

In New York, Beauty Is All Around You

by Sasha Sanders

You can't be indifferent to New York. You may hate it, and plenty people do, including some who live there. You may find it intimidating, too busy, too loud and brash. You may want to leave almost as soon as you arrive. Or, you may love it. You may experience it as the most exhilarating, most manically energetic place you've ever been. You may get a kick out of its novelty and romance. And you may be seduced by its beauty, of which there is plenty, even if it's not what you normally think of as beautiful.

In many ways, New York feels like the yang to Cape Town's yin. One is called Slaapstad, the other is the city that never sleeps. Where Cape Town has mountains, New York has skyscrapers. Instead of space, it's all pace. Cape Town is a relatively easy place to live in, whereas the song is absolutely true of New York: if you can make it there, you'll make it anywhere. These are the kinds of things that can be overwhelming, that can tire people and drive them out of New York. It can all just be too much. And yet, they are the same things that make the world's quintessential concrete jungle such an exciting, beautiful city.

Yes, there are all the famous spots you know about. Plenty of them. The Statue of Liberty. The Chrysler Building. The Empire State. Brooklyn Bridge. Central Park. Times Square. The theatre and museums. There are so many of these that you could easily spend a week or two and not see them all. Or you could simply walk around the city and see them without even trying. They are more than just tourist attractions. They are to New York what the Eiffel Tower and the Champs Elysees and the Seine are to Paris; they are what people who have never been to New York know of it; they make New York what it is. Their

beauty is in their architecture and engineering; in their concrete, stone and metal; in the glass as well as the grass; in the trees, the ponds, the rivers. And they are kind of surreal... you've seen them so often in movies and on TV that even when you see them for real for the first time, they feel familiar.

There are also other beautiful places, probably not quite as famous and certainly not visited as frequently by tourists. Coney Island, the world's first amusement park, with a kind of retro charm that is hard not to like, is also home to a famous annual hot dog eating contest and is still a great summer's day out for New Yorkers, even though many of them have never been there. Just a short stroll up the boardwalk is Brighton Beach, past its hey day, run down, now adorned by Russian tea rooms and populated predominantly by ex-Soviet immigrants, many of whom can't speak English and can get by just fine without it. And right at the top of Manhattan, past Harlem, past Washington Heights, is Fort Tryon, an enormous, green, forested park that is so quiet and peaceful you can't believe you're still in the middle of New York.

But these are not New York's only source of beauty. There is also what you see in between these either world famous or relatively obscure attractions: the less expected, less physical details; the moments and impressions and feelings that you cannot schedule and can't know when you will experience.

You may find this part of New York's beauty in the trains; in their jerky movements through tunnels and over bridges; in their passengers, who – unlike in other parts of the world – do not ignore each other; in the beggars who board your carriage for one stop with some talent – a song, a rap, a dance – or some story – I am collecting for the homeless, I have AIDS, I am going to be a star.

You may find it in the novelty of buying a hot dog, or a pretzel, or roasted peanuts, from a vendor on a street corner. Or in taking a yellow cab, and finding out the driver is West Indian, and enjoying a passionate, nostalgic conversation about cricket in the heart of a city where everyone else lives for baseball.

You may find it in the people, most of whom are polite and friendly, many of whom are direct and to the point, some of whom are downright rude.

You may find it in experiencing just how cosmopolitan a city it is – perhaps the *most* cosmopolitan city – and in realising that almost everyone here is only a newer or older immigrant, and is aware of that fact, and is embracing of it.

You might find it in the scale of things, the size of the buildings, the ambition of the people; in the intangible but real and incredibly powerful sense that absolutely anything is possible, that anything can happen. It feels infinite, and it is everywhere.

These are not things that a tourist guide can tell you about or help you plan. You don't find them at particular places, but rather in moments. At those moments, you could be anywhere, but you realise how New York is different to where you come from, and to most other places on the planet. And it is in those moments that New York is at its most exciting, most energising, and most beautiful.