

Story and photographs
by Verne Maree

I'll Take **M**an

I think there's nothing more exciting than going to a new country for the first time. It took me this long to make my first trip to the States. Though I've done a lot of travelling in the past few years, touching down in a dozen new destinations, arriving in New York gave me a thrill I haven't felt since my first-ever trip overseas – to London, at the age of 22.

Sense of place

Perhaps it's something to do with the weird familiarity of places you have read about, scenes you've watched countless times on screens big and small. But until you actually find yourself in the place, on the spot, you don't know how it actually *feels* to be in New York. Images are purely visual, but truly absorbing a place involves all the senses. According to my husband Roy, buildings in NY all have the same smell; so do their ships. He reckons they all smell like coffee ... must be the the result of the stuff being continually on the brew for years.

Scripted

My sister had told me that being in NY makes you feel as though you're in a movie, and she was right. My whole trip felt like a personalised movie script. As events happened, scenes unfolded, I'd go 'Aha! – that was bound to happen!'



hattan



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It's Reuters

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ANYTIME



Le Maison Cartier, Fifth Avenue



St Patrick's Cathedral

It started with our arrival at Newark Airport. "There is a little less visibility than we need for landing," was the wry comment by the pilot of SQ22 from Singapore. Against all weather forecasts (accuweather.com was less accu than usual), a sudden, heavy snowstorm blanketed the state in snow, iced up the runways and brought airports to a standstill. We were lucky to land, and to have booked a car to our hotel. Thousands of less fortunate souls were stranded as all outbound flights were cancelled, and, of course, all the hotels were full.

The next morning's TV news showed hordes of foul-breathed and disgruntled would-be passengers waiting it out in Newark, JFK and La Guardia airports; looking dismally at a trio of hilarious teenagers bunny-hopping around in their sleeping-bags. BA ran out of de-icer and kept one planeload of hopefuls on the runway for nine hours.

What a nightmare! – but this is the stuff of movies. Bad weather strikes, so people take road trips in rental cars with strangers to get home for Christmas or whatever. Along the way, they discover themselves, others, America. It somehow seemed right.

Then, as we approached the door to our hotel room, there came the unmistakable sound of a woman moaning in the throes of passion. Just one series of groans, but another 'aha!' moment for me. I remembered the diner scene in *When Harry Met Sally*, and countless images of sleep-frustrated motel room occupants banging furiously on thin walls and ceilings.

And at the Museum of Television and Radio, I was stuck in a lift and had to wait to be rescued ... another movie moment!



Street theatricals



Manhattan view from under Brooklyn Bridge



The Empire State Building from the Rockefeller Centre

Song and Dance

For every new scene or event in New York, there's a song to match the moment. Airport snow-in? *Driving Home for Christmas* by Chris Rea. The sign for the New Jersey Turnpike? Simon and Garfunkel's *America*. Big neon cross on a church? The Eagles' *Paradise*. And of course, *Heart of New York*, *Feeling Groovy*, *I'll Take Manhattan*, *Give My Regards to Broadway*, and *New York, New York*. We sang them

softly under our breath in public and loudly in the hotel bathroom.

No longer rude New Yorkers

I was almost disappointed to find the *people* of New York not conforming to my mental script, however. So polite! So charming! Or, at least, not snarling "F_____ you!" at the slightest provocation. At a hotel bar (where else?) Bob Shank from Long Island explained it to us. Since 9/11, he said, the attitude has changed completely. New Yorkers have started looking out for those around them; caring for one another. According to another local, this change of heart started earlier, with Mayor Giuliani's campaign to clean up and humanise 'Gotham City'. They've developed a new sense of community, and you can feel it.

Having been here, amongst these people, made the catastrophic events of 9/11 suddenly real for me.

Sight-seeing

You need a plan for New York – an 'agenda', according to the guide on the Waterways cruise (more on this later). It's a huge, varied and complex city, and you can't hope to 'do' it in just a few days.

I hate to rush from sight to sight. I prefer to decide on a few destinations and stop along the way to people-watch, eavesdrop on conversations, and smell the coffee. Our *Frommer's New York 2007*, written by a New Yorker, gave useful suggestions on what to see if you have just one, two or three days in the city.



We stayed at The Benjamin, a beautiful little Art Deco hotel in Lexington Avenue (at 50th Street). It's just across from the stunning Waldorf Astoria, which was full because it was the weekend of St Patrick's Day, a major festival marked by a big parade down Fifth Avenue. Being in Midtown Manhattan, it's convenient for Times Square and the theatre district, Central Park and Fifth Avenue shopping.

Nearby Grand Central Station, with its gorgeous domed ceiling and great sense of atmosphere, is lovely to wander around; I especially liked its food market, where busy locals pick up deli food, Continental breads, cheese, pasta and so on, either for lunch or to take home for dinner. There are various dining options in the building, including the highly rated Oyster Bar.

Just up Park Avenue you'll find the Rockefeller Building. New Yorkers are enormously proud of this 1929 icon, the first privately funded, multi-purpose skyscraper in the US. Seventy storeys high, it gives you arguably as good a view as you'll get from the slightly more famous and equally beloved Empire State Building; what's more, its short films and other visual displays give you an insight into the effect of the Great Depression on the people of New York. Then you can visit Radio City Music Hall, the main

and original tenants of the building, and be rocked by its legendary high-kicking Rockettes.

