

Manhattan Springs Back to Life

Broadway enthusiasts, art aficionados and food lovers will find new offerings in and around Times Square and in neighborhoods below 42nd Street, heralding the promise of a vibrant recovery.

By Julie Besonen

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Not far from Times Square, verdant Bryant Park is a favorite place for picnics and taking a break from the crowded sidewalks. Credit...Anna Watts for The New York Times

During the worst months of the pandemic, Manhattan's once teeming sidewalks were ghostly footpaths, but it was never a ghost town. Ghost towns are abandoned for good. But New York stalwarts held fast, groping their way into the light as restaurants, bars, theaters and other venues got off to wobbly starts when vaccines made it feel less fraught to venture out.

And now, suddenly, it seems, Manhattan — especially around Times Square and in neighborhoods below 42nd Street — has barreled back to life with all the things that have always lured visitors: splashy museum exhibitions, big names on Broadway, restaurants everywhere. Many beloved businesses did not survive these last two years, among them, Lord & Taylor, Jazz Standard, Upright Citizens Brigade theaters, “21” Club, Pegu Club, Café Boulud, La Caridad 78, Eisenberg’s Sandwich Shop and Coogan’s. But hotel openings, new restaurants and spirited street life are bolstering hope that a full recovery is at hand.

Midtown and downtown office workers are less in evidence as remote work remains strong, but the 56.4 million visitors projected to show up in 2022 (up from 32.9 last year, according to the city’s tourism promotion agency, NYC & Company) should help make up for their absence.

In and around Times Square

Sidewalk gridlock is in full bloom in Times Square. Some people still wear masks in the open air, others as chin straps ready to pull up for taxis, the subway and city buses, where the mandate still stands (though many increasingly flout it).

Proof of vaccination and masks in cinemas and the majority of restaurants are no longer compulsory. Most Broadway theaters recently dropped the vaccine requirement, although masking will remain in effect through at least May 31, 2022, according to the Broadway League. Actors from shows like “Plaza Suite” (Sarah Jessica Parker, Matthew Broderick), “Macbeth” (Daniel Craig), “Company” (Patti LuPone, Katrina Lenk), “Funny Girl” (Ramin Karimloo) and “The Music Man” (Sutton Foster, Hugh Jackman) have been sidelined periodically this season by Covid-19, so the precaution is logical.

In concert with Broadway League protocols, the Drama Book Shop also requires masking. The longtime bookstore's previous location closed in 2019, and Lin-Manuel Miranda is among the partners who revived it in a handsome new space (266 West 39th Street) last year. In addition to every play and show business biography imaginable, there are comfy chairs to sink into while gazing overhead at the designer David Korins's twisting bookworm sculpture of more than 2,400 books and scripts arranged chronologically as a paean to theater history.

Broadway geeks can bed down at Civilian, a 27-story, 203-room hotel that opened in Hell's Kitchen (305 West 48th Street) last November. David Rockwell and the Rockwell Group dreamed up the design, its second-floor lounge featuring dollhouse-size sets for shows like "Hadestown," "Take Me Out" and "Moulin Rouge!" An outdoor terrace is tranquil except for the occasional siren. Sensitive sleepers might be more bothered by the noise from elevators; request a room away from them. This month, prices range from \$189 to \$449, according to a recent online search. The cheapest rooms fit a bed and not much else, and amenities are stripped down; it costs \$20 per day to request housekeeping.

The hottest place to eat in the theater district is a modest Italian deli, All'antico Vinaio (729 Eighth Avenue), where lines form before it opens at noon. The Florence import is manned by upbeat guys singing along to Italian music while slicing and stuffing squares of golden schiacciata (Tuscan bread that's thinner than focaccia). La Favolosa is the best seller, the bread plastered with pecorino cream and artichoke cream, piled with salame and spicy eggplant and crushed into a big delicious mess. The shop is cramped, so if it's a nice day, picnic in Bryant Park, a 10-minute walk away.

Below 42nd Street

Heading downtown, there are many new cultural experiences, including Little Island, a blossoming public park on the Hudson River that looks like something out of a fairy tale. It's so popular in warm months that timed entry reservations are enforced starting May 12.

Causing a sensation among art lovers is "Jean-Michel Basquiat: King Pleasure," an immersive new exhibition in Chelsea's Starrett-Lehigh Building (601 West 26th Street), where a food hall is scheduled to open this month. Timed tickets, available until Labor Day, often sell out despite the price (\$35 on weekdays, \$45 on weekends, a bit less for seniors and children under 13).

Basquiat died at 27 of a heroin overdose in 1988, and his estate lent the 200-plus artworks and artifacts, most of them never before exhibited. His sisters helped faithfully recreate their childhood living room and dining room in Brooklyn, and in video clips they, and others, share fun memories of the artist. A replica of his paint-spattered studio on Great Jones Street is here, too; a video projects the artist at work there. Pumping dance music fills a homage to the Palladium nightclub's Michael Todd VIP Room, where Basquiat loved to party and a mural of his dominated a wall. The intimate family element combined with the scope of Basquiat's glowing, gone-too-soon talent creates an emotional impact that's hard to shake.

In the Meatpacking District, the Whitney Biennial 2022, "Quiet as It's Kept," is on through Sept. 5 (99 Gansevoort Street; \$25 for timed tickets). Postponed for a year because of the pandemic, the exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art has a somber theme, but beauty is present in the haunting photos of East Los Angeles, by Guadalupe Rosales, and Rebecca Belmore's sculpture of a human cloaked in a sleeping bag and surrounded by bullet casings.

Several videos are mesmerizing, including the first floor's "Extracts," a meditation on "Moby-Dick," by the collective Moved by the Motion. On the sixth floor look for Coco Fusco's gorgeous "Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word" and Alfredo Jaar's "06.01.2020 18.39," depicting the attack on peaceful protesters in Washington, D.C., in 2020 following George Floyd's murder. And be sure to step outside for Charles Ray's affecting figurative sculptures on the fifth-floor terrace.