

# Unexpected New York

THE BIG APPLE IS A CENTRE OF CIVILISATION AND A BOOMING METROPOLIS – BUT ALSO HOME TO SHELTERED NOOKS, QUIRKY EXPERIENCES AND ODDITIES GALORE

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# 25

WOW  
LIST 2017

With its statue of Atlas and Top of the Rock Observation Deck, the Rockefeller Center is an attraction in its own right.



→ New York City, with more than eight million residents and almost 60 million visitors annually, is a world of wonder. It's easy to be swept up in the sights on the surface – the Statue of Liberty, Central Park, Broadway and Times Square – but hidden among the skyscrapers are incredible, though less famous, attractions.

"The intensity of this city can sometimes force a certain level of creativity," says Alex Kalman, co-founder and curator of mini museum Mmuseummm.

That creativity can express itself in many ways, including in those smaller places that are harder to find. You'll never feel like you've spent enough time here, with its sprawling boroughs often feeling more like rabbit burrows – you need to really dig in to find the best experiences.

### Theatre surprise

A short cab ride from the bright lights of Broadway is The McKittrick Hotel (530 West 27th Street). From outside it's an innocuous warehouse with a bouncer, velvet rope and pieces of monochrome wall art. It truly belies the thrillingly odd performance that happens inside each night: *Sleep No More* is conducted over five floors, across many spooky, detailed sets, with dozens of actors individually telling their own story. Choose to follow any character and see their tale unravel through dark and kooky narratives. One woman checks into a beautiful 1930s-inspired hotel, and has a high-stakes conversation with the proprietor. One man receives a cut-throat shave from a nemesis. Another woman wanders, lost and pursued,

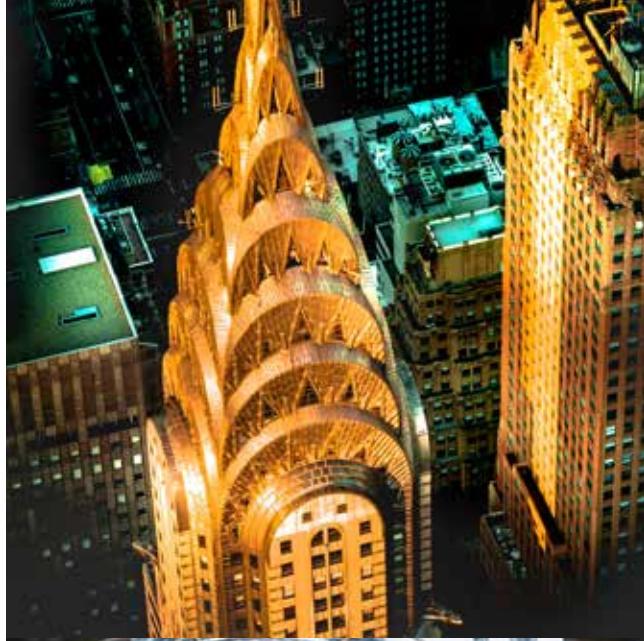
“Hidden among the skyscrapers of New York City are incredible, though less well known, attractions.”

through a misty forest. Most of the story is expressed through dance and movement, and it all culminates in a bloody final feast involving all the major characters. The audience is instructed never to speak and everyone must don a bone-white mask to obscure their identity. The immersive show draws plot points and themes from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and several Alfred Hitchcock films, and it's a crazy ride throughout its three-hour runtime, after which all are invited to the in-house bar for cocktails and live music. *Sleep No More* isn't a scary theatre experience, but it'll cause lack of sleep as you recall each small moment and try to unravel the intriguing story.

Also beyond Broadway is a whole other theatrical world known as Off-Broadway. These are generally more intimate shows in smaller theatres like the Orpheum Theatre or SoHo Playhouse. Theatre devotees should be sure to check them out for diverse and, often, more challenging shows. It's often the proving ground for shows before they move to Broadway, with famous productions like *Grease* and *Rent* starting Off-Broadway.

### What's the password?

After the alcohol ban of the 1920s, New York residents became intimately familiar with the idea of underground pubs or bars, where they would seek out fun when fun was outlawed – a secret society of revellers just hoping to not get caught. These days, the 'speakeasy' is just as fun (though now legal) and small bars with delicious cocktails are proliferating as a trendy and comfortable place to meet friends and sink some sundowners. ➤



CLOCKWISE  
FROM OPPOSITE

► The Manhattan Bridge connects the boroughs of Manhattan and Brooklyn by spanning the East River.  
 ► The opulent furnishings of Brooklyn speakeasy Boudoir.  
 ► An actor performs at *Sleep No More*, as a masked audience member looks on.  
 ► Pocket-sized Mmuseumm 2, containing sculptures from a Syrian seven-year-old.  
 ► Le Dauphin cocktail, containing absinthe, chilli liqueur, almond milk, coconut and cacao nibs at Boudoir.  
 ► High tea at speakeasy Garfunkel's, located in the former premises of a phoney bank.  
 ► Look between the famous skyscrapers and tall buildings like the Chrysler Building and there's no telling what you can discover in New York City.



