



TAKE A BITE OF THE BIG APPLE

By Dan Schlossberg

Though politicians might say otherwise, New York is the real capital of the United States. Everything is bigger, better, and faster -- regulating the pulse of the nation at a frenetic pace that seldom stops.

Just ask George Steinbrenner, who corrals quality players for the Yankees the way kids collect baseball cards. Thanks to his latest maneuvers, Alex Rodriguez may join one-time rival Derek Jeter in American Express commercials.

The Yanks get an A+ for landing A-Rod, especially since the arch-rival Red Sox considered the Feb. 14 swap another Valentine's Day Massacre. Not since the 1920 sale of Babe Ruth from Boston to New York has the Red Sox Nation been so humiliated.

Despite its history, heritage, and hallowed institutions, Boston can't hold a candle to Manhattan. But neither can anyone else.

As Carrie Bradshaw realized during her week-long exile in Paris, New York has the best restaurants, best theaters, best museums, and the best baseball team on the planet. It also has a network of land, sea, and subterranean transit systems that make drivers look dumb and dumber.

Walking is a good way to get around -- especially in midtown Manhattan, smallest of the five boroughs. It measures only 13.4 miles long and is never more than 2.3 miles wide, embracing a total territory of 22.7 square miles.

Because every square mile has a myriad of attractions, proper planning is a must.

Manhattan is a city of neighborhoods, from Little Italy to Chinatown. It's easier to find Irish pubs, kosher delis, or Indian enclaves than it is to find a cab driver who speaks English. Taking a general city highlights tour -- where somebody else does the driving -- provides an excellent overview and lets visitors know where they'd like to linger later.

There are tours of every length and description, from boat rides to Broadway. In addition to tours of NBC and CNN studios, there are on-location tours to such popular TV show sites as Seinfeld, Friends, Law & Order, and Sex and the City. And Kenny Kramer, the real-life inspiration for Seinfeld's wacky neighbor, even hosts something called "Kramer's Reality Tour."

Tickets for live television, from Good Morning, America to Saturday Night Live, are free but hard to get. There are occasional standby tickets to David Letterman but most are distributed by mail.

Discounted show tickets, especially for Wednesday matinees, may be purchased daily from TKTS booths at Times Square or the South Street Seaport.

There's a wide variety of upcoming shows, including the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, at Madison Square Garden March 18-April 11; the Sakura Matsuri Cherry Blossom Festival, at Brooklyn Botanical Garden May 1-2; and the Tribeca Film Festival, organized by resident actor Robert DeNiro, May 1-9.

On July 11, The New York Historical Society marks the bicentennial of Alexander Hamilton's death in a duel with Vice President Aaron Burr, while Republicans gather for the coronation of George W. Bush, in pursuit of a second term, at Madison Square Garden Aug. 30-Sept. 2.

Politicians who haven't paid attention to the city might not recognize the skyline. Though the World Trade Center was destroyed by Arab terrorists on Sept. 11, 2001, there are many new additions. The Skyscraper Museum opens in April at the Battery Park Ritz-Carlton, the 80-story towers of the Time Warner Center are opening at Columbus Circle, and the Alvin Ailey American Theater plans a September debut for the nation's largest facility

totally devoted to dance.

At 55th and Ninth, it's only a block from the real-life, soup emporium that won an Emmy for Seinfeld and a nickname for its cantankerous owner ("the Soup Nazi").

City cabbies can also be cantankerous, especially for out-of-towners.

Learning the local language is a good idea: "the City" means Manhattan but "the Village" is Greenwich Village, once a bastion of Beatnik culture and Vietnam protest but now a Mecca for artists, writers, poets, and folk-singers who frequent Washington Square Park at the foot of Fifth Avenue. While NYU students study under the spring sun, chess-players contemplate their next moves near the famous arch, designed by Stanford White.

