

# How to Feel Like a New York City Family

It goes without saying that New York is a city of unparalleled cultural richness, boasting world-class museums, performing-arts troupes, and restaurants. But what *isn't* so widely known is how much of New York is accessible to families. Before we had our daughter, my husband and I dined out in restaurants whenever we felt like it, went to movie theaters in the afternoon, and spent hours leisurely strolling through art galleries and museums. As grown-ups, we found that there was no shortage of fun things for us to do. After Maisie came along, in my quest to become a typically overinformed New York parent, I did some digging. What on earth do I *do* with this poor child? I felt it was my duty as a concerned citizen to make the city more hospitable to children. But hold up there—what's this? Who knew that New York City had some 1,000 playgrounds, and that Central Park alone has 21 magical playgrounds, where kids can scamper on fanciful stone bridges, porpoise sprinklers, and 45-foot-long curved slides? Or that regular story-time hours for kids are held all over the city, including in the beautiful MoMA sculpture garden? Or that the original Winnie-the-Pooh bear resides in the New York Public Library—and you can see it for free? It seems that while I was gallivanting around Manhattan untethered by children, a number of forward-thinking pioneers were busily making the city a better place for its kids. Hooray!

We've discovered that the public parks are a wonder, and a godsend for families whose habitat is the concrete urban jungle. We've learned that the city's museums have unparalleled collections and thrillingly innovative programs for children. We've found that the zoos are some of the finest and most forward-thinking in the country. And we've found ourselves, as parents, falling in love with the city all over again. It's like mining a vein of pure gold in your own backyard.

Still, even with the parks, the museums, the boat rides, and the seasonal spectacles, sometimes the most memorable New York moments are the serendipitous ones you encounter as you stroll about the city. You can see the most amazing things just by turning a corner. We've stumbled upon ballet aerialists swinging from the New York Stock Exchange. We've seen dragon dances on Chinatown streets. We've listened to Brazilian drummers doing impromptu concerts on the street. Some new company is always handing out free energy drinks or chewing gum (one day we got a free kitchen baggie sealer). Movie sets pop up all over the city, and you never know when you'll stumble upon a major production with megawatt stars hanging out in hair rollers and eating a bag of chips (Stars: They're just like us!). Why, just last Sunday, while pushing our daughter in a stroller, we encountered a gentleman with two parrots on his shoulders, one of whom was named Gazpacho. And to my daughter's delight, Gazpacho clambered onto my hand and gave me a tweak with his beak. Who can beat that?

## 4 ON YOUR MARK, GET SET, GO!

This is a big place to tackle in just a few short days. The pulse and tempo of New York City can be discombobulating at first if you're not used to it—my North Carolina nephew actually got dizzy from his first encounter with the noise and commotion—but once you attune yourself, you'll find it a tremendously exciting place, especially for youngsters. It's easy to spot a native New York City kid: They tend to stride down the sidewalk with an unerring radar for other people, bikes, and cars. But I've also seen many kids who've only been here a few days shed their skittishness and start to walk with that same savvy, confident stride, smoothly maneuvering their way around the city. Kids are sponges, remember? They learn fast, and the city's got a lot to teach them.

This guidebook is filled with all the wonderful things you and your family can do in the city. So let's dispense with some of the negatives right from the get-go. First of all: **Yes, there's crime in New York.** But the good news is that crime rates have fallen dramatically in the past 10 years. So dramatically, in fact, that when a mugging occurs in my neighborhood, it's a shock. Still, the city is not the place to drop your guard. Stay alert, and follow the tips in "Safety," in chapter 3.

Second: **Yes, it's deliriously easy to spend money here.** Whenever I visit the suburbs or go down to my native state of North Carolina, I'm always convinced I'm being vastly undercharged at grocery and convenience stores. Why on earth do businesses charge such high prices in New York City? *Because they can.* You are a captive shopper on this island, and there's so much to do and see, who has time to schlep to a discount store in another borough just to save a few bucks?

