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14 Things to Do in New York City For First-Time Visitors

Ride E-Bikes in Central Park

Central Park is an 843-acre park in the heart of the city. It offers a nice reprieve from the concrete jungle and is home to some of the coolest attractions in New York.

One of the best ways to explore the park is by [renting e-bikes](#). You can easily see the main attractions in a few hours.

Here are some of the best places to go and things to do in Central Park:

- Rent a rowboat at the Loeb Boathouse and eat lunch at the Central Park Boathouse Cafe
- Visit the animals at the Central Park Zoo
- Play at the Heckscher Playground and climb Umpire Rock
- Admire the famous Gapstow Bridge and Bow Bridge
- Walk under the tree tunnel at The Mall
- Stop by the Bethesda Fountain and hear the street musicians at the Bethesda Terrace
- Rent a remote-controlled model sailboat at the Conservatory Water Pond
- Visit Strawberry Fields and pay tribute to John Lennon
- Explore the wooded trails at The Ramble
- Check out the lookout point at Belvedere Castle and visit the nearby Shakespeare Garden
- Enjoy free fishing poles and bait at the Charles Dana Discovery Center
- Go ice skating at Wollman Rink in the winter

Visit SUMMIT One Vanderbilt

SUMMIT One Vanderbilt is more than just an observation deck, it's a 3-level interactive art experience that boasts some of the best views of the city.

The elevator takes you up 91 stories in 42 seconds! When you reach the top, you'll first experience a two-story room with floor-to-ceiling windows and a glass floor and ceiling.

The next room is filled with giant silver balloons that are fun to play with and make for cool photos! You can stay as long as you want in each room, but you can't go back once you leave

to the next room.

There is also a room with clear boxes where you can step out and see the city below you. It's a cool concept, but you'll have to wait in a long line and you'll only have 30 seconds in the box.

The last room has a huge screen where you can find your face floating in the clouds. It's a little bizarre, but our kids thought it was funny!

After exploring all of the rooms, you can visit the open-air rooftop bar and cafe. The views from the top are incredible and it has a more relaxed vibe.

I recommend booking your reservation about an hour or two before sunset so that you can experience the city during golden hour, sunset, blue hour, and nighttime. It's magical.

Take a Ferry to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island

Although visiting the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island is one of the most touristy things to do in New York, it is a must!

There are three ticket options when visiting the Statue of Liberty. The price is the same for each ticket, but the crown and pedestal tickets often sell out. You can reserve tickets up to 5 months in advance, so book them as early as possible.

Keep in mind that [Statue City Cruises](#) is the only authorized concessioner, so do not purchase tickets from any other third party dealers. Also note that you'll need to show your reservation and pick up wristbands at the Clifton Castle box office before getting on the ship. It's a little bit of a walk from the ferry dock, so make sure you do that BEFORE you walk to the boat. I am speaking from experience!

With the General Admission ticket, you can take the ferry from Battery Park to the Statue of Liberty Island and Ellis Island. You'll get a chance to walk around both islands and the ferry ride itself is a great experience as you get to see views of the New York skyline.

With the Pedestal Access ticket, in addition to the ferry ride, you'll also be able to take the elevator or climb 10 stories (215 steps) to the top of the pedestal.

With the Crown Access ticket, from the pedestal, you'll be able to climb all the way up to the inside of Lady Liberty's crown.

This is the option we purchased and it was a cool experience. First, you'll take the elevator or climb the steps to the top of the pedestal where you'll get a great view of the New York skyline and harbor from 10 stories up.

From the pedestal, you'll take 162 steps up a narrow spiral staircase. Bags and purses of any kind are not allowed inside the crown, but there are lockers available at the base of the

pedestal for .25 cents.

It's surprisingly small inside of the crown and the tiny windows don't offer a very clear view, but it's still amazing to be inside of such an iconic landmark. Each group is only allowed to spend a few minutes in the crown before heading back down. As you walk down the stairs, look for Lady Liberty's face and notice the folds of dress.

The Statue of Liberty Museum is also worth visiting. It is free, and you'll find exhibits, memorabilia, and information about the construction of the Statue of Liberty.

We learned some interesting facts, like did you know it took 8 years to create and build the statue in France? To ship it, they had to disassemble it into about 300 pieces. It was transported in 214 shipping crates and took approximately 2 months to travel from France to New York in 1885. The newly constructed statue was unveiled on October 28, 1886.

After visiting the Statue of Liberty, you'll hop back on the ferry and make a stop at Ellis Island.

Between 1892 and 1954, more than 12 million immigrants passed through Ellis Island making it the busiest immigration inspection and processing station in the US.

You'll have a chance to walk around the original processing station which has since been turned into a museum with thoughtful exhibits and displays.