“**A city of so many people is a natural zone for the creation of pockets of the wacky and weird.”**

Sophisticated and suave both aptly describe The Raines Law Room (48 West 17th Street). The subterranean bar is named after one particular law aimed at restricting the sale and consumption of alcohol, leading to the proliferation of what would become known as 'speakeasy' bars. The law didn't last, but this establishment will still make you feel at home with cups of refreshing beverages and the convenience of a waiter call button. Head down the stairs and press the buzzer to be granted entry.

Boudoir (135 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn) is another such bar, hidden away in Brooklyn Heights. Tarek Debira, operator of the bar along with his wife Patricia Ageheim, says: "People appreciate the quality, effort and thoughtfulness of a well-made drink, as well as feeling special."

Boudoir is an opulent parlour taking inspiration from Marie Antoinette's era and decor. Booths adorned in rich red upholstery, gilded mirrors and period art adorn the cosy space, with cocktails such as the Guillotine and the Air Balloon matched to appetisers including crispy frog legs with spicy honey sauce. "Speakeasies have captured the spirit of thoughtfulness and have taken it to a whole different level," says Tarek. "They combine crafted cocktails with hidden storefronts and beautiful decor, creating a unique experience."

Named after an embezzling '20s crim who had a phoney bank in the same building, secrecy is also rife at Garfunkel's – you'll need a passcode to get past the functional bank vault door (67 Clinton



Street). Curtained windows allow light during sunny afternoons, but relax in the plush purple lounges to soak up the underground vibe of this-of-the-era drinking den focusing on cocktail mixology and with a cracker ambience. Somewhat out of character but nonetheless worthwhile, the bar also does a beautiful afternoon tea Wednesday to Sunday.

### City oases

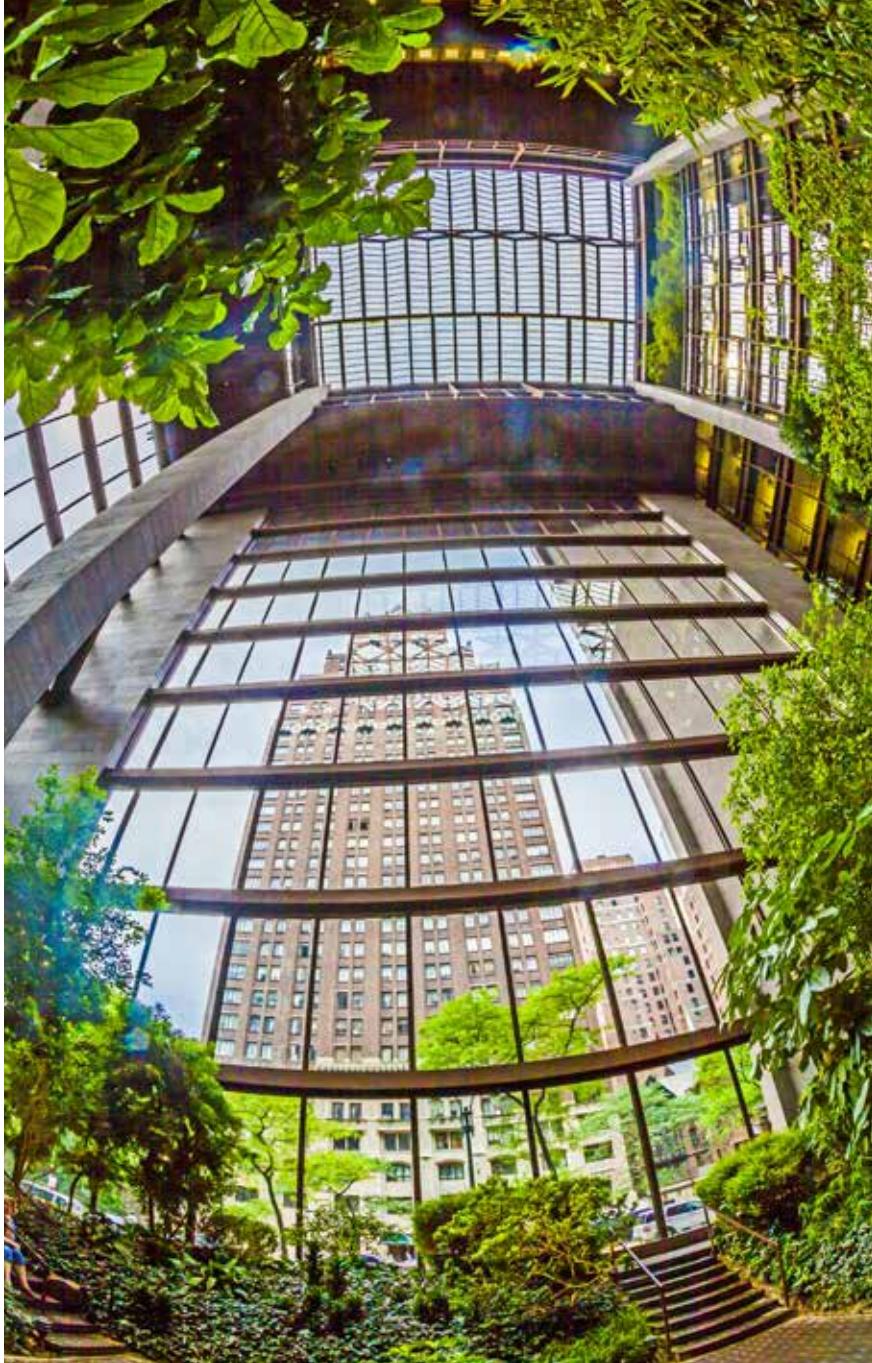
The High Line is great, if you get the rare opportunity to see it without throngs of people clogging the walkway. Central Park is also lovely, if you can stand the queues for the rowboats and the hundreds of travellers taking snapshots with selfie sticks. Thankfully, New York City's reputation for beautiful parks stretches beyond these behemoths.

