

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Best of New York City

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Celebrating the most festive parades and seasons
  - ▶ Finding rooms in the best hotels, both grand and budget
  - ▶ Enjoying meals at the most delicious restaurants and street eats
  - ▶ Visiting Lady Liberty and other top attractions
  - ▶ Giving the credit card a workout at the top shops
  - ▶ Choosing the spots with the best nightlife
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**W**elcome to New York City! No matter when you visit, there's sure to be something of interest going on. In this chapter, I list my choices for the best events, hotels, restaurants, attractions, shopping, culture, and nightlife.

Whether you're looking for a world-class hotel, exotic cuisine to enjoy, or the view from the Empire State building, I have no doubt you'll soon compile your own "Best of" list . . . but here's a good place to start!

### *Best Events*

**Best Parade: West Indian-American Day Carnival and Parade.** Held on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, this is the biggest parade in New York. The music (calypso, soca, reggae, and Latin), the amazing costumes, and the incredible Caribbean food make this an unforgettable experience. If you're lucky enough to be in town on Labor Day, don't miss it. See Chapter 3.

**Best Time of Year to Come to New York: Summer.** Most people prefer the temperate days of fall to visit New York, and that's when the city is most crowded; but my personal favorite season is summer, when the streets are empty, restaurants and shows are easier to get into, and countless free outdoor cultural events abound.

**Best Season in New York: Christmas.** Lighted Christmas trees on Park Avenue, the big snowflake at the corner of 57th Street and Fifth Avenue,





**GREENWICH VILLAGE**

*The once-famous Bohemian enclave where off-beat became the Beats is still the city's best people-watching neighborhood. You won't find any high-rises here, just quaint, narrow streets and beautifully preserved brownstones and townhouses.*

**NOHO**

*I'm not sure why this very tiny stretch of furniture stores, boutiques, and a few restaurants has been designated a neighborhood, but it has. Maybe the powers that decide these things wanted a companion to SoHo so they came up with NoHo (North of Houston Street).*

**EAST VILLAGE**

*The East Village now is home to some of the city's most interesting restaurants and despite its counter-culture reputation, real estate prices are very "establishment."*

**NOLITA**

*Here's another neighborhood that has a cute acronym (North of Little Italy). This is really old Little Italy in architecture, but there is nothing old about the very hip boutiques and cafes that are sprinkled throughout the relatively small enclave.*

**SOHO**

*What once was an artist's destination has become a very affluent and very trendy tourist destination. You'll find just about all the top designer names in retail here housed in historic cast-iron buildings.*

**LOWER EAST SIDE**

*This is where so many immigrants, especially Jewish, settled as their first home in America. And there is still some of that old world feel to the neighborhood but it is fading fast as it becomes the city's newest hot spot for restaurants, bars, and clubs.*

**TRIBECA**

*In the 1980s TriBeCa (Triangle Below Canal), with its sprawling lofts and hip restaurants, became one of the most desirable places to live. After September 11, 2001 and its close proximity to the World Trade Center, the area lost a bit of its luster, but that was only temporary. TriBeCa is thriving once again.*

**LITTLE ITALY**

*Sadly, this once unique and charming neighborhood, squeezed by the expansion of Chinatown, has shrunk to a mere block or two. And what's left, with very few exceptions, is nothing like what it once was. You can't even get a good plate of pasta here anymore.*

## Midtown Orientation

### MIDTOWN EAST

The heart of corporate Manhattan, Midtown East is also where you'll find such landmarks as Grand Central Station, the Empire State Building, St. Patrick's Cathedral, the Chrysler Building, and the United Nations.

### MIDTOWN WEST

This bustling sprawl of an area includes many of the city's best hotels, the Art Deco masterpiece, Rockefeller Center, and a neighborhood called Hell's Kitchen where you'll find some of the city's most ethnically diverse restaurants.

### TIMES SQUARE/ THEATER DISTRICT

In the truly American tradition, everything here is big and gaudy and, as a result, the streets here are constantly crammed with people who have come to gawk at the big and the gaudy — meaning the neon wonderland of Times Square.

### MURRAY HILL

This is a quiet, mostly residential neighborhood. On its southern fringe is the Indo-Pakistani enclave known as Curry Hill.

### GRAMMERCY PARK

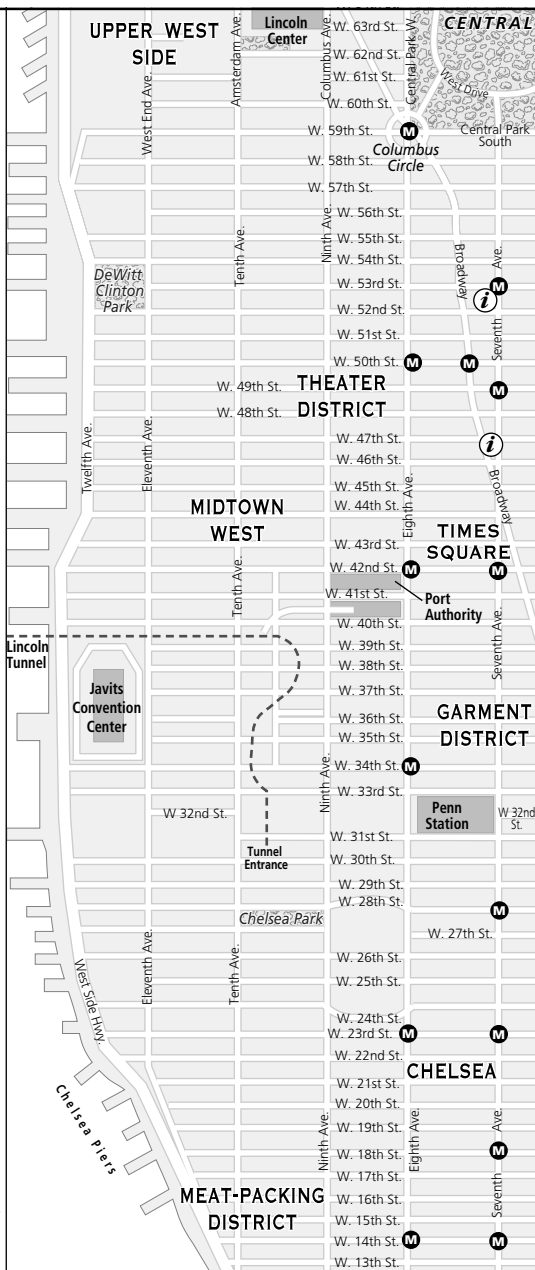
The heart of this neighborhood is the postcard-perfect little park that's so exclusive you need a key to get into it. You don't need a special key to live in the quaint and very beautiful brownstones that surround the park, but you do need money. Many of the buildings here date back to the 1800s, giving the area a real 19th century feel.