If you have time, you may want to consider booking a Hard Hat Tour where you can take a 90-minute guided tour to hear fascinating stories and see parts of the museum that are not open to the public.

The ferry departs from Battery Park where you'll find the famous SeaGlass Carousel, Battery Playspace Park, various monuments and memorials, and an urban farm.

Visit the 9/11 Memorial and Museum

The 9/11 Memorial is a touching tribute to honor the victims and survivors of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The 9/11 Memorial reflecting pools sit in the footprints of the Twin Towers and is lined with the names of almost 3,000 victims who died as a result of the attacks.

The memorial is free to visit, but you'll need to purchase a timed-entry ticket to visit the museum.

The museum is an emotional experience but very well done. You'll be able to see a large collection of salvaged remains, including the last column standing, the beams that absorbed the point of impact between floors 96-99, and the remains of a crippled fire engine.

There is also a separate exhibit where you'll watch the original news coverage, hear recorded voicemails, and get a much more personal glimpse into what it was like on that day. Photos and videos aren't allowed in this part of the exhibit, but it is very powerful. I appreciate that they also focused on the stories of the heroes that day, and not just the tragedies.

For a more in-depth experience, I recommend booking a guided tour where you'll be able to hear more stories and details about that day.

Stop by The Oculus

The Oculus is located across from the 9/11 Memorial.

Although it is just a transportation hub and shopping center, it is worth stopping by to admire the stunning futuristic architecture.

Walk Across the Brooklyn Bridge

The Brooklyn Bridge is an iconic New York City landmark and can't be missed!

It took 9 years to build the bridge, and when it was completed in 1883 it was the longest suspension bridge in the world. It has since been designated as a National Historic Landmark.

The best way to experience the bridge is on foot. You can bike across the bridge, but the bike lane is by the cars below so you won't get the same views as you do from the top.

The architecture of the bridge is so photogenic and you'll be able to get a great view of the skyline. The bridge is 1.1 miles long if you want to walk the full length and visit popular spots in Brooklyn like DUMBO, Brooklyn Bridge Park, Jane's Carousel, and Giamaldi's Pizzeria.

Explore the Financial District

The Financial District is where Wall Street and the New York Stock Exchange are located, as well as the famous Charging Bull and Fearless Girl statues.

You'll also find the stunning Trinity Church tucked in between towering skyscrapers. This historic church was built in 1846 and stood as the tallest building in the US for 23 years. Alexander Hamilton and his wife are buried here and you can visit their graves in the small churchyard.

Federal Hall is also located in the Financial District. Although the current building isn't original, this is the site where George Washington was inaugurated as the first President of the United States of America.

The building is open to the public where you'll find a small museum. You can even see the stone from the balcony where Washington took the oath of Office. As a fun fact, New York was

the first capitol city of the US and Federal Hall served as the first seat of government and first capitol building.

Eat Handmade Noodles in Chinatown

The origins of New York's Chinatown dates back to the 1870s when the early Chinese immigrants settled around Canal and Mott street.

Today, it is a vibrant neighborhood with an amazing food scene! We couldn't get enough of the fresh hand-pulled biang-biang noodles at Xian Foods. Tasty Hand-Pulled Noodles and Great NY Noodletown are also good options.

Alimama Tea is known for the most heavenly cream puff creations, try adding boba to the creamy center! We also love their mochi donuts that have gone viral on social media.

If you're still hungry, Little Italy is located nearby and is the best place to grab a slice of authentic pizza or homemade pasta.

Visit the New York Public Library

The New York Public Library Stephen A. Schwarzman building is considered one of the most beautiful libraries in America.

One of the main draws is the Rose Main Reading Room. Every detail of the sprawling room is absolutely stunning! It has been featured in several movies such as Spider-Man, Ghostbusters, and Breakfast at Tiffany's. If you want to visit the reading room, it is only open to the public from 10-11 am daily.

The Treasures Room is also worth visiting where you'll find some really cool artifacts and collections, like the original Winnie the Pooh and Friends.

The library is located next to Bryant Park where you can sprawl out on the lawn and enjoy the sunshine, or grab a bite to eat at the cafe, or even ride the carousel.

During the holidays, it transforms into a winter wonderland with a Christmas market and ice skating rink. For more of the best things to do during the holidays, see our guide [12 Bucket List Things to Do in New York at Christmas](#).

Go to the Top of the Rock

The Top of the Rock Observation Deck is located on the 70th floor of the Rockefeller Center.

The open-air deck offers 360 degree views over the skyline of New York. The deck is surrounded by glass walls allowing unobstructed views.

I recommend booking tickets for an hour or two before sunset. It's incredible to watch the city come alive as the sun fades and the lights come on.

Rockefeller Center is also where you'll find the famous Christmas tree and ice skating rink during the holidays.

Visiting the observation deck on top of the Empire State Building is also a classic New York experience. However, I like the Top of the Rock better because you can get photos with the Empire State Building in the skyline.

