

TRAVEL

THE BIG APPLE

Return to New York City: fewer crowds, cheaper prices, omnipresent vaccine cards



View of the Chrysler Building and the East River from atop Summit One Vanderbilt, a new attraction in New York City. Photos by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

You'll need to wear a mask and show your vaccine card at many indoor destinations. But it seemed a minor inconvenience, given all this city has been through.

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NEW YORK CITY — I found a seat on the subway, could walk through Times Square without bumping into strangers, and saw a terrific Broadway show for less than \$70.

If you've ever longed for a New York City without all of the crowds and chaos, now is the time to go.

The crowds are fewer, the prices are lower, the noise is a few decibels quieter. But it's still every bit as fun as it used to be, maybe more so.

I visited the city this month, my first trip to New York in two years, to see how the city is faring. My assessment: quite well, all things considered.

Yes, you'll need to wear a mask and show your vaccine card at many indoor destinations. But it seemed a minor inconvenience, given all this city has been through.

Few cities were affected by the coronavirus pandemic as deeply as New York, due to its population density and international connections. During the height of the crisis, hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers fled the city, although many are making their way back.

The hospitality industry, in particular, was devastated. Numerous Manhattan hotels have closed for good, along with restaurants and retail vendors. Indeed, it was rare that I walked a block during my three-day visit this month and didn't notice a vacant storefront.

I was also worried I might feel unsafe — violent crime in New York increased in 2020, as it did in most big cities. But I never felt insecure. Though less crowded, the city wasn't empty. There were always plenty of people around, wherever I went.



Little Island Park, built atop tulip-shaped concrete pilings in the Hudson River, is a new attraction in New York City's Meatpacking District.



The Guggenheim Museum in New York City, designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

I loaded my itinerary with activities — some brand new, some new to me and a few old favorites. I checked out the new observation deck, Summit One Vanderbilt; took a stroll through Little Island Park, a magical new public space in the Meatpacking District; and made a first visit to the Guggenheim Museum, the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed temple of modern art.

I also spent hours just walking the city, soaking up the atmosphere — because even a less-crowded New York is still a busy, dynamic place.

And things are about to get busier. Just last week, the United States reopened its borders to international travelers, and there is no U.S. city that relies



Times Square isn't empty, but it isn't wall-to-wall people either. Notice the Cleveland Browns make the news ticker on Nov. 5.

more on foreign tourists than New York. Cab drivers, restaurant workers and other hospitality staff all expressed cautious optimism about the future. "It's getting better, a little bit better," replied the gentleman who drove me to my hotel from LaGuardia Airport, when I asked about business.

The weekend of my visit was one of the busiest in recent months, with the return of the New York Marathon, which was canceled last year like so many events and traditions.

The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade this year returns with a live audience, after running last year for TV only. The Radio City Rockettes premiered their 2021 holiday show while I was in town, after missing all of 2020.

It may take a while, but there's little doubt that New York City eventually will return to all its pre-COVID glory and grandeur. Until then, the decreased crowds and prices make now a terrific time to go.

BE PREPARED FOR SOME CHANGES

If you do go now, be prepared for a few adjustments:

- ▶ You'll be asked to show verification that you've been vaccinated numerous times — any time you want to eat inside a restaurant, at museums, at Broadway shows. If you haven't been vaccinated against COVID-19, you might consider another destination (or, better yet, get vaccinated). I feared the vaccine-verification process would slow down the process of getting into venues, but the businesses have the system down pat. (Note: There are apps you can download on your phone for this purpose, including NYC COVID Safe, but most people, myself included, just show their paper card.)
- ▶ Even with proof of vaccination, masks are required in nearly all indoor spaces, at museums, shows and on the subway. (Note: Vaccine verification is not required on public transportation.)
- ▶ Even an uncrowded New York has occasional crowds, particularly at some of the new tourist attractions and on public transportation. After spending much of the last year and a half avoiding people, being shoulder to shoulder with strangers on the subway did feel a bit unnerving.
- ▶ New pandemic-related regulations make everything a bit less spontaneous. In an effort to control capacity, numerous venues now require reservations, including museums and attractions. So be prepared to plan ahead.

FIRST STOP, LITTLE ISLAND PARK

I took an early-morning flight from Cleveland to LaGuardia, dropped my bags at my Midtown hotel and was ready to explore the city by 10 a.m.

First stop: Little Island park, which opened in May in the Meatpacking District and has quickly become one of the city's most popular new attractions.

The park is built atop 132 tulip-shaped concrete pilings rising from the Hudson River. It's just 2.4 acres, but it packs a punch, offering terrific views of the city skyline, intimate spaces for conversation, a large waterfront amphitheater, interactive public art and more.

