



WAKING UP TO THE CITY OF DREAMS

When Broadway went dark and Times Square emptied last spring, **TONY PERROTTET** sought out unexplored corners of the five boroughs to sate his wanderlust—and rekindle his love for New York City.

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A view of Manhattan at sunrise.

FOR NEW YORKERS, April really was the cruelest month. Two weeks earlier, I'd flown back from Australia, straight into Day One of the city's surreal lockdown. By the time I was ready to poke my head back outside my East Village apartment, the world had radically shrunk. I was aware of the existential irony: I was a travel writer unable to travel.

On my bookshelf was one of the great satires of the peripatetic life, *A Journey Around My Room*, written in 1790 by the French officer Xavier de Maistre. When placed under house arrest for six weeks for fighting in an illegal duel, de Maistre set off to explore his one-room prison as if on a great voyage, reporting back on such exotic wonders as his sofa, bed, and carpet as breathlessly as if he were charting the South Pacific.

De Maistre's point, of course, is that we need to look at the familiar with fresh eyes, and that even the most circumscribed world can offer marvelous revelations. As a writer "confined to quarters" myself, I would just have to treat New York as de Maistre did his bedroom, with my apartment on 10th Street serving as Base Camp. Why not explore the city and seek out nooks and crannies I hadn't seen before? I put on my metaphorical pith helmet and sallied forth into the wild.

For the first several weeks, I confined myself to a few streets in my neighborhood. Walking the near-deserted avenues, the natural world took on a new importance. I observed the daily nuances of the weather as never before, clocking the hour of approaching dusk and the slow shift of the seasons. Did Tompkins Square Park always have such ravishing flowers in spring? Walking south, I was stopped in my tracks by a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, the sun behind it like a nuclear blast.

My little cosmos expanded when I graduated to Citi Bike. I set forth on more ambitious jaunts, encouraged by the eerie absence of traffic. I learned that bike lanes run the entire waterfront around downtown Manhattan, snaking past Battery Park and the Freedom Tower. Venturing west to Hudson River Park, I discovered a quiet corner to watch the sunset, when even New Jersey looks like Florence.

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The next step was to make expeditions to Brooklyn—first by bike, then by ferry. I felt as exuberant as Walt Whitman in his poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”: *Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm’d Manhattan?* The next maritime excursion was even more ambitious—Queens!—a fabled land I knew mostly through *Seinfeld*.

As a die-hard Manhattanite, these out-of-borough experiences forced me to put together a mental map of the city’s jigsaw of neighborhoods. For years, I had been emerging from subway stations in Long Island City, Greenpoint, and Sunset Park, all of which seemed like unconnected enclaves. Now I saw how the entire city unfolded. It had only taken me 25 years.

New York revived its urban pleasures in leisurely increments, teasing its residents like a burlesque dancer. The great turning point was the arrival of outdoor dining. Restaurants seized the sidewalks and curbside lanes, creating airy spaces garlanded with string lights and hemmed by potted plants. Avenues blocked off to traffic evoked Paris in the 1920s, with socially distant tables providing unheard-of elbow room in

a city where diners have traditionally been sandwiched together without mercy.

Of course, there were downsides. A thunderstorm would destroy the best-laid plans. A relaxing drink might be interrupted by a blaring fire engine just feet from your table. And for New Yorkers accustomed to late-night carousing, it was a shock when service stopped at the stroke of 11 p.m. “Even frigging Cinderella got to party until midnight,” one waiter joked.

The alfresco dining boom had an unexpected side effect: it stimulated all the pent-up creativity of performing artists who, weary of Zoom shows, brought live music, stand-up comedy, and even improv to the streets. Guitarists began popping out of the open windows at the grungy bar Marshall Stack on the Lower East Side. One Saturday night, I stumbled across a band playing in a church courtyard on 10th Avenue—an event called Funk on the High Line—while a portable wood-fired oven cooked Neapolitan pizza.

Even in semi-lockdown, the city offered only-in-New-York surprises. Having a drink at the Frying Pan boat on the Hudson River, I was startled by a series of explosions—the Macy’s Fourth of July fireworks, set off unannounced on July 1, so crowds wouldn’t have the chance to gather. One summer midnight I cycled to deepest Bushwick, where folk musicians played on the deck of an abandoned boat in an industrial canal, bathed in the reflected floodlights of a nearby factory. Such random pleasures felt like gifts—reminders of a life before the world ground to a halt.

De Maistre was right. The limitations on my movement forced me to pay attention, making every moment feel fresh and rich. No coffee has tasted quite so delicious as the first cappuccino I bought from a lonely barista serving from a doorway in Dumbo. The most fabulous concert in Madison Square Garden will never compare with the mad exuberance of Broadway singers performing Prince’s “Purple Rain” in Astoria’s makeshift drive-in, Radial Park, prompting everyone present to leap up and dance.

Dorothy Parker wrote, “New York is always hopeful. Always it believes that something good is about to come off, and it must hurry to meet it.” I thought of this on a visit to the Whitney Museum, when I spotted a refrigerator in the gift shop filled with cans labeled MIRACLE SELTZER. It was an arty, tongue-in-cheek symbol of Parker’s hope, offering “pure carbonated water to make all your dreams come true.” I paused for a moment, then purchased three. ●