

New York! New York!

By Steve Tuck

New York City is home to 12 million people, but they're just a drop in the bucket compared to the number of bodies often occupying the city spaces. The most visited city in the U.S, its population swells by more than 70 million tourists annually.

Even more surprising is just how small the actual city is. One thing visitors learn very quickly: good walking shoes are a must. Everything is just blocks apart.

A good part of your time is spent looking up. There are so many tall buildings and what is remarkable is how old many of them are. The Empire State Building was built in 1930 and 1931 and has 102 floors. It stands out like a giant seen for miles around. The lights at the top are energy efficient and are as beautiful close up as from afar.

At least two hours is necessary for a relaxing visit to this landmark — and that depends on the length of the line-ups and the weather; on a clear day, in high tourist season, allow more time. We decided the best way to get both an orientation and see all the sights was to take the Gray Line Sightseeing bus tours. There are four and for \$50 you can go on all: South Loop, North Loop, Brooklyn and an Evening Tour.

Each takes about two hours and you can hop-on/hop-off (except the Evening Tour) as you wish. The price lets you select what you want to ride within 24 hours of purchase.

A great way to view the city is take the Staten Island Ferry that runs between St. George on Staten Island and Whitehall Street, at the lower end of Manhattan. More than 60,000 people travel this ferry daily and there are five boats for a total of 109 trips on a typical weekday. The day we travelled was clear and the views of the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island and looking back at the skyscrapers and bridges of lower Manhattan, absolutely superb.

The ferry runs 24 hours a day and best of all, it's free. This is undoubtedly the best bargain you'll find and truly worth the time. The added bonus is that everyone walks everywhere, because nothing is really very far away in NYC, thus the ride on the ferry provides some relief and a chance to sit and watch the scenery go by.

Perhaps the greatest asset of NYC is Central Park. This expanse of parkland — 843 acres — right in the upper end of Manhattan is surrounded by some of the priciest real estate in the country.

Apartments there have housed such luminaries as Jackie Kennedy and John Lennon and continue to house multimillionaires — in fact, the penthouse of one building went for \$49 million. But the park is home to millions of people who walk their dogs; relax under the trees on a hot summer day; rent a power toy sailboat to sail on the lake; ride a carousel, pitch a ball; or just stroll for seemingly endless miles. It's open 6 a.m. to 1 a.m., seven days a week. Like the State Island Ferry, it's free.

The various neighbourhoods that make up NYC are intertwined and each has its own fascination. Chinatown has grown huge and has pushed back some of the other neighbourhoods. As you walk along the sidewalks — absolutely chock-a-block with people, most looking at tour maps — the storefronts open to display their goods: fresh fish, produce, clothing, the list is endless. Want a name brand watch? You can buy an "Olex" for a fraction of what a "Rolex" costs.

As you walk along, the signs switch from one corner to the next from Chinese to Italian. Little Italy is a fabulous place to walk around, especially at lunch or dinner time. Endless restaurants offer all sorts of Italian dishes. We wandered into Grotta Azzura Ristorante, that advertises itself as "New York's Original 'Blue Grotta'" and famous since 1908. It's in the heart of Little Italy at 177 Mulberry Street. At lunch they have probably the best deal going: a choice from six different pastas and a similar choice of main entree for just \$9.95 In a city where you might find a \$20 hamburger, this was an oasis. Apparently it was Frank Sinatra's favourite restaurant — bet you can't guess the music that was playing.

Although the sightseeing bus tours are a great way to see the city, the fastest and most convenient is to go underground. The NYC subway is made up of numerous lines that travel for miles and at breakneck speeds. There are express trains that whisk through stations where the local trains stop.

Finally, although folks who have watched Law and Order might think otherwise, NYC is quite safe. There are police everywhere on the subways. There has been a huge crackdown on crime and the result is that one can travel around feeling very safe indeed.

Would we go back? You bet! We love N.Y.

Steve Tuck is the publisher of the BC Interior edition of Forever Young.