

New York City: Visit again and again and again

"People come to New York because they're looking for something, only to find once they get here that the city raises more questions in one's soul than it answers..."

Nancy Franklin
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By JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

On the shuttle bus ride in from Newark Airport to Manhattan, I overheard a mother recounting to her young son some of the sights they would see on his first trip to New York City: the Statue of Liberty, the top of the World Trade Center, South Street Seaport, Greenwich Village.

We dropped them off at their hotel in the heart of Times Square. I figured she wanted him to be as close as possible to the lights of Broadway. And they could easily walk to his first Broadway show.

It made me think about the first time my parents took me sightseeing in New York... the sights my husband and I visited during the 10 years we lived in and around Manhattan... the sights I showed my children.

It's been a number of trips to New York since I deliberately set out to see such "sights." And many of them have changed over the years. For instance, the twin towers of the World Trade Center, not the Empire State Building, are New York's tallest structure.

Not merely ferry to the Statue of Liberty and back, but now can more fully understand the immigrants' experience through the museum that opened in 1990 on Ellis Island. The United Nations headquarters was once a definite must-see. I'm not sure how true that still is since its power and promise haven't been realized.

People now live on Roosevelt Island, which once only held jails, asylums and hospitals. The short aerial tram ride to this East River isle offers interesting views. You can board at Second Avenue and 60th.

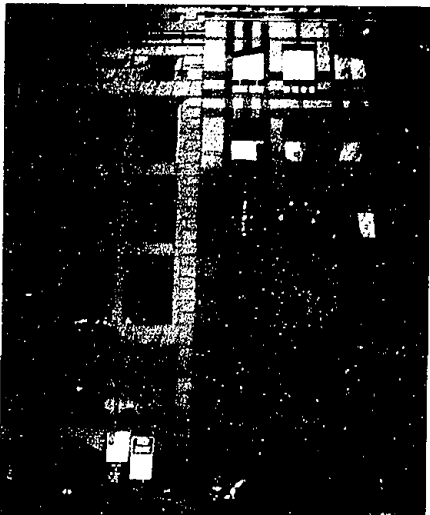
New York, arguably the world's premiere city, has in common with other world class cities that the more you see, the more there is to unravel. The joy of returning over and over is that you can become more than a tourist. The wonder of New York is that something extraordinary is around every corner.

So where you stay in New York is important. And I'm not talking about fancy versus not so fancy. It's that where you stay is your neighborhood for that particular trip. Moving around the city - west side, east side, midtown, downtown - provides a chance to get a true feel for the various sections.

Recently I'd been back. Since we usually go to New York during the winter months, it's tempting to stay in the 60s on the west side. That way you're less dependent on a taxi to get to Broadway or Lincoln Center if the weather is bad. Ready for new vistas, I opted for the east side and a hotel I hadn't stayed at on my most recent trip.

At the Regency Hotel, Park Avenue at 61st, I experienced a lovely hotel in the last stages of renovation, with a gracious lobby and courteous, accommodating service. Their concierge expediently called to find the hours and specific subway directions to PS 1 - the edgy art museum in Queens that recently associated with the Museum of Modern Art. In the hotel's wood-paneled, bookshelf-lined library, you can sink into comfy settees to have anything from breakfast to an after-theater supper. And their workout room is spacious and well-equipped, although on the basement level.

I also was delighted that just around the corner was my favorite deli, the original Viand on Madison at 61st. Viand occupies a sliver of a storefront on the aisle between counter and the wall of single-file tables is significantly narrower than at Steve's Deli at



Looking Up: The Christmas windows of Burberry (right) and Escada, two high fashion stores on 57th Street.

Maple and Telegraph, for example. Still, New Yorkers are willing to wait "on line" for their incredible turkey sandwiches for as long as it takes.

A highlight for me is running in Central Park. Its 843-acres (the principality of Monaco would fit within its confines, according to Podor's guidebook) present not only an oasis for New Yorkers but a microcosm of the city surrounding it. Around each bend is a new "neighborhood" whether it be the skating rink, the Carousel, the Sheep Meadow, Strawberry Fields (which John Lennon immortalized), Central Park and Fiesch Children's zoo, and the various wetlands and waters.

Running the park from the east side rather than the west affords new sightings, such as the bronze mountain lion mounted on the rocky ledge above a major running route and the statue of a Polish hero off the beaten path.

