

ONE SHORT DAY IN MIDTOWN

WHAT TO DO IN 16 HOURS IN THE MIDDLE OF MANHATTAN

BY LAUREN HAUPTMAN

Short, of course, is relative. And with so much to do in the Big Apple, one day must be relegated to one area. There's no better area than the one that contains the best shopping, theater and architecture in the world: Midtown Manhattan. We've set out an ambitious 16-hour tour within the roughly 2-square-mile area from 40th Street on the south to 59th Street on the north, and Third Avenue on the east to Ninth Avenue on the west.

Whatever your preferences, this itinerary is very adjustable, and the time guidelines are pretty rough. No one is timing you: Expand or skip at will. Want to spend more time shopping? Do some credit damage in the Fifth Avenue stores (not a big shopper? the shop stops we suggest are still worth a peek). Want to explore the park? Wander farther north for a green while. Raining? Spend time in the shops, buildings and museums along the way. All our recommendations are free unless otherwise noted.

Regardless of how you tweak your day, there's a lot to do, see and eat, so get up early, put on some comfortable yet stylish shoes, and get going: Gotham awaits.

MORNING

8 AM: GRAND CENTRAL TERMINAL

(& Breakfast, Part 1; 42nd Street and Park Avenue)

Do as the locals do, and meet at the information booth under the four-faced clock in the center of Grand Central (as New Yorkers call it). Look around: The sunlight streaming in through the soaring arched windows gives the marble-laden Beaux Arts interior an otherworldly glow often missed by those running to catch the train to their Westchester and Connecticut suburbs.

Head down to the lower-level Dining Concourse for the first part of your breakfast. Get a cup of coffee (and a nibble if you're really hungry; some bread and cheese from the fabulous **Grand Central Market** on the Main Concourse is also a nice holdover until Breakfast, Part 2) to drink while you explore.

Surprisingly great shops abound, as do stunning architectural features. Back in the main concourse, be sure to find yourself a spot where you won't get knocked over by rushers-by, look up at the zodiac ceiling, and feel free to gasp. Star-gazing will never be the same to you.

The entire terminal is full of wonderful history and secrets; alas, some discoveries will have to wait for your next visit. Do make a quick stop at the **Transit Museum Store** in the Shuttle Passage, which has some of the best New York (subway) souvenirs in the city.

*[Seasonal note: Roughly from Thanksgiving to the end of December, the building's Vanderbilt Hall hosts the **Grand Central Holiday Fair**, one of the best gift fairs we've ever seen; other happenings are held here throughout the year.]*

9:15 AM: PARK AVENUE & BREAKFAST PART 2

Exit the north side of Grand Central, up the escalators, through the Met Life Building, out the doors onto 45th Street. Across the street you will see two tunnels; take the one on the right, which is East Helmsley (as in Leona) Walk, which will let you out on Park Avenue, where you will continue walking north.

Head north up **Park Avenue**, which is a wide boulevard usually centered by colorful plant life and, sometimes, interesting sculpture. You will pass the famous **Waldorf-Astoria** hotel and pretty **St. Bartholomew's Church**. Just past St. Bart's, make a right onto 51st Street and head east. When you reach the southwest corner of 51st and Lexington Avenue, look up and to your right for a great view of the top of the **Chrysler Building**.

Continue to east to Third Avenue, where you will see **Ess-A-Bagel** (831 Third Ave., 51/52) staring back at you from across the street. Here are, arguably, the best bagels in New York

and, therefore, the world. Ask for whatever's hot, and get it with butter or cream cheese (a smear) to go. If you are lucky, Uncle Bill himself will wait on you. Be grateful if he gives you a hard time, as this is how New Yorkers show love. Walk and eat at the same time, turning left out the door, then right on 49th Street, heading west to Fifth Avenue.

10 AM: SAKS FIFTH AVENUE (611 Fifth Ave., 49/50)

Stand in front of Saks, look across street at Rockefeller Center. If it's December, you'll see the famous tree at the end of the Promenade; other seasons offer beautiful foliage of their own. We will spend more time in Rockefeller Center later, so feel free to pop into Saks briefly.