An excellent recommendation was to start by taking a cruise around Manhattan Island – either the Circle Line or Waterways does cruises from 90 minutes to two hours. (It cost US\$22 for our 90-minute Waterways excursion.) It gives you a sense of the geography of Manhattan Island, bounded on the west by the Hudson River and on the east by the East River. Highlights for me were sailing under the Brooklyn Bridge, its huge steel arch picture-framing a postcard view of the Manhattan skyline, and getting close enough to the Statue of Liberty to take satisfying shots of this icon.

Culture

You could spend a month in New York's museums and art galleries and still not see them all. I chose MoMA (the Museum of Modern Art), partly because it's in Midtown but mostly because it's utterly splendid. Entry is expensive at US\$20, but it's so worth it. Gallery after gallery reveals treasure after treasure – Monet's water lilies go on for miles, Picasso is explored through every period, Andy Warhol's 32 tins of Campbell soup look back at you, Jackson Pollock's genius is spattered across vast walls, and everyone crowds around Van Gogh's *Starry, Starry Night* – to name a very few.



St Patrick's Day reveller



Broadway show

The Museum of Television and Radio (on 56th Street) is not a traditional collection of exhibits, but the repository of a fantastic collection of recordings. You could spend a week there.

We booked ahead for a Sunday matinée performance of *Spamalot*, the Broadway musical hit based on Monty Python's *In Search of the Holy Grail* and other movies. Though slow to get going, it soon got into its stride. As we sang along to the number *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*, though, we wondered how many in the audience knew that Python originally had it being sung by the two poor souls nailed to crosses on either side of Christ.

Food

So much food and so little time! We South Africans are known to be meat-lovers (the barbecue or *braai* is the archetypal South African socio-culinary event), but I've never eaten as much meat in ten days as I did in the US.

Having decided that a steakhouse was a quintessentially New York culinary experience, we booked (ahead, on the internet) at Frankie and Johnnies on 45th Street at 7th Avenue – one of the oldest and most well-known of this *genre*. My bum was bruised on a bumpy banquette, my right elbow was in my neighbour's ear and my left in Roy's garlic mash, and the service was 'steakhouse traditional', i.e. nothing to write home about; but the place reeked of old-time atmosphere and the massive sirloin was a treat. It wasn't cheap: the prices were about what you'd pay at the fabulous Morton's here in Singapore.

Also recommended is the Bull and Bear at the Waldorf Astoria; if you don't want a steak in the restaurant proper, have a beer or a cocktail at the beautiful bar, nibble the mixed nuts in silver dishes and absorb some of the ambiance. This is the hotel where the President and visiting dignitaries tend to stay, but it's not stuffy – like New York itself, it's full of grace, charm and vibrant energy.

Another typical foodie haven is the deli: they're everywhere, but Carnegie's near Times Square has been famous for decades. The walls are covered with old photos of famous diners; Kevin Bacon looked down on our chopped liver and pickles with a particularly fatuous expression. We made only a small dent in the gargantuan Reuben, a mountain of pastrami on rye quite unnecessarily topped with about a kilogram of melted Swiss cheese, and took the rest away with us, as the other customers seemed to be doing. That said, I saw an unfairly lithe Asian chap casually forking up a piled-high plateful sliced pastrami as though it were noodles.



Above: Roy doing a hotdog in Times Square
Above right: Not Cartier Fifth Avenue
Right: Public art in Fifth Avenue



In normal life, I avoid hotdogs like the plague they are, but this was New York. The beef content of the average hotdog is debatable, but we had to have one in Times Square ... and then whenever one of the multitude of hotdog stands called to us.

Style gurus


I'm not a major shopper, but if you are, you can get some expert advice from Style Clinic by Astin Brown on where and when to shop in New York and other major cities. Lovely Tahnya Butterfield, who lives in Singapore, kindly gave me reams of notes on where to go for designer clothing, home-ware and more, including who was having sales, where there would be so-called 'sample sales', and the best outlets for cut-price, brand-name goods both in and around the city.

I did some shopping, of course, and discovered that you can buy just about *anything* at Macy's. Saks Fifth Avenue, probably the most beautiful department store I have ever seen, and Bergdorf Goodman's, likewise, made me just a teeny bit depressed. After you've spent a few hours browsing the top designer boutiques, high-street knockoffs look and feel terrible by comparison. So three cheers for Century 21, the huge discount store in the Financial District (adjacent to Ground Zero) where you can buy all sorts of top designer gear at sometimes giveaway prices. Scoring a red, polka-dotted halter-necked Donna



Clockwise from top left: Andy Warhol's soup cans at MoMA; Times Square, a peculiar cycling contraption; and Manhattan viewed from the ferry

Ricci dress at half-price cheered me up, and the frivolous Versace mini-skirt helped, too.

I've barely nibbled the toffee off the Big Apple. As I write this, my 'little sister', Dale, who lives in London, happens to be on what I think is her fifth visit to New York in as many years. Now I know why she and Colin just have to go back – again and again. 



Recommendations

- Astin Brown: www.styledclinicab.com
- Carnegie's: www.carnegiedell.com
- Century 21: www.c21stores.com
- MoMA: <http://moma.org>
- The Benjamin: www.thebenjamin.com
- Frankie and Johnnies: www.frankieandjohnnies.com