

The Green Heart of the Big Apple: Central Park in New York City

by Cheryl Pendry, *PassPorter Featured Columnist*

Considering that New York's Central Park covers more than 800 acres, you'd think it's a place that's hard to miss. You'd be wrong.

My first visit to the Big Apple was back in 1987 with my parents, when we did most of the main tourist attractions. I then returned on my own about a decade later, commuting on Amtrak from Philadelphia, where I was staying with my friend. I made it to a few more attractions that time. My third visit was in 1999 on our honeymoon, when I was keen to show my new husband some of the wonders that the city offered that I'd enjoyed on my previous visits. It's probably fair to say, on that particular stay, we didn't do much that was new to me. However, on none of those three visits did I make it to Central Park. To give you an idea, I think the closest I ever got was seeing Rockefeller Center and even that's a few blocks south of the park.

It was after a friend of mine visited Central Park on a trip to New York and posted her photos that I realized I had to go. It was such a beautiful place and I couldn't believe how much there was to see and do there. Figures like 843 acres just mean nothing to you, until you actually see images of the park for yourself. So a mad idea came into my head. As part of our tour of the States, which was already taking in Walt Disney World in Florida, Chicago, Disneyland in California, and Las Vegas, perhaps we could make New York our very first stop? Mad as it sounded, it worked, because the airfares going into New York were much cheaper than going into Orlando, so I worked it all out and gave us just over 24 hours back in the Big Apple, with the first and most important stop to be Central Park.

I stuck with the promise I made to myself and we did head there first, even managing to bypass the wonderful World of Disney Store. (We would be returning there later, which made that a bit easier!) Then we were at the entrance to the park and suddenly all the skyscrapers give way to a green area in front of you. Admittedly, it's impossible to see much of it, as it's full of trees, but you could instantly see the difference from the previous blocks, all crammed with shops, hotels and restaurants, with no space in between them.

Almost as soon as we entered the park, the noise of the city started to lessen, which amazed me. Sure, I was expecting it to be a bit quieter, but I never thought that there'd be such an instant difference in the noise levels.

We quickly came upon the Central Park Zoo, which looked wonderful and I wish we'd had enough time to explore it, as from what we could see of it, it looked like the animals had some lovely habitats. In fact, I was impressed that we could see some of the animals as we walked through the park. It was a nice touch and didn't hurt their marketing, as it certainly made me want to go in! For those who do want to visit, one of the main attractions here are the polar bears, Ida and Gus. Other popular creatures include the sea lions, red pandas, penguins, and snow leopards.

It's a very pleasant walk to the [Bethesda Fountain and Terrace](#), which was next on my list of things to see. Be warned though, it's very easy to become disorientated as soon as you get into the park. We were with a native New Yorker and all of us struggled to get our bearings to begin with. I think it's got something to do with suddenly being away from the familiar grid layout of the city.

The Bethesda Fountain was dedicated in 1873 and the statue at the top of the fountain is called Angel of the Waters. It was created to mark the opening of the Croton aqueduct system in 1842, which brought pure water into New York for the first time. Once again, it was a very calming place to be and very beautiful, especially as we were lucky enough to be there in the fall, with some of the trees turning into beautiful gold and red colors. To me, this was exactly how I'd imagined Central Park to be. Perhaps that's not surprising, as I know many, many films have been shot here. I guess that's where the image comes from!

As we walked, we saw the [Loeb Boathouse](#), which dates from the same period as the Bethesda Fountain. I noticed that you could enjoy a meal here and once again wished that we had a bit more time in New York. Sure, it would be a pricey treat, but what a great setting and what lovely views you'd get with your food!

Next on my itinerary I wanted to see the [Hans Christian Andersen statue](#) and, nearby, the statue of [Alice in Wonderland](#) and some of her friends from that story. This is certainly an area that the children enjoy and parents can sit and enjoy the nearby Conservatory Water. Here, you could see the tops of apartment buildings peeping over the trees and I couldn't help but look in admiration at those rooms. How much must they cost? I would imagine they won't come cheap.

Our final stop was to be [Strawberry Fields](#). It's one of those places that I think everyone probably wants to see in Central Park, whether you were a Beatles fan or not. It was a very eerie visit, as the wind picked up considerably just as we got there and it almost felt as if someone knew we were coming. It felt like it was snowing, but with leaves and it was

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something I've never come across before. Although this was obviously created to be a peaceful area and a memorial to John Lennon, the sheer number of visitors here meant it was actually much less peaceful than other areas of the park, which was a shame.

With the wind still blowing, we headed out of the park. Finally, I had set foot into Central Park. A couple of hours only allow you to scratch the surface of this place. There were so many places we hadn't even seen, such as the Wollman Rink, which must be a wonderful sight in the winter when it's packed with ice skaters. Then there's Sheep Meadow, and Tavern on the Green (and I know, from friends, how wonderful, if expensive, the meals are there).

Of course we never made it as far up as Belvedere Castle and, as it's home to the Central Park Learning Center, that must be a fascinating place to visit. Somehow, we even managed to miss the Dairy on our way into the park, which houses the park's Visitor Center.

Maybe one day we'll get back to Central Park and explore some more of those 843 acres and what it has to offer. It's certainly a unique place. I can't think of any other city with such a huge park on prime real estate land. It is truly one of a kind.

[Editor: All the sights mentioned in this article can be found via the [Central Park Conservancy's "virtual park" web page.](#)]

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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