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# My Love Letter to New York

## The Best the City Has to Offer

IN THE ANXIOUS DAYS FOLLOWING 9/11, I KNEW A LOT OF PEOPLE—PARENTS of small children, in particular—who considered moving out of the city. We all wondered if we could continue living in a place that was so obviously a target. And as we began drawing up emergency plans, plotting escapes across bridges, telling family members under which tree in Central Park we'd meet them should another attack occur, I wondered if I was a fool for wanting to stay. There was a feeling that life would never return to normal, that we were a broken city, and that something fundamental had been lost.

Something fundamental was lost, of course—our innocence, our sense of security, and some 3,000 of our friends, neighbors, and family members. But the city and its residents have rebounded with a steely nerve and sense of exuberance that I wouldn't have thought possible in 2001. New York is thriving. Crime is at its lowest rate in decades, visitor numbers have reached historic levels, and the preschools here are turning away dozens of children because so many families are staying in the city that there just aren't enough of these facilities anymore. Though I'm too superstitious to say it out loud, there's a feeling that New York won its skirmish with the dark side—at least for now.

The main reason we stayed? There's simply no other place in the United States so brimming with opportunities. Those of us who live here open our doors to incredible options each and every day: The chance to experience the best and newest in the worlds of art, theater, dance, and music. The ability to feast on expertly prepared foods from all over the world. The belief that we can make our voices heard on political issues, in this news media capital of the nation. The opportunity to meet today's movers and shakers, the ambitious who come here because they know that if they want to achieve a certain level of prominence in their careers, or in the eyes of the world, New York is the place to do it (are you humming, “If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere” right now?).

There's another factual reason for a New Yorker's pride. Because of the density and diversity of our population; our long history as a center of commerce and ideas; our access to the United Nations, Wall Street, and the opinion makers of Madison Avenue; and endless other resources, there's simply *more* here than in most other places. And if that claim seems extreme, well, you'll just have to regard boastfulness as another unavoidable characteristic of “the Big Apple.” What would New Yorkers be without our big mouths?

In visiting New York, you, too, are opening yourself up to a world of wonderful opportunities. In fact, that's what can make New York so intimidating to visitors—there are just so many darn choices. In this chapter, I've sorted through a book's worth of options, selecting my favorites.

## SIGHTS YOU'VE GOTTA SEE, THINGS YOU'VE GOTTA DO

When something is the best in the hemisphere, it must be visited, and so when you come to New York, you have no choice but to visit the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** (p. 140). I think it's one of the great wonders of the U.S., right up there with the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone, a place so stuffed with eye-popping treasures that you could spend your entire vacation here and see only a small fraction of its highlights.

But you can't stay mired in the past. New York has the trifecta of American modern art museums in the **Museum of Modern Art** (best collection, p. 143), the **Guggenheim** (best fun-house architecture, p. 145), and the **Whitney Museum** (best for cutting-edge contemporary art, p. 150); and you should visit at least one of the three.

For those who care more about science than art, and require that science be artfully presented, **The American Museum of Natural History** (p. 142) is a hall of marvels. With one of the finest and most intelligently presented dinosaur collections in the world, and a state-of-the-art planetarium, it's a winner with people of all ages.

Of course, New York includes much more than museums in its cultural scene. Its **theaters** (p. 296) and **jazz clubs** (p. 275) are the best in the nation, and one night of your New York vacation must be dedicated to being an audience member. Those with more high falutin tastes flock to **Lincoln Center** (p. 271) for world-class opera, ballet, and classical music.

### THE FINEST HISTORICAL SIGHTS

You'll want to spend some of your vacation simply walking the city's teeming streets, staring up at skyscrapers, and visiting the areas where history was (and continues to be) made—it's an essential NYC experience.

Though New York City was captured early on in the American Revolution, much of the planning for the war took place here, as did many of the most important events in the early life of the Republic. And you'll come face-to-face with all this history in the **Lower Manhattan Historical and Financial districts** (p. 12). This area is also the site of one of the defining events of modern history: the attack on the **World Trade Center** (p. 136), and hundreds of people come here daily to pay their respects.

In New York harbor, reached by ferry, the **Statue of Liberty** and **Ellis Island** (p. 133) are two definitive sights that speak eloquently to the great contributions, yesterday and today, that immigrants make to the United States. Just around the river bend is New York's famous **Brooklyn Bridge** (p. 139), one of the great engineering feats of the 19th century and still the best stroll in the city. You can easily see all three sights and Ground Zero in a day.

“*New York is an ugly city, a dirty city. Its climate is a scandal, its politics are used to frighten children, its traffic madness, its competition murderous, but once you have lived in New York and it has become your home, no place else is good enough.*”

—John Steinbeck,  
*The Making of a New Yorker*

Uptown are the skyscrapers that defined Depression-era New York (and are now competing for tourist dollars with their observation decks): **Rockefeller Center** (p. 138) and the **Empire State Building** (p. 125). These are the city's goosebump-makers; both are thrilling to visit, as much for their views as for the buildings themselves.

Flanking the East River, the **United Nations** (p. 126) is the final, history-making must-see. Though visitors can no longer sit in on debates (too many disruptive protesters), touring the grounds and learning its history is a fascinating exercise.