But there *are* ways to cut costs with your family in tow. (Back in the day, we used to crash art openings in SoHo for the free hors d'oeuvres and wine, but, oh, never mind. . . .) Grocery stores are costly enough in the Big Apple, but Korean delis, the convenience stores of the city, *really* inflate prices. Four soft drinks will cost you six bucks—seven if you throw in a small bag of chips. If your hotel has a **kitchenette**, stock up on drinks and snacks at a local chain supermarket. Also take advantage of **complimentary breakfasts** or—even better—hotels that have a "**Kids Eat Free**" policy. Hit the city's **greenmarkets** for fast, healthy, inexpensive snacks like delicious apples, breads, fruit, cheeses—you'll be supporting local farmers in the process. Check out [www.cenyc.org/greenmarket](http://www.cenyc.org/greenmarket) to find out what's in season and if there's a greenmarket near you. **Eat ethnic**—good, cheap Chinese restaurants can be found everywhere in the city, and Ninth Avenue between 57th and 34th streets is just one great ethnic eatery after another, from Brazilian to Thai to Peruvian. It's a tourist trap, but Little Italy will fill your kids up with their three-course *prix-fixe* lunches, and decent pizza places are on every corner of the city. And don't forget **transportation costs**. Buy unlimited-ride MetroCard passes if you plan to crisscross the city by bus or subway. Or walk: It's the cheapest and best way to get the flavor of the city by far.

Third: **Street people remain a reality of life in 21st-century New York.** In your travels, you and your kids will likely spot vagrants sleeping in doorways or pawing through corner trash bins. People may ask you for money, and it's certainly your prerogative to offer them some change. But it's also fine to smile and simply say "Sorry," and move along. While these encounters may be uncomfortable at times, that's just the flip side of one of this city's great pluses: Everybody, from the Wall Street banker to the greengrocer to the starving actor waiting tables, shares the streets. It's all part of the fabric of this crazy-quilt, melting-pot, gumbo stew we call New York City.

## 1 FROMMER'S FAVORITE NEW YORK CITY FAMILY EXPERIENCES

- **Spending the Christmas Holidays in New York:** Crusty old New York turns unabashedly giddy with celebration during the holidays. At Christmas, you really feel the heart of the Big City. In December, Rockefeller Plaza is an especially thrilling holiday sight, with the city's biggest Christmas tree (a real doozy) twinkling with lights. The tiny Rockefeller Center ice rink is lively with the clash of blades and the tinny blare of piped-in music. Two spectacular holiday shows run the length of the season: The New York Botanical Garden's **Holiday Train Show** and **Radio City Music Hall's Christmas Spectacular**. *The Nutcracker* ballet is produced in two different venues. See chapter 11.
- **Taking a Boat Ride Around Manhattan:** When you're out on the sparkling waters of New York Harbor, with the salt air in your hair and the sea gulls gliding overhead, you'll thrill to the Manhattan skyline in all its glory. It's a fantastic way to see the town. See "Getting Around," in chapter 4.
- **Visiting Chinatown:** The kids I know from out of town always head down here for good food, cheap toys, and excellent street theater. Come during the Chinese New Year for thrilling dragon dances in the street. The neighborhood always feels exotic to me, too. See chapters 6 & 8.
- **Spending a Sunday Afternoon at the American Museum of Natural History:** Weekends are definitely family time at this magnificent big museum on the Upper West Side, but the more, the merrier—these dim, cool, high-ceilinged halls never seem too crowded. Head for the musty old back corners where there are old-fashioned dioramas or stop by the Natural Science Center in the early afternoons for hands-on puttering with plants and live animals (for ages 4 and older). See p. 152.
- **Talking to the Animals in the New York Zoos:** The Central Park Zoo is perfect for toddlers: It's small and compact but still spacious enough to feel like a real nature outing. Check out the feeding schedule as you walk in the front entrance—the Sea Lion Pool is the centerpiece of this tidily landscaped little gem of a zoo. Don't expect fancy tricks, but there'll be enough barking and diving and splashing to satisfy everybody. Just yards away is the charming Tisch Zoo, where little ones can feed baby llamas, sheep, and goats as the traffic above on Fifth Avenue whizzes by. In the world-class Bronx Zoo, forward-thinking zoo officials have created enclosures as close to animals' natural habitats as possible, where visitors ride a monorail above free-roaming tigers, elephants, and rhinos. See p. 157, 158, and 182.
- **Riding a Bike Through the Canyons of Wall Street on Sunday:** The suits have the weekend off, and the streets are quiet and pretty empty. Rent a bike, and cruise the narrow corridors with the muscular skyscrapers of the 1920s looming above. It's a thrill. See chapter 8.
- **Playing in Central Park:** It's über kiddie land in every way, with a breathtaking array of playgrounds, pools, and attractions to keep children busy and happy for hours, days, weeks. Point toddlers to the Carousel and the Swedish Marionette Theater; and send the older kids to the state-of-the-art playgrounds, ball fields, and pools. See chapter 9.

