

An Eclectic Weekend in New York – ...the new Whitney Museum, Midtown Luxury, the Meatpacking District, Ping Pong, a Ferry, a Diner and more

NEW YORK IS A CITY OF MILLIONS....as in countless little errors and missteps just getting around, just being a clunky, wrong-footed tourist in a huge, sprawling city. Big cities that house and entertain millions mean leaving the small city familiarity and sure footedness of home.

So a recent trip to New York meant a long delayed visit and some rusty big city travel skills being tested. But first there's the airport to contend with. So from demure Sarasota I landed in Lady Liberty's hefty lap way out there in Queens where JFK Airport resides.

JFK is a massive, somewhat improved mess. The JetBlue terminal, fortunately, was updated and reopened in 2014, while a good part of the airport is an add-on to an add-on, as only big cities can do. The massive growth of the airport can be seen as you walk to the exit and see the 1962 Eero Saarinen-designed original TWA Terminal, a tiny bird of a structure now dwarfed by albatrosses of additions.

So you amble about following easy signage and decide to try the bargain way into the city since the airport really wants you to try it. JFK has added the AirTrain that escorts you off property to a depot of sorts where you decide one of city life's many questions: subway or train?

The reason for being at this depot is to test the idea of going cab-free (shudder) since a trek to midtown now goes for \$52 and that's before tolls and tip make it more like \$70.

After a brief loss of direction, and the good fortune of finding a young couple also going to midtown, I chose the subway. With people hurtling at you left and right, you tense up to punch in for your metro card with a long line of anxious travelers from all over the world standing behind you. To the fellow from China: I'm so sorry I couldn't help you get to Brighton Beach.

After a meandering path, an elevator, steps and an escalator (I think), I arrived at the subway along with a mass of humanity. Many have said how New York has changed in one perceptible way since 9/11: people are pleasant, even helpful. I asked 4 different people what stop I should get off on and got 4 different answers, but the thoughtfulness was appreciated.

After I emerged from the ground I was amazed, amazed that a soft serve ice cream cone was \$4 while a piece of real designer jewelry, piled high in a cart like boxes of Ivory soap, we're going for only \$5—and just a stone's throw from Fifth Avenue! What a deal and some things about New York never change.

Heading south on Fifth Avenue, past those familiar landmarks of God and State (St. Patrick's and Saks), I made a right turn on to 44th and found the Hotel Sofitel New York. My other experience with the Sofitel line was in Philadelphia when they first opened just off Rittenhouse Square in a building that was once the Philadelphia Stock Exchange. I remember it well by the black-lacquered color scheme and that the property had an Asian touch to its decor.

Sofitel is known as a business hotel, but of course anyone who wants more than a bit of polish and less of the Disney or cookie cutter effect will appreciate its fine lines and crisp service. Sofitel New York is akin to an Armani suit—it's tailored and trim, in shades of olive and tan in a classic tweed or houndstooth and with a decided non-flashy look. It's subtle, yet easy on the eyes and spirit—more like an easy chair that is comfy, but still looks brand new.

Once in the hotel, you're frequently greeted by friendly staff with a warm "bonjour" as the company is French. Sofitel opened its first property in Strasbourg in 1964. Its first overseas opening (in Minneapolis) was in 1974. In 1995, Sofitel had 100 hotels in 40 countries. Two years later, Sofitel joined the Accor Group, founded in 1983 and in 2000, opened properties in Philadelphia and New York. In 2008, Sofitel became its own unit in the Accor group with 120 Hotels worldwide.

Along with its tailored lines, the hotel has an Art Deco feel best seen in the romantic bar and restaurant named Gaby. The lobby area is spacious and elegant and perfect for afternoon tea or a rest or a place to meet friends. There's a very handy touch screen map to help you find your way, but the concierge, who managed to get some lucky guest tickets to the musical "Hamilton" was skillful and very friendly.

Cabs plod along 44th Street making it quiet, but 5th Avenue and its feast for the eyes is just 5 minutes away, and that means just a short walk to Rockefeller Center, St. Patrick's and shopping galore. Enjoy dinner at their restaurant Gaby which features—you guessed it—French cuisine. The hotel has 398 rooms on 30 floors including 52 suites and one presidential suite all featuring Sofitel's own sleep system

called the "SoBed." It was very nice and delivered great sleep.

