom.

The press sits in what amounts to a first-class cabin (comfy large leather seats) and boards early. When the president touches down in the Marine One helicopter, we all head back out onto the tarmac, watch him board and hustle back. Takeoff happens almost as soon as the president boards.

Then there is the food. On Friday night, I got this text from my mother: "How was the flight? Do they serve snacks???" Yes. Lots of snacks. Even on a short flight to New York we got a light meal (French onion dip and small pieces of toast with cheese melted on them!). Then there are baskets of fruit and candy for the press to nosh on.

After landing at John F. Kennedy Airport, we helicoptered into Lower Manhattan, flying over Brooklyn and past the Statue of Liberty.



Helo-ing in NYC (Katie Zezima)

Riding in a presidential motorcade is actually much more interesting than flying on Air Force One. For one, it makes starkly clear the bubble in which the president and first lady travel in. Doing so in a place like Manhattan only makes that more apparent. We headed up FDR Drive and First Avenue, both of which were completely closed. Thousands of people stood behind metal barricades, straining for a glimpse and holding phones up high, snapping photos. NYPD cars blocked each intersection. A sea of lights from emergency vehicles spread out before us. It turns out you can get around Manhattan pretty quickly when there is, literally, no traffic.

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We headed up to Times Square, where the president gave a speech at the annual meeting of the National Action Network, a nonprofit group founded by the Rev. Al Sharpton.



President Obama addresses members of the National Action Network at their 16th annual convention at the Sheraton New York Times Square. (John Moore/Getty Images)

Only a president can shut down a major bus route at rush hour, and that's exactly what Obama did as the motorcade sped down Lexington Avenue.

Like most people who visit New York, the Obamas wanted to do dinner and a show. They and a few friends ate at Maialino in the Gramercy Park Hotel, which describes itself as a "neighborhood Roman trattoria overlooking Gramercy Park" and where seared lamb chops with kale sprouts and fennel puree will set you back \$37. The surrounding streets were completely shut down. Secret Service agents milled about.

And the press did what it so often does on presidential trips: We waited. We were hustled into the hotel bar, where we sat at small cocktail tables with candles that illuminated the dimly lit lounge. People grabbing drinks after work gave us odd looks. Some members of the press played pool at a table set up in the back. There were framed photos of Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee -- so you know it was a classy place.

Two hours later we were ready to roll again, this time up Sixth Avenue. The president was late to see "A Raisin in the Sun," but when you're the president "late" isn't really a thing. Even more people came out to gawk on a warm night; at some points the crowd

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was 10 people deep. The driver of a Mister Softee truck snapped photos. Times Square was completely shut down.

We were hustled into an Italian restaurant across the street, ate dinner and, again, waited. It was almost like being a chaperone on a date, except you don't actually get to spend time with the people who are going out. I did get to take in a bit of what makes New York great, like seeing a guy in an Elmo costume sitting inside a coffee shop at 10:30 p.m.

About two and a half hours later, we headed back downtown, helicoptered back to JFK.



Helo-ing, by night. (Katie Zezima)

The president and first lady held hands as they walked toward the plane, and Obama kept his arm around his wife's waist as they walked up the red-carpeted stairs. We hustled back to the press cabin. Rare is the commercial flight where buffalo chicken sliders are waiting on your seat when you board.



**Katie Zezima** covers the White House for Post Politics and The Fix. She previously worked for the New York Times in Boston and the AP in New Jersey. She was a 2011-12 Knight-Wallace Fellow at The University of Michigan. Follow her on Twitter [@katiezez](#).

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