Explore 5th Avenue

5th Avenue is one of the most famous shopping streets in America. It is home to high end retailers like Saks Fifth Avenue, DIOR, Tiffany's, Gucci, and popular stores such as Urban Outfitters and Free People.

If you're visiting with kids, they'll love FAO Schwarz. It's like Costco, but instead of food samples you get to sample different toys! There are so many new toys to try, and they also have fun demonstrations like magic tricks.

Make sure you check out the life-sized piano on the top floor that was featured in the movie *BIG* with Tom Hanks.

The LEGO Store on 5th Avenue is also awesome for kids, it's our favorite Lego store that we've ever visited!

They have so many cool and innovative things, like a machine that will turn any photo into a Lego mosaic. Such a fun gift idea! You can also create a personalized custom mini-figure that is printed right at the store.

There are also fun photo-ops like a life-sized NYC taxi made out of Legos that you can actually sit inside.

Our boys also liked the Nintendo Store that has gaming stations and interactive games. The NBA store is also a favorite!

St. Patrick's Cathedral is also located on 5th Avenue. This incredible church was completed in 1879 and is the largest Gothic Revival Catholic cathedral in North America. The church is open for visitors if you would like to step inside and admire the beautiful architecture.

See Times Square at Night

There's no place quite like Times Square in New York City, and there's no place quite like Times Square at night!

It's sensory overload with neon lights, flashing billboards, music blasting, street performers, and an electric energy that is hard to describe. It's definitely a tourist hot spot and is not everyone's cup of tea, but you need to experience it at least once while you're in New York!

There are plenty of shops, restaurants, and tourist attractions in Times Square, including Madame Tussauds, The Museum of Broadway, and Hershey's Chocolate World.

Times Square is the best place for people watching. You never know what you'll see, from the famous Naked Cowboy to every super hero character you can think of!

Wander Through Chelsea

Chelsea is a fun neighborhood on the West Side. One of our favorite things to do here is walk along the Chelsea Highline.

This public park was built on the tracks of an elevated train line that ran from 1933-1983. The 1.45-mile beautifully landscaped park runs above the streets of Manhattan with great views along the way.

We also love grabbing a bite to eat at Chelsea Market. This food hall and retail space is housed in the old Nabisco factory building dating back to the 1890s. This is actually where Oreo Cookies were first created!

There are so many food options at Chelsea Market, but Los Tacos No. 1 is our favorite. It's a popular spot for good reason, so you can expect a long line but it goes fast.

While you're in the neighborhood, check out Little Island at Pier 55. This man-made island has a cool urban park elevated above the water and it is free to visit.

Pier 57 also has a food hall and rooftop park with great views across the Hudson River to Hoboken.

Stop By Grand Central Terminal

This historic Beaux-Arts train station is more than just a transit hub, it's a piece of New York history.

The site of Grand Central Terminal has been a transportation hub since 1871, when the original Grand Central Depot was built. It served multiple railroads but was later replaced by the current Grand Central Station which opened on February 2, 1913. At the time, it was the largest train station in the world with 44 platforms serving 67 tracks.

At the heart of Grand Central Terminal, you'll find the breathtaking Main Concourse. It has been featured on a number of movies and TV shows and is known for its iconic "celestial

ceiling", marble floors, and the famous four-faced brass clock on top of the information booth.

As an interesting side note, the celestial ceiling mural depicts the different constellations, but it was painted in reverse orientation. It is believed that this was done to represent how the constellations might look from heaven.

The Whispering Gallery is a fun little hidden gem. It is located near the Oyster Bar and allows visitors to experience a unique acoustic phenomenon. If you stand at one corner of the archway and whisper, the sound travels across to the opposite corner, it's pretty cool!

Another hidden gem is the "Campbell Apartment", a former private office that has been restored and now serves as a bar and lounge.

The Transit Museum Annex has a small museum that features rotating exhibits on the history of transportation in New York City and offers a glimpse into the evolution of the subway system.

I recommend booking a [guided tour](#) to learn about the terminal's history, architecture, and secrets.

A Few More Recommendations

I hope this guide will help you discover the best things to do in New York City if you're visiting for the first time! There is so much to do and see, it's impossible to fit it all into one trip. If you have time, here are a few more recommendations:

- See a show on or off Broadway.
- Visit a museum like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the MoMA, and the American Museum of Natural History.
- Explore popular neighborhoods like Soho and Greenwich Village where you'll find the famous *Friends* building.
- Watch a performance at Radio City Music Hall.
- See the famous Flat Iron building.
- Take a ride on the Roosevelt Island Tramway.
- Tour the Morgan Library and Museum.
- Visit Hudson Yards where you can shop, dine, see The Vessel, and go to the top of the Edge NYC observation deck.