As for the rooms, opt for a suite if you can. You'll feel like you have your own New York walk-up with a sitting area, bedroom and generous bath with separate shower and tub. Oh and can't let this detail go unmentioned: Hermès toiletries are included. Nice.

If you really want to splash out, opt for the room with a terrace and enjoy the stunning night sky as you watch New York City wind down from work and light up for fun and play. It's stunning and yes costs a bit more, but really, can you put a price on having the New York skyline just outside your bedroom door?

Here are some fun things to do if you're on a weekend jaunt in New York City (that is, if you decide to come out of your plush Sofitel room). It's an eclectic itinerary that includes, among other things, modern art, ping pong, a diner and a ferry.

A Museum Re-Emerges

What a difference 63 blocks from the upper east side to the lower west side can make. With the smell of gentrification in the air, it was off to the Meatpacking District—specifically Gansevoort Street — a cozy jumble of Diane Von Furstenberg type stores alongside old meatpacking warehouses, some still in use. It's also where you'll find the High Line, that oxygen generator in the sky that comes to a halt just about at the Whitney's front door.

The glass framed Whitney is bounded on one side by the Hudson River and the rest by the bustle and jive of this burgeoning, long forgotten part of lower, west side New York.

Interestingly, the Whitney had its first home in Greenwich Village in 1914, when Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney established what was then called the Whitney Studio. There she presented exhibitions by living American artists whose work had been disregarded by the traditional academies. Whitney's advocacy on behalf of living American artists was critical. In the early 1900s, artists with new ideas found it nearly impossible to exhibit or sell their work in the U.S. Recognizing these obstacles, Whitney began purchasing and showing their work, making her the leading patron of American art from 1907 until her death in 1942.

By 1929 she had more than 500 works, which she offered with an endowment to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. When the offer was refused (tsk tsk MoMa), she set up her own museum, one with a new and radically different mandate: to focus exclusively on the art and artists of this country. Founded in 1930, The Whitney opened on West Eighth Street in Greenwich Village. (The Museum then would hopscotch twice: first to West 54th Street in 1954 and then to the Marcel Breuer-designed building on Madison Avenue at 75th Street, which opened in 1966.)

At the latest incarnation of the Whitney, you can easily make a near day of it with a quick commute if staying in midtown or the theatre district area. The museum beckons you to stay with its many outdoor spaces (as well as galleries) spanned over 8 floors. The glass-wrapped ground floor has a gallery (free to enter), bookstore and restaurant that make you feel you're right on the street – which, in reality, you are.

Heading up on one of the elevators (themselves works of art) there are 8 floors of plain white walls. On each floor you can step out into an open-air deck and see another masterpiece: the New York skyline. Renzo Piano, the museum's architect, made the Whitney a partner with the environment, not a dark, enclosed temple. I enjoyed looking at the jumble of rooftops from the 40s, 50s, 60s all the way to contemporary glass and steel creations. How appropriate to see paneled water towers right out of an Edward Hopper painting, an artist whose work the Whitney has in abundance including his "Early Sunday Morning" painted in 1930.

The new building with its 50,000 square feet of indoor galleries and 13,000 square feet of outdoor exhibition space and terraces is street savvy and street smart. The building's profile reminded me of a cruise ship with its stacked, staggered floors. Having a chance to walk outside on every floor is a really unique experience.

Located on the Museum's ground floor, Untitled is the new fine dining restaurant from Danny Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group, helmed by Chef Michael Anthony of Gramercy Tavern and Chef de Cuisine Suzanne Cupps. The eighth floor Studio Cafe features toasts, soups, salads, and other light fare. Back out on the street, there are loads of aiming-to-please cafés and bistros everywhere.



The Whitney Museum of American Art



Hotel Sofitel New York



Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty are a 20-minute subway ride away. Plus there's Wall Street, the Skyscraper Museum, the Museum of Jewish Heritage and the National Museum of the American Indian. My advice to the traveler though, is only one museum per day. And never tackle a behemoth like the Met in one visit. The Whitney, by contrast, is bite-sized or make that right-sized and not overwhelming

The Whitney Museum of American Art 99 Gansevoort Street, New York

To January 17, 2016: Archibald John Motley Jr. (1891–1981), a bold and highly original modernist and one of the great visual chroniclers of twentieth-century American life. He first came to prominence in the 1920s during the early days of the Harlem Renaissance—the cultural flowering of African American art, music, and literature that extended beyond the New York neighborhood of its name to other cities, notably Chicago, where Motley spent most of his life.