10:15 AM: FIFTH AVENUE, EAST SIDE

Exit through one of Saks' front doors and turn right; walk up the east side of Fifth Avenue, heading north toward Central Park. This is one of the world's major shopping meccas, but the first building you'll encounter after Saks is **St. Patrick's Cathedral**; if you like churches, stop inside. You'll pass a plethora of wonderful stores on your way to the park. Our favorite is **Takashimaya**, which is a Japanese department store unlike anything else we've seen in this country. Try to buy something — anything — just to have it wrapped in the telltale triangle boxes and bags. The sixth floor, called "Growing Things," features Takishimaya's signature fresh flower and garden department, along with its to-die-for baby gifts. *[Tip: Department stores are the best places to use the bathroom; the nicer the store, the nicer the bathrooms — usually.] [NOTE: Sadly, Takashimaya closed after this was published. ☹]*

As you continue up Fifth Avenue, stops may include **Trump Tower** (long past its heyday); a peek down **57th Street**, home of the world's most well-known luxury brands; a chat with the live "wooden" soldier in front of **FAO Schwarz** (767 Fifth Ave. at 58), a must-stop if you have kids along, or nieces and nephews somewhere else; and the New York flagship of **Apple** (as in computers), accessed through a giant Louvre-esque cube in front of FAO Schwarz. *[Tip: The Apple store is a great place to check your e-mail if you don't have free WiFi in your hotel.]*

If you are hungry (even if you're not), buy a pretzel, hot dog and/or chestnuts from one of the ubiquitous street vendors. Chances are they won't taste great, but it's something you need to do anyway.

11:15 AM: CENTRAL PARK

Designed near the end of the 19th century by Frederick Law Olmsted, "the Park" as it is simply called, is an idyllic pastoral paradise in the chaotic city. You could spend a week just wandering around, eat all your meals and do everything but sleep there (though some do that, too), but, alas, there's only time for a quick peek today.

[Note: If you do want to spend a little more of your short day here, highlights of the southern part of the park include the Central Park Zoo (time it to be there on the hour or half-hour to see and hear the George Delacorte Musical Clock), Wollman Rink in winter, the carousel and rowing on the lake (not in winter) by the Boathouse.]

11:30 AM: FIFTH AVENUE, WEST SIDE

Once you extricate yourself from the Park, pretend you're Madeleine, and run through **The Plaza Hotel** (Fifth Avenue at Central Park South). A quick stroll through the ground floor of old-line New York department store **Bergdorf Goodman** next store is warranted (*Note: The men's store is across the street*), if only to see the wealthiest New Yorkers buying their upscale accessories under the beautifully, wonderfully ornate ceilings. As you continue south on Fifth Avenue, make time for a stop into Manhattan's other uber-store, **Henri Bendel** (712 Fifth Ave., 55/56). Bendel's (don't say it with a French accent; it's pronounced Henry BENDuhl) famous Lalique windows, brown-and-white-striped everything (the cosmetic and travel cases are world-renowned), and unusual accessories and jewelry make this one of our favorite stores.

Continue south on Fifth Avenue, passing flagship store after flagship store (if you're not a shopper, try to appreciate the architecture). Make a right on 53rd Street. On the right (north) side of the street is the **Museum of Modern Art** (11 W. 53rd St.), which reopened in 2004 to mixed reviews following a major renovation. Entrance to MoMA is expensive (though if

you can stand huddling with the masses, Fridays from 4–8 pm are free), and we don't have time to "waste" in a museum. Cross the street to the **MoMA Design Store** (44 W. 53rd St.), which is phenomenal for arty souvenirs and minimalist MUJI items. Turn right out of the store onto 53rd Street, then make a right back on to Fifth Avenue.

AFTERNOON

12:30 PM: ROCKEFELLER CENTER (Fifth Avenue, 49/50)

Rockefeller Center is especially fun in the winter, when you can watch the ice skaters go round and round (if you're really lucky, an Olympian will be doing spirals, or a marriage proposal will be under way on the ice). Have lunch in the Rockefeller Center Concourse overlooking the rink or *in* the gardens that replace it during other seasons. There are myriad restaurants ranging from food court–style options to the upscale Sea Grill. Get to the concourse level by taking the glass elevators from street on the north and south sides of the plaza, or through 30 Rock (30 Rockefeller Center, the tall building behind Prometheus) to see its beautifully muraled Art Deco lobby.

2 PM: RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL (Sixth Avenue, 50/51)

On the west side of Rockefeller Center is **Radio City Music Hall**, the Art Deco home of the Rockettes and any number of visiting acts. There are also tours and, in December, the famous *Christmas Spectacular*.

Continue south on Sixth Avenue, and grab a cupcake for dessert at the **Magnolia Bakery** (of *Sex and the City* fame) outpost at 49th Street (northeast corner). Continue south on Sixth, and turn left on 47th Street to the stretch known as **Diamond and Jewelry Way**, named for the, well, diamonds and jewelry stores that line the street. Walk east to Fifth, then down the other side back to Sixth. Ogle at the jewelry lining the windows; avoid the sidewalk diamond-hawkers who are there to convince you life would be so much better with a few more carats (well, it would). Continue west on 47th Street to Broadway.