Though minutes from midtown by subway, the Village seems a world apart. Its sidewalk cafes, bistros, and off-Broadway plays are cheaper, more casual, and often more creative alternatives. One of them, the Sullivan Street Playhouse, housed "The Fantasticks," a show that only recently ended a run of 30-plus years.

Off-Broadway theaters have fewer than 300 seats and often accommodate experimental works or revivals. By contrast, the city's four music Meccas (Carnegie Hall, Town Hall, Avery Fisher Hall, and City Center) all have at least 1,000 seats.

Though numerous Broadway theaters also have the benefit of size, tickets to top shows generally expensive and tough to get -- even if booked three to 12 months in advance.

Tickets to top sporting events, such as the annual baseball interleague series between the Mets and Yankees, are also hard to find. But brokers always have tickets to that annual grudge match, which culminated in a Subway Series four years ago.

Other hot sports tickets feature the basketball Knicks and hockey Rangers, who share Madison Square Garden, and the football Giants and Jets, whose home turf lies across the Hudson in New Jersey's Meadowlands. Also in Jersey are the Nets, an NBA team that won 13 straight under a new coach this winter, and the Devils, a solid hockey team whose move east proved it's possible to get the puck out of here. A third hockey team, the New York Islanders, is based in Long Island's Nassau County.

Yankee Stadium, opened in 1923, is a monument steeped in history but living on life-support. Former Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a rabid Yankee fan, agrees with George Steinbrenner that the team needs a state-of-the-art facility with better access.

The Mets, Shea Stadium tenants since 1964, have already proposed plans to build and occupy a replica of Ebbets Field, legendary home of the Brooklyn Dodgers, near their present Queens location, a tape-measure homer from the late-summer U.S. Open tennis tournament.

No matter where they play, New York sports teams will always compete for players, publicity, and headline space on tabloid back-pages. And they will never cease to add to the city's immense appeal.

That appeal increased dramatically in recent years with steep declines in crime, especially in the once-blighted Times Square area. Gone are the porn shops, con artists, pickpockets, and squeegee men who intimidated drivers trapped in traffic.

Tourists, no longer wary of unpleasant encounters, come more often and stay longer.

Crowds are still a problem in New York, even without a World Series or national political convention in town. But the city somehow finds room for 33 million visitors, eight million residents, and several million commuters who make Rush Hour an adventure.

The numbers are mind-boggling: people maneuver around town in 12,000 taxis, 6000 subway cars, 3,700 buses, and enough ferries to bring 85,000 commuters across the Hudson River daily.

Water has always been a major player in the New York experience. With 578 miles of waterfront, the city is home to the world's busiest port and a network of bridges and tunnels. Both the Brooklyn Bridge, erected in 1883, and the Holland Tunnel, finished in 1927, were considered engineering marvels of their day, but the application of modern technology is more evident at Verrazano Narrows, site of the world's second-longest single-span bridge.

Boats of all sizes, shapes, and descriptions -- including a fleet of ocean-going passenger ships -- ply New York waters.

Wise World Series fans avoided the highway crush last fall by taking a 90-minute New York

Waterway ferry that sailed down the Hudson toward the Statue of Liberty, skirted Battery Park, slipped under the sedate Brooklyn Bridge on the East River, then turned northwest on the Harlem River before docking near Yankee Stadium.

When warm weather permits, New York Waterway also runs cruises up the Hudson to Bear Mountain, Sleepy Hollow, and Kykuit, once the Rockefeller family home. The 16-year-old company also operates numerous commuter routes daily.

Skyline views are the top attraction on the lunch, brunch, and dinner cruises of the three-decked Spirit of New York, a sleek sightseeing vessel that combines cuisine, cruising, and 30-minute performances staged by singing waiters and waitresses.

The Spirit of New York departs from Chelsea Piers, converted from a quartet of decaying docks into a 30-acre sports village with skating rinks, bowling, batting cages, golf driving ranges, restaurants, conference facilities, and marina. Waterfront weddings are sometimes held in Pier 60.

