In a New York Minute : Travel Feature

by Sara Varney, PassPorter Message Board Guide (Moderator)

I spent my Fourth of July in New York City this year. It wasn't how I planned to spend it, but it sure was fun! So how did this spur of the moment trip come about?

I learned in late June that I needed to be in New York City on July 5 to take a test. (I'll reveal for what later in the article.) Despite having lived in Manhattan for a brief stint in my twenties and the fact that I now live less than two hours away, I had not actually been to "the city" in over five years. In the interim a lot had happened -- mainly 9/11 and my becoming a mother. I'll admit to a moment of irrational fear about visiting New York again. I decided to face my fear head on and immediately enlisted my best friend to come with me.

But where to begin? After all, there is no PassPorter New York City. (Yet…) We decided to go down on the Fourth of July and spend the night. We also decided that the main focus of our trip would be shopping! Shopping for us means Fifth Avenue, which meant a hotel nearby in Midtown Manhattan. It also meant we didn't want to spend more than $175 a night for the hotel so we'd have more money in the budget for shoes!

I checked out hotel rates and room availability on web sites like Travelocity and Expedia. There seemed to be plenty of rooms available in New York City that night, so I decided to see what kind of deals I could get on Hotwire. Hotwire lets you see the general location and price of a hotel room along with the amenities available, but not the actual name of the hotel - until after you book. The cost of the room is non-refundable and due immediately, so you are taking a bit of a risk. We chose a 4 star hotel in Central Midtown Manhattan that was labeled a "customer favorite," for $169/night. After booking we discovered that our hotel was the Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers, at Seventh Avenue and 53rd St. We would see if $169 was a bargain once we checked in!

Our next decision was how to get to there. You're probably thinking, "But you only live two hours away! Wouldn't you just drive?" Not necessarily. Parking in New York City is VERY expensive and driving is, well, let's just say I'd consider bungee jumping less risky. This left us with hiring a town car, taking a bus or taking the train. A town car turned out to be cost prohibitive - about $400 round trip! Where is Happy Limo when I need them? A bus just didn't fit in with the image of the glamorous Girls' Weekend that we had planned. So the train it was!

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We looked at the Metro North commuter rail schedule online and decided that we would drive to New Haven and take the train from there. The trains were on a holiday schedule for the Fourth so our options were limited, but on the way home there was a train leaving practically every 5 minutes. While you can purchase tickets online, they must be mailed to you and our trip was too soon for that. We purchased them at the station, which is cheaper than buying them on the train.

Finally, the day arrived! My friend arrived bright and early to pick me up and we hit the road. We boarded the train and arrived at Grand Central Station about 90 minutes later.

Now, had I not been carrying a heavy bag with multiple changes of clothing, we probably could have walked to our hotel. But it was hot, and I am lazy. "Taxi!"

We were greeted at the hotel by a doorman, and entered a lobby that was just gorgeous. Dark woods and large floral arrangements abounded, but alas…no Hidden Mickeys! Check-In was quick and painless, and we were directed to a room on the 10th floor.

The room was very small but beautifully furnished, with two queen beds with cherry headboards, nickel light fixtures, and a desk that ran the entire length of the window. The beds were extremely comfortable and had linens with a very respectable thread count. Not to mention five, count 'em, five pillows each! We quickly decided that the Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers was worth every penny and then some.

From there it was off to the races! Or off to the stores, to be exact. We hoofed it over to Fifth Avenue and headed directly for Saks Fifth Avenue, about a five block walk. I found myself slipping back into my old "New Yorker" ways -- jaywalking, speed walking and smiling in benign amusement at the tourists who were looking for traffic the wrong way down a one-way street and almost getting run over.

We enjoyed lunch in the store at Cafe SFA, and then got down to some serious spending. July is a great time to shop in New York City, as the summer sales are in full swing. Much coin was dropped in the shoe department by both of us.

After "spending" the day shopping we headed back to the hotel, some of our purchases in tow. (Tip: If you live in a state that has lower sales tax than New York, ship your purchases home. You will not be charged sales tax but may be required to pay your state's sales tax when you file your income tax later.) We stopped at the hotel's concierge desk to enquire as to a nearby place for dinner. Our concierge recommended

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Giovanni Restaurant and called to arrange reservations for us.

The reservations turned out to be unnecessary as we had the restaurant practically to ourselves! Due to dining early by Manhattan standards (6:30 pm) and the holiday, business was very slow. This was fine by us, as we lingered over calamari and pasta and re-lived the glory of the bargains found that day.

The next morning we indulged in the ultimate luxury for the mother of a toddler -- watching the Today Show from bed while eating a big, uninterrupted room service breakfast! Once we rolled ourselves out of bed and primped for a while, we decided to go back to Fifth Avenue and check out Bergdorf Goodman, a luxurious department store that had been closed the day before. Alas, the heavens had opened overnight and it was pouring rain. So once again -- a taxi cab to the rescue!

We spent the morning spending even more money, pausing only so I could take my exam. I passed, by the way. The test was to be a contestant on a game show. "Who Wants to be A Millionaire." Maybe you've heard of it? I'm now in the contestant pool, so wish me luck!

Our next stop? Times Square! Lest you think us too sophisticated after shopping Saks and Bergdorf's, our main goal today was to find the Hello Kitty store. (OK, we had also squeezed in a trip to the Disney Store the previous day.) My friend is a collector, and was very excited to see this haven for Sanrio merchandise. Haven -- nay, this is Hello Kitty heaven! Pink, for what seems like miles, greets you upon entering. Judging from my friend's squeals of delight and the ringing of the cash register, I'd say this store was a hit.

Well by now it was time to start heading home, but frankly, we were having too much fun! After convincing ourselves that we would be better off taking a later train home, we decided to cap-off this girls' trip the right way. After all, what Girls' Weekend is complete without a trip to the spa? No appointments? No problem!

So it was back to Saks Fifth Avenue, to the Elizabeth Arden Red Door Salon & Spa. An hour or so later we emerged refreshed and looking gorgeous, thanks to a facial (me) and a sugar scrub (her), followed by a complimentary make-up touch-up.

Finally it was time to go home. We returned to the hotel and collected our bags. (Unlike Disney resorts, which hold your bags for free on the day you check-out, the Sheraton charges $3/bag.) One final taxi ride to Grand Central, and we were headed home.

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In retrospect, I don't know why I stayed away so long. Getting there and back was far easier than I anticipated, and getting around New York was equally as easy thanks to a well-located hotel. The things I'll remember for next time are; bring more cash (taxis and tipping cost more than anticipated), research restaurants just a little, and wear comfortable shoes. (Buy the uncomfortable ones to wear at home!) I know one thing for sure -- I'll be back soon!

About The Author: Sara is counting the days to her family's trip to Walt Disney World this fall. She is also looking forward to an upcoming trip to Hilton Head Island next month.

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