SEE NEW YORK CITY, K2

SIGHTSEEING

Inside New York City's newest sky-high view

Summit One Vanderbilt is equal parts art exhibit and observation deck

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NEW YORK CITY — Nearly 1,400 feet above the streets of Midtown Manhattan, I looked down and saw myself?

Not satisfied with that view, I tried again and fixed my gaze upon the Empire State Building.

Inside the city's newest skyscraper attraction, all is not what it seems. Mirrors on the walls — and ceilings and floors — create an optical illusion unlike anything I've seen before, an infinity of tourists posing atop one of the city's tallest structures.

The new Summit One Vanderbilt attraction, which opened last month, joins the increasingly competitive battle for bragging rights among a growing number of sky-high observation decks in New York City.

Which vantage point is the most daring, the most creative, the most innovative? Summit certainly makes a strong case for all of those.

The attraction is spread across the top three floors of One Vanderbilt, a soaring office tower completed in 2020 next to Grand Central Terminal. At 1,401 feet tall, it's the fourth-highest building in New York City (only One World Trade Center, plus two recently completed residential towers near Central Park, are taller).

Across town, at 30 Hudson Yards, Edge juts out from the top of another super-tall glass tower, offering guests a jaw-dropping view from more than 1,000 feet aloft. This week, the attraction debuted an additional-charge activity called City Climb, where harnessed and helmeted participants can go even higher, "skyscraping" to the top of the building's crown (the cost is high too, at \$185 per person; go to edgenyc.com).

Meanwhile, in Lower Manhattan, One World Observatory offers terrific views from atop One World Trade Center, the city's tallest building (oneworldobservatory.com).

And for traditionalists, you can't beat the observation decks at the top of the Empire State Building (esbnyc.com) and Rockefeller Center (rockefellercenter.com).



Inside Summit One Vanderbilt, a new observation deck/art installation in Midtown Manhattan. Susan Glaser, *The Plain Dealer*

There's nothing traditional about the view from Summit One Vanderbilt, which is equal parts art exhibit, observation deck and Instagram photo prop.

Honestly, I enjoyed the place, but the number of people taking photos of themselves inside the space made me want to scream.

One other quibble: The long line through a dark hallway to access the elevator, which is part of the experience, seemed unnecessary, particularly during a time when we're still supposed to be staying 6 feet apart from one another.

At the ground-floor entrance, visitors are given booties to wear over their shoes so as not to damage the mirrors. Plastic sunglasses are also complimentary, if you didn't bring your own — and you'll need them, as the sun reflecting off all those mirrors is intense. In addition, it's suggested that women wear shorts under their skirts to prevent any unintended views.

Upon arrival to the 91st floor, there are several "exhibit" areas to explore, created primarily by New York artist Kenzo Digital, including a space called Transcendence, with floor-to-ceiling windows

looking south toward the Empire State Building and east toward the Chrysler Building. Mirrors on the walls, floor and ceiling create a dramatic infinity effect.

Another room — my favorite — features large silver balloons bouncing around in the space, with New York's skyline as the dramatic backdrop.

The entire experience is reminiscent of Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Mirrors exhibit, which visited the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2018. In fact, Kusama created her own art installation at Summit, dubbed "Clouds," featuring dozens of metallic, cloud-like shapes arranged on the floor in one of the rooms.

Standard tours conclude at Apres, an indoor-outdoor terrace, offering pricey drinks and incredible views. Guests can add on one more experience, Ascent, which will take them another two stories up via glass elevator.

Reservations are required, and sunset time slots sell out first. Proof of COVID vaccine is required. Price for the standard tour is \$39 (\$10 more at sunset); Ascent is another \$20. Information: summitov.com

Tallest buildings in New York City

- ▶ One World Trade Center, 1,776 feet
- ▶ Central Park Tower, 1,550 feet
- ▶ 111 West 57th St., 1,428 feet
- ▶ One Vanderbilt, 1,401 feet
- ▶ 432 Park Avenue, 1,397 feet
- ▶ 30 Hudson Yards, 1,270
- ▶ Empire State Building, 1,250 feet
- ▶ Bank of America Tower, 1,200 feet
- ▶ 3 World Trade Center, 1,079 feet
- ▶ The Brooklyn Tower, 1,066 feet

(Just in case you're wondering, Cleveland's tallest building, 947-foot-tall Key Tower, would rank as New York's 22nd tallest building.)

NEW YORK CITY

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Continues from K1

The park was bankrolled by billionaire power couple Barry Diller and Diane von Furstenberg, who are also funding its maintenance for the next 20 years.