I had never before run as far as the Reservoir, where I joined the herd of joggers circling its 1.6 mile perimeter. It affords a great view of the high-rise buildings that surround Central Park, including the renowned Dakota, where Lennon lived and died.

On the return route, I caught up with a truly New York sight - a professional dog walker high stepping it with 10 (by actual count) leashed canines of assort-



Fairyland: Holiday lights adorn trees along Park Avenue near Grand Central Station.

ed breeds keeping stride.

Another advantage of the near east side is that the major art museums are within walking distance. Smartly, they have staggered the days each closes so visitors don't miss out: the Metropolitan on Monday, MOMA (Museum of Modern Art) on Wednesday, the Guggenheim on Thursday, the Whitney, Monday and Tuesday. I headed for the Guggenheim, with its glass-domed, innovative spiral rotunda design by Frank Lloyd Wright, which I have visited often since its opening in 1959.

Although some disparage its six-story, quarter-mile ramp as a poor space for viewing art, you don't wonder whether you're viewing an exhibition in the proper order, as can happen in more traditional museums.

This time it was Picasso's paintings, sculpture and sketches from the Spanish Civil War through the end of World War II that occupied the bulk of the ramp.

The remaining space was devoted to 10 years (1959-69) of work by pop artist Jim Dine. Picasso, of course, is a hard act to follow and Dine suffers as a result. Both exhibits run into May.

Generally, I've sacrificed food to theater. However, this trip I tried to work in more than soup before, pastry after. I picked a restaurant within walking distance of our hotel from the best

new restaurants of 1998, according to departing New York Times reviewer Ruth Reichl. The arepas at Bolivar, a South American restaurant at 206 East 80th, are sensational. On the regular menu, these Columbian griddle cakes are made with fresh corn and served with creme fraiche. This night, they also served them as an appetizer: three blini-sized pancakes, each topped with a different delicacy - caviar, crabmeat, creme fraiche. A 6:15 p.m. reservation and friendly, efficient service allowed us a relatively leisurely meal.

Since it was Monday night and most theaters were dark, it was easy to catch a cab to Lincoln Center for the Metropolitan. And, Opera's performance of Il Trovatore. A few empty seats - unusual for the sold out Met - probably reflected the ho-hum review it received in that day's Times.

But whatever the production, attending the opera in that glittering house, arguably the best in the world, is a glorious experience.

Which brings me to the art of ticket getting. Unless it's a last-minute trip, calling the theater listing usually works. I had no trouble getting good seats to "Art" about six weeks before, but although it's a Tony Award-winning play it's been running a while.

For hot tickets, such as next season's premiere staging of the

new Great Gatsby opera, I rely on the brokerage firm of Global Tickets. They charge above the box office price. But throughout 10 years of using them I've yet to be disappointed by either their failure to book what I want to see or by poor seating.

Yes, Times Square recently has been cleaned up, free of prostitution and adult movie houses. But now it's criticized for looking more like Hollywood than New York - "Disneyfied" I believe is the description.

The same could be said for Fifth Avenue, where Saks Fifth Avenue and Bergdorf Goodman stand like book ends propping up more paperbacks (including a Disney store) than hard covers.

The posh shopping has moved over an avenue to Madison between 69th and 79th. Calvin Klein, Prada, Betsey Johnson and similar designer boutiques rule; giving way to art and antiques as you continue to the upper east side.

Over my three-day visit, you could say I was true to my east side neighborhood (although I didn't set foot in Bloomingdale!). Maybe next trip I'll check out one of Soho's new hotels - the Soho Grand or the Mercer - and spend my time in Lower Manhattan.

Sure, I'll miss running in Central Park, but Manhattan becomes so narrow downtown that the East River and Battery Park are viable substitutes. And, of course, off-Broadway, off-off Broadway and a whole different art, fashion and restaurant scene are indigenous to Soho, the Village, Tribeca, the East Village, Little Italy and Chinatown.

I guess I'm actually a bit envious of that woman on the airport shuttle. Been there, done that is not something you can ever say about New York.

Judy Berne has more time for travel now than when she was managing editor for the Eccentric Newspapers. She continues as a regular columnist for the Eccentric's op-ed page and frequently writes on travel for the O&E's Sunday Arts and Leisure section.

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