- **Root, Root, Rooting for the Home Team:** On a sunny summer afternoon, there are few pleasures more fully satisfying than heading to the Bronx to see the Bronx Bombers play in the new Yankee Stadium, or to Flushing, Queens, to catch the Mets in their the new ballpark, Citi Field. In either case, nobody minds if your kids make noise, you can leave early if they get tired, and there's plenty of food available—especially the overpriced hot dogs that are so much a

part of the experience. In the winter, head to Madison Square Garden to watch the Knicks (basketball) or the Rangers (hockey) play—and, if you can snag tickets, take a bus to the New Jersey Meadowlands to watch a football game starring the 2008 Super Bowl champs, the New York Giants, or the New York Jets, with new quarterback Brett Favre. See “Spectator Sports” in chapter 11.

## 2 THE BEST HOTEL BETS

- **Most Family-Friendly:** The **Doubletree Guest Suites**, 1568 Broadway (☎ 800/222-8733 or 212/719-1600; p. 79), provides not only standard two-room accommodations sleeping four or six, but also kitchenettes, baby equipment, childproof rooms, and a super toddler playroom. The Upper East Side's **The Loews Regency**, 540 Park Ave. (☎ 212/759-4100; p. 77), offers kids all sorts of amenities, including their own concierge; and **Le Parker Meridien**, 118 W. 57th St. (☎ 800/543-4300 or 212/245-5000; p. 79), has special welcoming packets for young guests; concierges at both of these hotels are full of great tips for kids visiting NYC.
- **Best Suite Deals:** The **Doubletree Guest Suites**, 1568 Broadway (☎ 800/222-8733 or 212/719-1600; p. 79), is a sensible family option, sleeping the whole crew in one unit for a relatively easy price. The **Embassy Suites Hotel**, 102 North End Ave. (☎ 800/EMBASSY or 212/945-0100; p. 90), offers some very favorable rates on weekends for its roomy, sleek suites.
- **Most Peace & Quiet:** It's all relative in New York, of course, but the **Excelsior**, 45 W. 81st St. (☎ 800/368-4575 or 212/362-9200; p. 70), is buffered by

Central Park and the park surrounding the Museum of Natural History, and the **Gracie Inn**, 502 E. 81st St. (☎ 212/628-1700; p. 78), is tucked away on an Upper East Side street near the East River. Even in Midtown you can find residential quiet at the **Millennium U.N. Plaza**, 1 United Nations Plaza (☎ 866/866-8086 or 212/758-1234; p. 86), and the **Holiday Inn Midtown 57th Street**, 440 W. 57th St. (☎ 888/HOLIDAY or 212/581-8100; p. 82).

- **Best Views:** Two downtown hotels feature dynamite New York Harbor views starring Lady Liberty and Ellis Island: The **Ritz-Carlton New York**, 2 West St. (☎ 800/241-3333 or 212/344-0800; p. 89), wins hands down for its glorious open westward views from a majority of guest rooms, but there are several rooms with great harbor views also at the **Marriott New York Downtown**, 85 West St. (☎ 800/228-9290 or 212/385-4900; p. 91).
- **When Price Is No Object:** My vote goes to **The Carlyle**, 35 E. 76th St. (☎ 800/227-5737 or 212/744-1600; p. 75), for its dignified East Side calm; its well-nigh-perfect service; and the spaciousness of its designer-decorated rooms, which really deserve to be called

apartments. Spring for a suite with a Central Park view and a grand piano. The **Four Seasons**, 57 E. 57th St. (☎ 800/819-5053 or 212/758-5700; p. 83), has a stylish Midtown address, sleek if somewhat small rooms (but then, you can afford a suite, right?), fabulous service, and a surprisingly kid-friendly gourmet restaurant.

