



**L**IKE all world cities, New York is constantly reinventing itself, and if you keep off the beaten track, every visit can seem like the first visit. So, with this in mind, I decided to skip the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the Staten Island Ferry and all the other tourist must-dos. I wanted to see things which I definitely had not seen before.

Early in my visit, I had an appointment to visit a colleague in one of the dodgier parts of Manhattan – Alphabet City. Avenues A, B and C have always had a scary reputation, and the area still isn't exactly relaxing, but as I strolled around, I realised that, absurdly, the place seemed more eco-friendly than it ever had before.

Sure, the elementary schools were still guarded by armed policemen, and a couple of shop windows had been shattered by bullets, but I was also seeing several derelict spaces converted into flourishing and well tended community allotments. Could it be possible that the residents here were spending less time shooting at each other and more time growing their own fruit and veg?

Further north west, I discovered that what had been an abandoned elevated railroad had also been transformed into an example of artfully tamed nature. Running up the West Side of Manhattan (currently from Gansevoort Street to 20th Street), the High Line Park is one of New York's most popular new attractions, cleverly landscaped using naturally-grow-

# New York, New York – but with a difference

Move over Statue of Liberty, Empire State Building and Bloomingdale's, **Jenny Woolf** opted to experience the hustle and bustle of the original American city instead of the traditional touristy must-dos. Remember, they named it twice for a very good reason...

ing wild plants, with many of the old tracks and some of the ex-industrial buildings incorporated into the scheme. Works of art in various media are scattered about. My favourite was Stephen Vitiellos' aural creation, "A Bell for Every Minute" in which a different New York bell – clock, phone, church – sounds every sixty seconds.

In fact, sitting on the High Line in the morning sun, while the city buzzed below and the bells sounded out, was a peaceful experience. What is more, the nearby Hudson riverfront had also been transformed into a landscaped succession of piers and walkways, where many folk obviously regularly went for an amble with their dogs. The country was creeping in elsewhere, too. St

Luke's in the Fields church, in nearby Greenwich Village, now has a wonderful hidden-away garden with winding paths and spreading trees, with an extraordinarily large number of soft-spoken, volunteer gardeners. So soft, so quiet, so lovely....

But I'd come to visit New York, so I didn't really want too much peace and quiet. The Tenement Museum at 97 Orchard Street, on the Lower East Side, offers a lively and more characteristic glimpse into the city's origins.

Over the last few years, researchers have restored six apartments in a tenement house dating from the 1860s. Hundreds of newly-arrived immigrant families passed through it in its time. Now, six of those families have

had their lives re-created with the aid of antique furnishings and props.

Visitors take a guided tour of one of the apartments and "meet" the particular family who lived there, but much of the building is still half-derelict. Cramped and dark, hot in summer and cold in winter, the museum makes it clear that this first stopping place was uncomfortable, dark and noisy, just like so much of New York still is.

The surrounding Lower East Side retained its full-on bustling immigrant character until quite recently. Some of this authenticity survives amidst today's self-consciously quirky clothing shops and modern steampunk cafes, and it's fun to stroll around of an evening spotting the

remaining real old businesses and doing a spot of people-watching. And when the street dramas and sinister old ethnic restaurants pall, there's a huge Wholefoods supermarket – sure sign of gentrification – just a few blocks away on Delancey. Sprawling over acres of shop-floor, it offers every conceivable type of countrified, organic, fair-trade wholesomeness.

On my last day I had lunch with my US publisher, whose offices are in the iconic Flatiron Building. It's not open to the public, and I'd never been inside, but when I got to the top, the views across the city were fabulous. You could see straight down Broadway to the edge of Union Square, which my publisher was planning to visit shortly with his

shopping bag. So what was he going to buy?

"There's a great farmer's market there, four days a week," he enthused. And there was, a great feast of organic cabbages, cauliflower and zucchini spread out in the shade of the skyscrapers.

So that's New York. Peaceful and eco-friendly. Well, not really. This back-to-nature stuff has all just become part of the larger mosaic of the city's life, existing alongside the clubs and cinemas and plays and art, the man with his barrow of rescued kittens in Fifth Avenue, the Smurfs I spotted in a diner, and the bloke dressed up as a corpse in the Rockefeller Center. For although the city is constantly changing, it also, in some indefinable way, remains very much the same.

## BIGAPPLEFACTS

Jenny Woolf stayed at the Barclay InterContinental. For further details of this hotel and the InterContinental Hotel Times Square, visit [www.intercontinental.com](http://www.intercontinental.com)