The Staten Island Ferry, in continuous service since 1905, links Battery Park to Staten Island, where an exhibit of ferry memorabilia graces the St. George Terminal.

The ferry's New York terminal is located in Battery Park City, on the southern tip of Manhattan Island. Once the site of a fort built by 17th century Dutch settlers, it is now a 25-acre waterfront park featuring a mile-and-a-half esplanade lined with bridges, walkways, and sculptures by prominent artists.

Battery Park is also the home of the new Museum of Jewish Heritage, a three-story hexagonal structure designed to resemble a Star of David. The first floor is devoted to the thriving European Jewish community before the Holocaust. The second floor uses artifacts, photographs, and video testimony to trace the evolution of the genocide, while top floor is devoted to the recovery, particularly in the United States.

By deliberate design, the windows of the museum's observatory face the Statue of Liberty, a gift from French schoolchildren in 1884, and Ellis Island, the main entry point for millions of immigrants from 1892-1924. The latter is now a museum.

At the South Street Seaport, a 12-block historic area on the east side of Lower Manhattan, historic ships and landmark buildings have been lovingly restored, creating the city's most unique waterfront environment. Street performers, vendors, and cafes converge in a colorful Old New York atmosphere near the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Similar conditions, and better views, are the hallmark of DUMBO, an acronym that stands for Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass. Cobblestone streets contain remnants of streetcar lines while riverfront parks provide photogenic views of the ancient Brooklyn Bridge fronting Manhattan's modern steel structures.

One of those structures, the Empire State Building, is the city's most visible symbol.

An Art Deco structure erected in 1931, it remains one of the world's tallest office buildings -- as well as a romantic meeting place favored by Hollywood (see Sleepless in Seattle). When the top 30 floors are illuminated for various holidays, visitors scan the sides to see where King Kong clinged.

The Empire State stretches 1,454 feet high, providing an 80-mile vista for visitors, and embraces two million square feet of office space. But nothing that happens inside matches the pace of Wall Street, the world's financial center. Fortunes are made and lost daily at the New York Stock Exchange, where anxiety is the rule rather than the exception.

It seems ironic that Wall Street took its name from the wooden wall Dutch settlers erected in 1653 to ward off would-be invaders. Today, the city is wide open.

That's especially true in Central Park, an 840-acre enclave of wooded grounds and lakes in the heart of the city. A virtual urban oasis, the park boasts buggy rides, ball fields, boats, and occasional concerts by nationally-known entertainers.

Biking, hiking, jogging, and horseback riding are favorite pastimes in the park, which also houses an extensive zoo.

Central Park borders the American Museum of Natural History, the city's most popular cultural attraction. The museum is known for its extensive fossil displays -- especially relating to dinosaurs and extinct species.

Science films in the museum's IMAX theater now compete for attention with the new Hall of

Earth, the first of a two-stage planetarium re-opening. Visitors experience such extreme natural conditions as hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanoes, and tsunamis.

The action starts early at Rockefeller Center, where crowds of out-of-towners cram the streets outside NBC Studios to get a few minutes of fleeting fame during the morning Today show. They stand a stone's throw from the sunken skating rink that is also the home, in season, of the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree.

Radio City, a 5,000-seat Art Deco edifice known for the dancing Rockettes, is directly across the street. A \$30 million renovation has restored its original grandeur.

Such restoration often works wonders: once-grimy Grand Central Station, one of New York's two main rail terminals, now glitters with the elegance of its original Beaux Arts design. Its \$196 million facelift has made the 1913 structure shine again -- from the famous Constellation ceiling to the chandeliers, marble balusters, and clerestory windows on the main concourse. More than 100 new retail stores, plus four restaurants perched in the corners of the concourse, have made Grand Central a prominent meeting place.

Weddings, funerals, and holiday services often pack St. Patrick's Cathedral, a Fifth Avenue landmark since 1879, to its full capacity of 2,400. With its 330-foot twin spires and 14th-century Gothic style, St. Patrick's stands out on a street of tony shops and expensive restaurants.