## UNCOMMON LODGINGS

Where you stay will obviously color your experience of the city. Although most travelers simply pick a standard hotel in Times Square, you'll get a more accurate (and I think pleasant) picture of life here if you choose to stay . . . well, anywhere else.

You'll also have a more exciting visit by picking non-traditional lodgings. Why not stay in a room off a working art gallery in SoHo? Or in a spare bedroom in the home of a chef who will cook a gourmet breakfast for you in the morning? Or have an entire apartment to yourself in prized SoHo, Greenwich Village, or near Museum Row on the Upper East Side—areas where hotels are scarce, but rental apartments are abundant? In chapter 3 I give you the tools for finding these and dozens of other more unusual lodgings.

If a hotel is more your speed, look into the less standard ones, those that reflect both the personality of their owners and of the city itself. At **Hotel QT** (p. 30), in Midtown, you pay just \$125 a night for the choicest of digs with a deejay poolside, so you can groove as you swim. At **Carlton Arms** (p. 48), **The Hotel Chelsea** (p. 46), or **Gershwin Hotel** (p. 49), your room is a one-of-a-kind creation, painted (and sometimes sculpted) by a visionary artist who's been given *carte blanche* to create an unusual environment (the rooms range from Jackson Pollock-esque creations, in which every surface is splattered with paint; to Mexican casitas, strung with colorful cut paper; to rooms that look like they're at the bottom of the ocean, with colorful fish murals surrounding the bed). Or choose a gracious inn, such as **Incentra Village House** (p. 50); **Country Inn the City** (p. 59); **Gracie Inn** (p. 61); or **Wall Street Inn** (p. 56), where the decor will be quaint (floral wallpaper, antique furniture, cushy beds) and the service oh, so personal.

Or simply get the most for your money in a clean, comfortable room that will serve as an affordable sleeping place (so you can spend your money on great meals, or theater tickets). Some of the best value sleeps in New York include **The Chelsea Lodge** (p. 44), **Chelsea Pines** (p. 45), **The Pickwick Arms** (p. 42), **Second Home on Second Avenue** (p. 53), **Amsterdam Inn** (p. 56), and **Larchmont Hotel** (p. 50). All are exceedingly pleasant places to stay, where you give up an amenity (at some you may have to climb a flight of stairs or perhaps share a bathroom) for a terrific price.

## DINING FOR ALL TASTES

Though you'll have traveled only to NYC, your tongue can travel the world, odd as that may sound, at the many excellent ethnic restaurants that dot the city. In Chinatown, you can visit veritable palaces of **dim sum** for brunch (p. 87), choosing

your meal from carts that careen through these vast banquet halls, laden with dumplings, noodles, sesame seed balls, and other starchy delights. Or head to the East Village’s **Little Japan** (p. 94) to try foods usually found only in Japan, from *shabu tatsu* meals (you cook your own steak in a vat of boiling water) to tea-houses to fast-food stands selling *okonoyake* (a sort of Japanese pizza, made with squid). Uptown in the area near the Theater District, your choice ranges from **Uzbekistani kebabs** (p. 77) to **Ethiopian stews** (p. 75) to the purple corn juice of **Peru** (p. 76). And in Harlem, you get the finest in **Southern-style soul food** at a bevy of friendly, dinerlike places.

And then there are those New York classics: deli sandwiches, bagels, hot dogs, and pizza. Don’t try to eat all four in one day—the damage to your digestive system could end your vacation right there—but you should try at least one during the course of your stay. For pizza, I like **John’s** (p. 74) in the Theater District and Greenwich Village; for hot dogs dash into **Gray’s Papaya**, or simply pick one up at a sidewalk stand; for deli food, go with the classic **Katz Delicatessen** (p. 96); and for bagels, the choices are many (see p. 117 for a full list of options).

Gourmet fare is an obsession in Manhattan, so you’re going to want to have at least one splurge meal while you’re here. A very reasonable \$25 will net you an elegant and delicious three-course meal at celeb chef Charlie Palmer’s **Kitchen 22** (p. 82). For more exotic fare in a fabulously chic setting, head to **Spice Market** (p. 103) and order carefully (as tabs climb quickly). For exquisite American food and wine, visit the closet-sized **Tasting Room** (p. 92), a foodie temple with the friendliest service in town. And if you just love desserts—who doesn’t?—make a pilgrimage to **Chikalicious** (p. 91), where \$12 will get you an imaginative, ultra-gourmet dessert tasting menu.

## THE FINEST “OTHER” EXPERIENCES

Get off the tourist treadmill and take part in one of the dozens of activities performed by actual New Yorkers each day. Attend a **lecture at the 92nd Street Y** (p. 183) or a **cooking class at the Institute of Culinary Education** (p. 184); take a free lunchtime **tango class at the Argentine consulate** (p. 185); pray at a **gospel service in Harlem** (p. 197); or spend an afternoon **steaming at the Russian and Turkish Baths** (p. 193) of the East Village. Really adventurous travelers can venture out to Brooklyn to the artists’ studios and galleries of **Williamsburg** (p. 202) or the vodka-soaked **Russian nightclubs of Brighton Beach** (p. 196). Or see how the lucky among us work by taking a **backstage tour of the Metropolitan Opera** (p. 190) or by being part of an **audience at a TV taping** (p. 186). These and many more activities covered in chapter 6 allow visitors to see sides of the city that outsiders rarely know about and, most importantly, to meet actual New Yorkers.