- **When Price Is Your Main Object:** You can't go wrong with the **Travel Inn**, 515 W. 42nd St. (☎ 800/869-4630 or 212/695-7171; p. 83), which delivers roomy, clean, fairly quiet motel rooms, plus a huge pool and free parking, for around \$150 to \$200 a night.
- **Best Lobby:** You've gotta love the classic Art Deco lobby of the **Waldorf=Astoria**, 301 Park Ave. (☎ 800/WALDORF, 800/HILTONS, or 212/355-3000; p. 85), with its marble-faced pillars, deep carpeting, ornamental plasterwork, the magnificent Park Avenue entry chandelier, and that amazing clock near the front desk.
- **Best Pool:** The pool at the **Millennium U.N. Plaza Hotel**, 44th Street and First

Avenue (☎ 866/866-8086 or 212/758-1234; p. 86), has it all: views, cleanliness, handsome tilework, and not much of a crowd.

- **Tops for Toddlers:** When all is said and done, the **Hotel Wales**, 1295 Madison Ave. (☎ 212/876-6000; p. 77), wins for its Carnegie Hill location, friendly staff, breakfast buffet, residential calm, and Puss-in-Boots theme. The **Doubletree Guest Suites**, 1568 Broadway (☎ 800/222-8733 or 212/719-1600; p. 79), scores big here, too, for its suite convenience and toddler playroom.
- **Tops for Teens:** Budding bohemians may want to be in Greenwich Village at the **Washington Square Hotel**, 103 Waverly Place (☎ 800/222-0418 or 212/777-9515; p. 89), while trendsetters will gravitate to the way-cool decor and hipster cachet of **The Paramount**, 235 W. 46th St. (☎ 866/760-3174 or 212/764-5500; p. 81), or the art-jazzed vibe of the **Gershwin Hotel**, 7 E. 27th St. (☎ 212/545-8000; p. 88).

### 3 THE BEST DINING BETS

- **Best Place to Eat Outside:** It's a seasonal occupation, of course, but when the city starts to thaw after a long, chilly winter, everyone heads outside—and you should, too. We love the **Boat Basin Café**, W. 79th St., at the Hudson River (☎ 212/496-5542; p. 112), for the spectacular Hudson River views, the vaulted limestone setting, and the wonderful smell of burgers sizzling on an outdoor grill.
- **Best Genuine Time Warp:** The city's vintage venues are a dying breed these days, but you can always count on the **Lexington Candy Shop**, 1226 Lexington Ave. (☎ 212/288-0057; p. 116), for good old-fashioned vibes. It's a living relic from 1925, with wooden booths, chrome-rimmed stools, and a classic New York egg cream.
- **Best Store Dining:** **American Girl Café**, 609 Fifth Ave. (☎ 877/247-5223; p. 118), will thrill your American Girl aficionado as much as it impresses her parents. The food is actually good, and there are special doll seats where girls can prop their American Girl dolls while they eat.
- **Best Dinner Entertainment:** Even seen-it-all city kids get a kick out of the table show at **Benihana**, 47 W. 56th St. (☎ 212/581-0930; p. 118), the trail-blazing Japanese steakhouse where flying knives and dexterous teppanyaki chefs became a showbiz standard. But

it's the little ones whose eyes will light up at the spectacle.