During warmer months, to prevent overcrowding, visitors were required to obtain free timed tickets to access the park, but reservations are not needed. The park is open 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. during late fall and winter, with extended hours in the spring. It's a magical space; don't miss it. (Information: littleisland.org)

ROOSEVELT ISLAND

Speaking of islands — I made my first visit to Roosevelt Island on this trip, escorted by my nephew, a student at Cornell Tech, which has its campus on the island.

Roughly 2 miles long by 800 feet wide, the island is in the middle of the East River, with Manhattan to the west and Queens to the east, a relatively quiet oasis that is home to 14,000 residents. It's accessible via subway and the Roosevelt Island Tramway — which, at \$2.75 per one-way ticket, may be the best bargain in New York.

The island's biggest attraction, aside from its spectacular views of the Manhattan skyline, is Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms State Park, on four acres at the island's southern tip. The park celebrates the four freedoms that Roosevelt outlined in his 1941 State of the Union speech: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear.

Designed in 1974 by architect Louis Kahn but not finished until 2012, the park features a massive bronze bust of Roosevelt and a 60-foot square plaza of granite with views of the United Nations, which Roosevelt helped create.

Adjacent to the park are the ruins of the city's former Smallpox Hospital, a gothic-revival relic designed by architect James Renwick in 1856 that is on the National Register of Historic Places.

New on the island is its first hotel, the Graduate Roosevelt Island, an outpost of the small chain that specializes in college-town lodging. The hotel was booked



New York City's Bryant Park, decked out for the holidays. Susan Glaser, *The Plain Dealer*

for the weekend of my visit, so I settled for a drink atop the hotel's 18th floor at the Panorama Room. The setting is spectacular — well on its way to becoming a top spot for a drink with a view in the city.

I also visited two other islands during my stay, Ellis Island and Liberty Island, which recently opened a new museum devoted to the Statue of Liberty. I'll write about the museum in a separate story this month.

BROADWAY

One side of the pandemic — and certainly the theaters don't share this view — is that prices to Broadway shows have come down considerably from what they were two years ago. I paid \$59 (plus fees) for a mezzanine seat in the St. James Theater to see "American Utopia," the show starring former Talking Heads frontman David Byrne singing and dancing and waxing philosophical on a variety of liberal topics. He was joined by 11 bandmates,

all barefoot and donning gray suits, in what I would characterize as a theatrical concert. It was terrific.

Also playing in New York right now: "Wicked," "Diana," "Hamilton," "Aladdin," "Moulin Rouge! The Musical," "To Kill a Mockingbird," and many, many others.

No doubt prices will go up with the return of tourists, who make up about two-thirds of Broadway show-goers. In the meantime, my friends in New York are taking full advantage of the opportunity to see so many excellent shows at reasonable prices. Tourists, of course, can take advantage too. (For information: broadway.com.)

THE GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

I've been to many art museums in New York over the years but never this one, and I'm not sure why, given my interest in architect Frank Lloyd Wright. My brother and sister-in-law, in New York for the month visiting their son, discovered that the Guggenheim is free one Saturday per

month — the Saturday of my visit (the next free Saturday is Dec. 4; you can reserve tickets 48 hours in advance at guggenheim.org). The museum is perhaps best known for its dramatic cylindrical shape, wider at the top than the bottom, with a spiraling interior ramp showcasing art on its curving wall.

Much of the exhibit space is devoted to rotating special shows, including, during my visit, a terrific showcase of the work of Russian painter Vasily Kandinsky. Also of interest: "Gillian Wearing: Wearing Masks," featuring the provocative works of English conceptual artist Gillian Wearing, exploring issues of identity through photographs, videos, sculptures and paintings.

A portion of the museum's impressive permanent collection is on display as well, in the Thannhauser Wing, including works by Degas, Manet, Van Gogh and Picasso.

As impressed as I was by the art, I was just as intrigued by the architecture, from the building's soaring rooftop skylight to the tiny, single-person restrooms interspersed throughout. Indeed, one of the criticisms of the building when it first opened in 1959 was that the architecture would detract from the art. Judging from my experience, that seems a fair concern.

After the Guggenheim, we walked south, through Central Park, which was bustling on this beautiful Saturday, past model-sailboat racing at Conservatory Water pond, a birthday party on the green and a lone saxophonist belting out reverberating tunes beneath a pedestrian bridge.

I also spent time on the High Line, the 1.5-mile linear park built atop an elevated railroad line on Manhattan's west side, and meandered through Bryant Park, recently transformed into its holiday Winter Village, with ice skating, shopping and dining.

We walked through Rockefeller Center, where a toy soldier was beckoning passersby into FAO Schwarz, and where, in a few weeks, a giant Christmas tree will attract a large crowd of holiday revelers.

Everything looked almost back to normal in New York City. In some ways, it was even better.