At the United Nations, the nations of the world are neighbors. The distinctive Secretariat and domed General Assembly building dominate the East River waterfront between 42nd and 48th Streets.

The postwar arrival of the UN, plus other pivotal events in the city's history, are traced at the Museum of the City of New York, an uptown institution that also offers escorted walking tours. It's not far from the Jewish Museum, the world's largest Jewish museum outside Israel.

The circular Guggenheim Museum, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, features paintings that hang along a spiral walkway and quiet reflecting ponds on the main level.

Other quiet places to escape the midtown tumult are the 250-acre New York Botanical Garden and nearby Bronx Zoo, where people "caged" in monorail trains observe exotic animals living in large outdoor habitats.

Man-made attractions also draw considerable attention in the city. The Intrepid, a World War II aircraft carrier that also saw service in Vietnam, is a floating sea, air, and space museum berthed on the Hudson waterfront. Not far away is the Jacob Javits Convention Center, scene of annual boat, auto, and travel shows.

New York is full of lesser-known museums -- covering almost any imaginable subject. There are police, fire, and transit museums, an African-American wax museum, and an Abigail Adams Smith museum, in a carriage house that once belonged to the daughter of President John Adams, that showcases the decorative arts of the 1820s.

There's even a museum dedicated to Antonio Meucci, who filed a patent for the telephone five years before Alexander Graham Bell.

New Yorkers consider telephone conversation an art-form, especially now that cell-phones are universal. But they also consider inspection of world-class art a spectator sport.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art houses collections of the classics, but the exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art reflect more recent styles. The latter museum has relocated to Long Island City, just across the East River in Queens, pending completion of expansion at its 53rd Street home.

The largest of New York's five boroughs, Queens is almost as large as Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island combined. The most diverse 120 square miles on earth, its 2,229,379 residents include large enclaves of Greeks, Indians, Chinese, Irish, South Americans, and more. Once the center of the silent film industry, Queens has also hosted two World's Fairs. The 380-ton Unisphere, the stainless-steel symbol of the 1964 fair, still towers 140 feet high over the 1964 fair site.

Sport is often king in Queens, home of the Mets, the Aqueduct and Belmont race tracks, and the National Tennis Center, site of the U.S.

The streets of New York are also attractions: sharp-eyed visitors can spot Hollywood stars, athletes, political leaders, visiting dignitaries, and -- according to the local visitors and convention bureau -- any of 7,300 professional models.

From Broadway to baseball, New York demands great performances. The New York

Philharmonic is one of many cultural icons at Lincoln Center, also the home of the Metropolitan Opera and The Juilliard School of Music. Countless careers were made or broken at Carnegie Hall.

When the New York Knicks aren't playing basketball in Madison Square Garden, native New Yorker Billy Joel might be singing there.

Woody Allen, another well-known local, prefers to do his work on the streets. Almost all of Allen's movies are New York stories filmed on location. The blend of skyscrapers, parks, and water locations has turned the city into Hollywood East, with some 200 films shot there annually.

Visitors who miss Allen on the street can catch him close up at Michael's Pub, where he plays his clarinet on Monday nights.

Nor is Jerry Seinfeld invisible: he holds box seats at Shea Stadium, home of the Mets. Billy Crystal, another comic who loves baseball, is partial to the Yankees, who always seem to have some celebrity -- even pint-sized Danny DeVito -- throwing out the first pitch.

There's no need to worry when warm weather turns wet: the city is an ongoing film festival, with free fare at most of the New York Public Library's 84 branches.

The Museum of Television & Radio, which exists entirely for viewing and listening. It has a computerized library of 60,000 shows, including TV movies, available for screening on 96 consoles, each accommodating four people.

The American Museum of the Moving Image, not far from Shea Stadium in Queens, offers 300 programs a year, while the Queens Museum of Art shows Saturday afternoon movies relating to current exhibits.