2:45 PM: TKTS BOOTH (47th and Broadway, under red steps; opens at 3 pm for evening performances)

This glass-encased booth is where you will buy discounted tickets for your evening activity: Broadway! Get on line and be ready with a prioritized list of shows you want to see (available performances are shown on the TKTS signs). Ask the other theater-goers for recommendations; you will meet both locals and tourists while you wait. When you get to the window, conduct your business quickly and decisively so you don't piss off your new friends on line behind you.

4 PM: TIMES SQUARE/42ND STREET

Pretend you are a local, and shake your head in disbelief at the Disneyfication of Times Square, as well as the new and hideous beach chairs that now populate swaths of former street. Note the news ticker on the One Times Square (*The New York Times*) Building (where the New Year's ball drops), the NASDAQ board, the giant Coke bottle, and all the fantastically, overwhelmingly bright lights and signs. *[NOTE: The tacky chairs have since been replaced, but it's still weird to hang out in the middle of the street.]*

Turn left onto 42nd Street heading west, and make a right on Fifth Avenue.

4:15 PM: NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY (Fifth Avenue, 40/42)

Take your photo with the giant stone lions, named Patience and Fortitude, who guard the front of the library. You'll be tempted to rest your weary soles on the steps, which will be crowded on a nice day, but there's a better option behind the library.

4:30 PM: TWO OPTIONS

1. BRYANT PARK (behind library)

Rescued from a dilapidated, drug-riddled fate nearly two decades ago, Bryant Park has become a midtown haven with lots of public tables and chairs among the pretty greenery. Winter hosts yet another skating rink; summer welcomes lots of outdoor events, including the popular and free Monday-night movies. Purchase a coffee or other beverage, and relax until dinner.

Or

2. EMPIRE STATE BUILDING (350 Fifth Ave., 33/34)

A bit south of the rest of our itinerary — just a quick stroll south on Fifth Avenue to 34th Street — you will find the Empire State Building. Currently the tallest building in New York City, it offers awe-inspiring panoramas from observation decks on the 86th and 102nd floor (there are entrance fees for both). The Art Deco tower is often lighted in different colors at night in honor of an event, holiday or sports team.

EVENING

6 PM: DINNER (5 pm if Tuesday)

There are so many restaurants in the Theater District. Be sure to choose ahead and make a reservation to avoid disappointment, hunger and/or bad food. Two of our favorite pre-theater eating spots:

Toloache (252 W. 50, Broadway/8; www.toloachenyc.com): This is not just one of the best pre-theater restaurants, but one of our favorites in the whole city. Chef/owner Julian Media serves authentic Mexican dishes twisted with unusual flavors. Who knew guacamole is better with fruit? Yes, fruit. Trust us. The *Guacamole Frutas* is a taste sensation, as is the *Quesadilla de Huitlachoche y Trufas*, a heavenly disc of Mexican mushrooms, manchego cheese, corn and black truffle. The impressive sheet of tequilas is a bonus at this bustling two-level destination.

Cascina Ristorante (647 Ninth Ave., 45/46; www.cascina.com): Well-priced house-made pastas and stone-oven pizzas shine here, especially when paired with wine from the owner's own vineyard in Italy. Start with the *Focaccia al Rosmarino* (focaccia bread with rosemary and olive oil), and ask for the pre-theater menu for an extra good deal.

7:30 PM: BROADWAY SHOW (for 8 pm curtain; 6:30 pm for 7 pm curtain if Tuesday)

Arrive at your show in plenty of time to go to bathroom and take your seat, so you don't piss off any locals by being late.

10:30 PM (APPROX)—MIDNIGHT: POST-THEATER

Revel in the glow of a wonderful show that changed the way you think of modern theater, or take the opportunity to lambast the indulgent director, inarticulate playwright or past-her-prime star over a post-theater drink or dessert. Both are available at perennial favorite **Joe Allen** (326 W. 46, 8/9), thought don't lambast too loudly, as there's a good chance your show's cast or crew is there, too, as this is a big celebrity hangout.

Alternatively, if you didn't include a visit earlier in the day, this is a great time to visit the **Empire State Building**, which is open until 2 am every day. What better way to end your very long Short Day in Midtown than by taking in the twinkling night lights from high above the City That Never Sleeps?

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