A Green Phenomenon



The High Line is New York City's newest and most unique public park. Located 30 feet above street level on a 1930s freight railway, the High Line runs from Gansevoort Street in the Meatpacking District to 34th Street in Clinton/Hell's Kitchen. It features an integrated landscape combining meandering concrete pathways with naturalistic plantings.

Make it a part of your visit to the Whitney and view with bemused interest the site of New Yorkers and visitors walking amongst living plants and enjoying every minute of it.

You Go for the View and the Price is Right, too

The Staten Island Ferry is one of the last remaining vestiges of an entire ferry system in New York City that transported people between Manhattan and its future boroughs long before any bridges were built. Today the Staten Island Ferry provides 22 million people a year (70,000 passengers a day not including weekend days) with ferry service between St. George on Staten Island and Whitehall Street in lower Manhattan. The ferry is the only non-vehicular mode of transportation between Staten Island and Manhattan.



The 5 mile, 25 minute ride provides a majestic view of New York Harbor and a no-hassle, even romantic, boat ride, for free. From the deck of the ferry you will have a perfect view of The Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. You'll see the skyscrapers and bridges of Lower Manhattan receding as you pull away and coming into focus again as you return.

Yes, Ping Pong

A pink pong emporium is what I call it, but you might say wha? Well, any attraction created by Susan Sarandon is going to get my attention. Turns out she loves the indoor paddle sport and opened SPiN six years ago in New York. It's proven quite popular and now there other SPiNs in Toronto, Los Angeles, Brussels, Chicago and San Francisco.



▲ SPiN creator, ping pong maven and astounding actress Susan Sarandon
◀ No basement rec room with a ping pong table ever looked like this

SPiN is underground and artfully decorated in the way we all wish we could have had rec rooms decorated. Colorful tables, lots of sofas and chairs, wall art and great finger food. There are 17 ping-pong courts (not tables), a full bar, restaurant – even a pro shop. All levels of players welcome. This is fun.

SPiN New York
48 East 23rd Street, New York • www.newyork.wearespin.com

Dining Options

Gaby at Hotel Sofitel

Elegant bar food — hummus, French cheese plates, croque monsieur. Beautiful space to nibble and nosh after a busy day walking New York. In the restaurant: Duck breast, Iceland cod, Angus filet mignon, Grilled lamb chop and lots more.

Location: 44 West 45th Street.



L'Entrecôte



As for dinner, the wish was for a pretty space and a steak. Oh, and good wine. By chance the choice was L'Entrecôte, a French bistro steak house on the upper east side. It has that charming bistro look with the wood built-ins around the room, women in traditional black uniforms serving, curtains in the window, etc.

You sit down and then wonder why there is no menu. That's because all they offer is steak and frites (French fries). So you order your steak and

you get as many servings as you wish as well as that lovely pesto-like sauce (if you like) ladled over your fries and steak. The meal starts with a flavorful salad with mustard vinaigrette complemented by crisp, I have to say, real French bread. They have a good wine selection, nice service and a very yummy steak all in a romantic setting. In addition to the New York location, they have others in Paris and three in London. Oh yes, one other quirk – no reservations, but twice there and no problems getting a table.

Location: 590 Lexington Ave (Corner of 52nd street).

Big Daddy's

Sure, it's geared towards kids – especially the ones who grew up glued to the TV in the 60s and who ate anything piled high on pink or teal dishes. This is a fun place and wow, those tater tots...still thinking about them. Did I mention this was on the Upper East Side AND that a hearty breakfast only costs @ \$12? Offerings include Pancakes (\$12), waffles made with challah (\$14), eggs, toast and tater tots (\$10), burgers, dogs (Usinger's from Milwaukee), shakes, cream-sicles, banana splits—you know, all that good stuff we gave up years ago.

Very affordable, large portions, really nice service and cute interior.

Location: 1598 Second Ave.



Getting to New York City

It was actually possible to fly from Sarasota to New York nonstop and not cost a fortune. Yep. I haven't flown from Sarasota in two decades and love its simplicity, directness and, well, lack of forced march like you get in places like Atlanta and Newark. Ten minutes from my house and about as long from the front entrance to the JetBlue gate.

You can fly to New York in just over 2 hours and sit on leather seats and get snacks and drinks and free entertainment and wifi. Oh and it gets even better, I pulled it off for \$200.

STORY: Louise Bruderle