There's a three-week film festival every fall, plus regular year-round cinema programs at the Film Forum, Angelika Film Center, Whitey Museum of American Art, 92nd Street Y, Film Society of Lincoln Center, and Brooklyn Academy of Music.

The best movie about the city itself is "Across the Sea of Time," a 3D presentation on the giant screen of the IMAX theater at Broadway & 68th Street. Inside the Empire State Building is another visual experience: two big-screen flight-simulator theaters that feature the sight of a flight over city landmarks plus the feeling of turbulence such a trip might entail. The simulated ride on Coney Island's Cyclone coaster -- Brooklyn's biggest attraction since the departure of the Dodgers -- seems all too vivid.

It would take months for an out-of-towner to see the whole city. There are 17,000 restaurants, 400 art galleries, 200 skyscrapers, 150 museums, and 69 historic districts. The city has 5,000 annual street fairs and block parties, not to mention parades for ethnic, religious, and political groups of every persuasion.

The New York City Marathon, held every fall, draws 28,000 runners and two million spectators. New Yorkers even turn out in droves (1.5 million) for the Halloween Parade, the only parade anywhere that takes place after dark.

Annual attendance figures at New York tourist spots make George Steinbrenner green with envy. Central Park attracts 15 million people per year, while the South Street Seaport draws 10 million and the Metropolitan Museum of Art lures 4.6 million. Total attendance at nightclub and music venues exceeds 25 million.

Everywhere visitors look, the diversity is staggering. Restaurants alone range from sidewalk cafes to intimate clubs with storied histories.

While Tavern on the Green, the famous Central Park landmark, is surrounded by domed windows and glittering lights that suggest a fairyland atmosphere, the "21" Club is a one-time speakeasy where top executives and power brokers huddle under a ceiling draped with model trucks, toys, and sports memorabilia donated by famous patrons. Steinbrenner is a frequent guest.

The view's the thing at the Boathouse Cafe, also in Central Park, and at The Water's Edge, which features a wood-burning fireplace and mellow piano music.

There are themed restaurants, from Mars 2112 to the Motown Cafe, and themed events, including an annual February contest that Ben's Kosher Delicatessen calls "the Super Bowl of matzoh ball eating."

Baseball memorabilia meets the eye at Mickey Mantle's, patrons dine on actual studio sets at Television City, and three-dozen sets of twins wait tables at Twins, which adheres to the belief that things come better in pairs.

The staff performs at Ellen's Stardust Diner, a 50s throwback on Times Square.

Italian seafood stands and restaurants line the shores of City Island, an actual fishing village

within the city limits (near the Throgs Neck Bridge in the Bronx). The Astors and Vanderbilts once moored their yachts there.

The Italian influence extends to Arthur Avenue, where patrons of Dominick's don't see menus or prices. They tell waiters what they want, then pay what they're told.

Fraunces Tavern, where George Washington bid farewell to the victorious Colonial Army, has served food and drink since 1762 -- less than 150 years after Dutch governor Peter Minuit traded \$24 worth of trinkets to the local Indians for Manhattan island. Neither the Yankees nor Mets have ever made such a good trade -- though the 1920 signing of Babe Ruth comes close.

To help accommodate a flood of annual visitors surging past 33 million, the city will add 5,000 new hotel rooms -- bringing its total to 65,000 -- by the end of next year. With 237 miles of subway lines and 210 bus routes, the city's \$1.50 transit fare seems a much better investment than taxi fare or car rental costs.

LaGuardia is the closest airport to midtown but visitors will find faster connections from New Jersey's Newark International. Traffic to and from John F. Kennedy Airport may have inspired Victor Borge, who said travelers should fly to the airport and take a taxi between cities. But getting there is worth the wait.

For additional information, contact New York & Company (formerly the New York Convention & Visitors Bureau), 810 Seventh Avenue, NY, NY 10019 (Tel. 800-NYC-VISIT or 212-397-8222, Fax 212-582-8765, www.nycvisit.com).