The Rockefeller Center is an attraction in its own right, located between 49th

and 50th streets, with its statue of Atlas and Top of the Rock Observation Deck. A little less known, and a reprieve from the bustle of the busy surrounding streets, are the Rockefeller Center Channel Gardens, dressed up each season to match a different theme. The centre also has rooftop gardens – though these beautiful green city havens are only occasionally open to the public.

Another urban oasis exists in the Ford Foundation building, which has an atrium of lush foliage that feels more like a tropical forest than a foyer. High ceilings and glass walls frame this pocket of tranquillity in a 1960s building lauded for its architectural value. It's adjacent to another garden – the Tudor City Greens (42nd Street between 1st and 2nd avenues) – and is open to the public from 10am to 4pm on weekdays.

You might not expect to find a waterfall in the concrete jungle that is New York's Midtown, but Greenacre Park offers just



FROM LEFT: Mmuseummm 1, a literal hole-in-the-wall gallery displaying an offbeat collection of objects; the lush foliage and glass atrium walls of the Ford Foundation atrium gardens.

that in its location on the east side, on 51st Street between 2nd and 3rd avenues. There are chairs, tables and benches for a rest from the action of sightseeing, and unexpected lush greenery to relax the mind after witnessing the buzz of the city.

Another green oasis is in the East Village. Kenkeleba House (214 East 2nd Street) is a gallery focusing on art by African-American, Latino, Asian-American and Native American artists. The gallery opens out to a park full of wrought-iron and steel sculptures – a thought-provoking and calming experience. Sometimes there are even live music events in the garden and people flock here to listen to tunes.

## Curios and oddities

A city of so many people is a natural zone for the creation of pockets of the wacky and weird. Start with Mmuseummm (pronounced simply 'museum', two locations at 4 Cortlandt Alley), inside an abandoned freight elevator, a stark contrast to The Met, that's for sure. Rotating exhibitions attempt to bring to light those things that may have been "overlooked, dismissed or ignored", which have included 'Personal Objects of Immigration' (items lost in the Arizona desert on the Mexico-US border), 'The Cornflake Taxonomy' (corn flakes categorised by size and brand) and 'Not

Bombs' (reproductions of items that required a bomb squad to determine they were not explosives, such as a stuffed toy pony and a rock). Offbeat? Sure. Thought-provoking? Definitely.

"I thought there was room to experiment with a new model for a museum," says co-founder and curator Alex. "Rather than creating one larger, centralised destination, we could look at under-utilised spaces in the city and try to transform them into cultural destinations. So we were looking at the cracks in the city and seeing how we could bring those alive."

At Mmuseummm, says Alex, it's all about "looking at the world that we're living in through objects from around the world. They reveal to us who we are, how we think, what we want, how we feel. They allow people to engage with stories around the world through the intimacy and physicality of objects."

There's also plenty of quirk to purchase in the city that never sleeps. Try a mummy-head snow globe, bone dice or antique medicine bottles at Obscura Antiques & Oddities (207 Avenue A). Otherwise there are ammonite fossils, animal brains in resin and insect-inspired jewellery at The Evolution Store (687 Broadway).

"There's a level of joy and surprise for visitors," says Alex of seeking out and finding attractions like Mmuseummm. "Travellers find themselves looking more carefully for a place because they have to seek it out. That puts them into a mindset of curiosity and adventure, and looking carefully."

When visitors seek carefully in a city like this, there's no knowing what else they may find hidden among the boroughs and the skyscrapers. New York City is the city that never stops changing, and if you look, you may find something unexpected. But take note, because things change fast here. 



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