- **Best Tea Party:** Afternoon tea couldn't be cozier than at the whimsical **Alice's Tea Cup**, at 102 W. 73rd St. (☎ 212/799-3006) or 156 E. 64th St. (☎ 212/486-9200).
- **Best Healthy Comfort Food:** You may not think that a place that specializes in healthy, organic, sustainable foods would draw kids by the barrelful—but when a place like **The City Bakery** (3 W. 18th St.; ☎ 212/366-1414; p. 128) includes unbeatable versions of fried chicken, mac 'n' cheese, French toast, and quesadilla, why wouldn't they come? A spinning chocolate wheel, fresh hot chocolate (with homemade marshmallows), and the city's best chocolate chip cookies don't hurt either.
- **Best Breakfast:** TriBeCa's **Bubby's**, 120 Hudson St. (☎ 212/219-0666; p. 143), welcomes kids for breakfast until 4pm daily; the weekend brunches are especially popular.
- **Best Pancakes:** Okay, so my daughter has rarely met a pancake she doesn't like, but the big, thick numbers at **The Smith** (55 Third Ave.; ☎ 212/420-9800; p. 133) leave her speechless; they also come with a cinnamon-dusted banana-and-walnut topping.
- **Best Family-Friendly Restaurant for Grown-ups:** For further proof that this truly is the golden age of children in NYC, witness as more and more city restaurants develop kid-friendly menus and attitudes. My current favorite is **Odeon** (145 W. Broadway; ☎ 212/233-0507; p. 142), which has transcended its übertrendy 1970s past to become a great neighborhood *boîte*, with solid food for the whole family and no cutesy kids' menu.
- **Best Food Court:** The Grand Central Dining Concourse is much better than it needs to be—why, I'd even go out of my way to eat there at lunch. It's got

Two Boots Pizza, Brothers Barbecue, Manhattan Chili, Junior's, Zocalo, and Hale and Hearty Soups, among others (oh, and you can stop at the little window outside Grand Central Oyster Bar for some great clam chowder). But my favorite food court—and the perfect place for a sit-down family lunch—is **Chelsea Market** (75 Ninth Ave.; p. 130). It's a very cool place, set in an old biscuit factory whose hardworking industrial parts have been transformed: a waterfall here, castlelike torches there. The food is great, from the Cleaver Company's delicious sustainable fare to Buon Italia's pastas, frittatas, and pizzas to Fat Witch's rich brownies.

- **Best Theme Restaurant:** If you must dine in a theme restaurant (and I know that sometimes you have no choice in the matter), head to **Ellen's Stardust Diner**, 1650 Broadway (☎ 212/956-5151; p. 122), where the waitstaff belt out their favorites to a karaoke machine in this Times Square cafe's weekend dinner shows.
- **Good Neighbor Award:** To **Keith McNally**, whose painstakingly re-created French bistros and Italian trattoria have become warm, comfortable neighborhood favorites among both the cognoscenti and families alike. Neat trick, that. You and your children will be treated well at **Pastis, Morandi**, and **Schiller's Liquor Bar**.
- **Best Venue for a Children's Party:** You can have a party in any number of restaurants these days, but few restaurants are as capable at handling splendid kids' celebrations as **Sarabeth's Central Park South** (40 Central Park South; ☎ 212/826-5959; p. 124). And few places will leave the grown-ups happier.
- **Best Dim Sum:** When it comes to the Chinatown lunchtime tradition of dining on small servings of dumplings, skewers, rolls, and other delectables right at your table, you can't go wrong

with **Ping's** (22 Mott St.; ☎ 212/602-9988; p. 141) or **Golden Unicorn** (18 E. Broadway; ☎ 212/941-0951; p. 141). For true spectacle, head to **Jing Fong**, at 18 Elizabeth St. (☎ 212/964-5256; p. 142), whose giant Hong Kong-style banquet hall is pure Vegas.

- **Best Pizza:** The nod goes to **John's Pizza**; the original Greenwich Village location, at 278 Bleecker St. (☎ 212/243-1680; p. 132), is still the best, but the branches at 408 E. 64th St. (☎ 212/935-2895; p. 117) and 260 W. 44th St. (☎ 212/391-7560; p. 127) serve up thin-crust brick-oven pies that are pretty darn close to perfection.
- **Best Family-Style Italian:** If you can't get to Arthur Avenue in the Bronx, then head to **Carmine's** (200 W. 44th St., ☎ 212/221-3800; or 2450 Broadway, ☎ 212/362-2200; p. 120 and 109) for great big platters of Southern Italian-style pasta, salads, and more. The food is remarkably good and the ambience properly clamorous (and amazingly satisfying) for a place this big. It's quite an efficient assembly line.
- **Best Desserts:** Yes, it's often packed and probably overexposed, but the hot-fudge sundaes and whimsical decor at **Serendipity 3** (225 E. 60th St.; ☎ 212/838-3531) make children very, very happy.