

Getting right to the core of the Big Apple

Going off the well-trod tourist track with a native New Yorker, **ANDY HOBAN** finds a city of hidden parks, lightning bolts, movie locations and rooftop athletes

SEEING the sights of New York is an exhausting concept but seeing the city through a New Yorker's eyes, and exploring its not-so-obvious delights, is a great way to experience it. The Big Apple Greeter is a network of volunteers who live in the city, love it and, most importantly, are dedicated to passing on their knowledge to visitors for free. From the intricacies of the subway system to the street lore of the neighbourhoods, Big Apple Greeter covers the lot with a local who has the stories, the facts and the gossip.

My wife and I and two friends were making our first visit to Manhattan so we wanted a whistlestop tour packed with memories that no one else had.

Laurie Norris, who has lived in New York for 37 years, met us at our hotel, The Benjamin, on East 50th Street, and immediately wowed us by showing us something we never dreamt could exist amid the noise and impersonal bustle that seems to define the city's streets. On East 51st Street

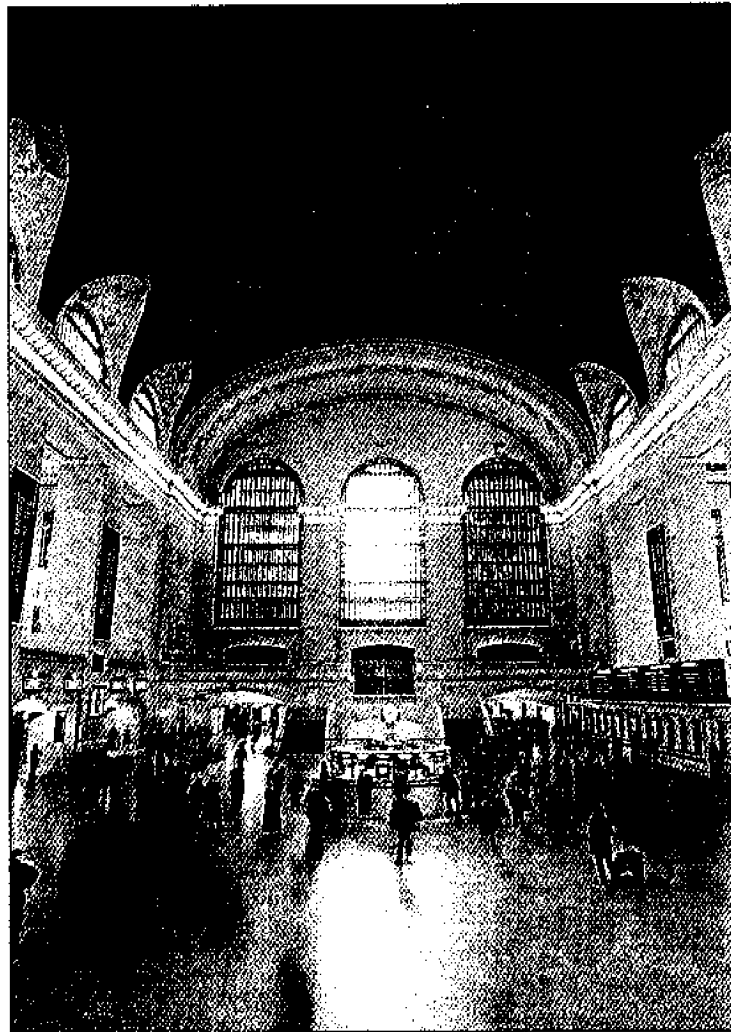
between Second and Third Avenue, through a tiny porchway, is an oasis of calm called Greenacre Park. The word park is a typically American overexaggeration; it's an area roughly the size of two good back gardens but containing shady trees, a waterfall and a small café. Talk about surprise.

From there, our journey of discovery began. At East 51st Street's junction with Lexington Avenue we found ourselves facing the General Electric Building, the first example of what skyscrapers were designed for - not just as office blocks but as the biggest business adverts the world had ever seen. Thus General Electric carved lightning bolts into the brickwork of its headquarters. The concept reached its zenith with the Chrysler building, encased in stainless steel and boasting hubcap motifs and huge gargoyle-like projections similar to car bonnet ornaments.

The series of firsts continued. The Citicorp Building on Lexington and East 51st Street was the first building to rest on a bed of concrete floating on a small ocean of oil so that it could move with the powerful winds that sweep through Manhattan.

THEN, LEVER House, the first commercial building within this district and the first to have the window cleaning cradles that now rock and sway the world over. Finally, we hit the Rockefeller Centre, site of the world's first underground shopping mall. The entrances of long ramps led shoppers on a downhill slope to temptation. Could New York women's renown for shopping abilities all be down to gravity?

From skyscrapers to blockbusters. South down Fifth Avenue we crossed Diamond and Jewellery Way, with street lamps all shaped like diamonds. In Marathon Man, this was the street where Nazi war criminal



BREATHTAKING: The marble magnificence and vaulted ceiling of Grand Central Station

Laurence Olivier tries to flee from a Jewish woman who has recognised him.

By the time we entered Grand Central Terminal, I was in film trivia heaven. It was here that Andy Garcia stopped the runaway baby's pram as he took a shot at one of Al Capone's goons in the Kevin Costner film *The Untouchables*. Yes, the film was set in Chicago but New York's magnificent marble station was the closest thing there was to a metropolitan train station of that era.

Built in 1903 by the millionaire Vanderbilt family, its size, opulence, massive blue vaulted ceiling studded with 2,500 stars forming the constellations and huge opal clock that dominates the main hall, still take the breath away.

Laurie didn't let us linger long. We were soon rattling south on the subway

to Bowling Green station and emerged at the very tip of Manhattan. We stopped for lunch on the promenade at Battery Park - with the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island beckoning us across the sun-dappled bay - but they were delights for another day.

Instead, Laurie walked us north through Battery Park City to the area of Ground Zero. Across the street, in the Winter Garden, exhibits detail designs submitted for buildings to replace the twin towers, culminating in Daniel Libeskind's winning plan, which includes the world's tallest structure. In place of heartbreak, hope and wonder are creeping in.

We ended in Greenwich Village, watching the artistic denizens of New York as they videoed each other and admiring the more athletic students of New York University as they ran laps on the rooftop of the NYU Sports Center on Bleeker Street.

It had been an exhausting, exhilarating and informative day and we bid Laurie farewell with feet throbbing, heads bursting with facts and hearts carrying more than a little of the love she has for the Big Apple.

● GETTING THERE: Thomson America & Canada (0870 403 0653/www.thomson.co.uk) has seven nights' self-catering at new LongAcre House Apartments, Manhattan, from £498pp (six sharing). Price includes flights from London. (Regional departures also available). Benjamin Hotel, 125 East 50th Street, New York. Tel: 212 715 2500. Fax: 212 715 2525. Rooms from £240 to £560 for two-bedroomed suites (some with terraces).

Big Apple Greeters can be requested by calling (from the UK) 001 212 669 8159 or online at www.bigapplegreeter.org at least three weeks before departure, for up to six people (including children). Larger groups should contact NYC & Company on (001) 212 484 1222. Visits are for two to four hours but may be longer if mutually agreed upon.

To order a visitor's information brochure contact the UK office of NYC & Company: 020 7202 6368/www.nycvisit.com.

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