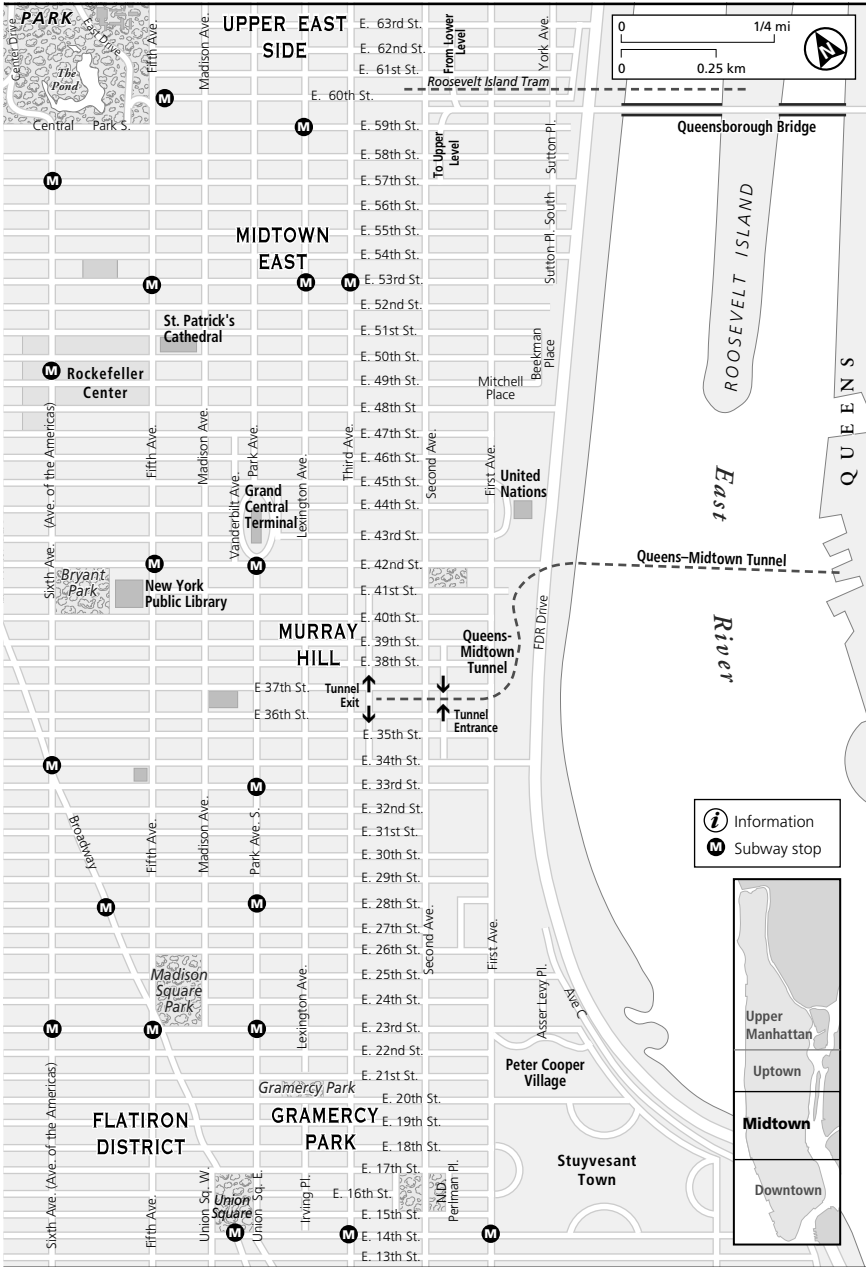
### FLATIRON AND UNION SQUARE

Cheaper rents attracted many publishing and media businesses and, as a result, the neighborhood is now bursting with restaurants and clubs. Along with Union Square, and the wildly popular greenmarket, the Flatiron Building embodies the spirit of this vibrant neighborhood.

### CHELSEA

With galleries everywhere, Chelsea is now one of the city's arts centers. There is an almost small town feel to this neighborhood, which has also become the center for the city's gay population.





## Uptown Orientation

### CENTRAL PARK

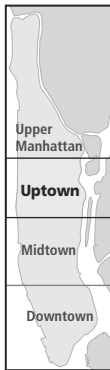
This 843-acre nature retreat in the heart of Manhattan is one of the great parks of the world. Even if nature is not your thing, from the Central Park Zoo to the Carousel, from playgrounds to skating rinks, there is something for everyone in Central Park.


### UPPER WEST SIDE

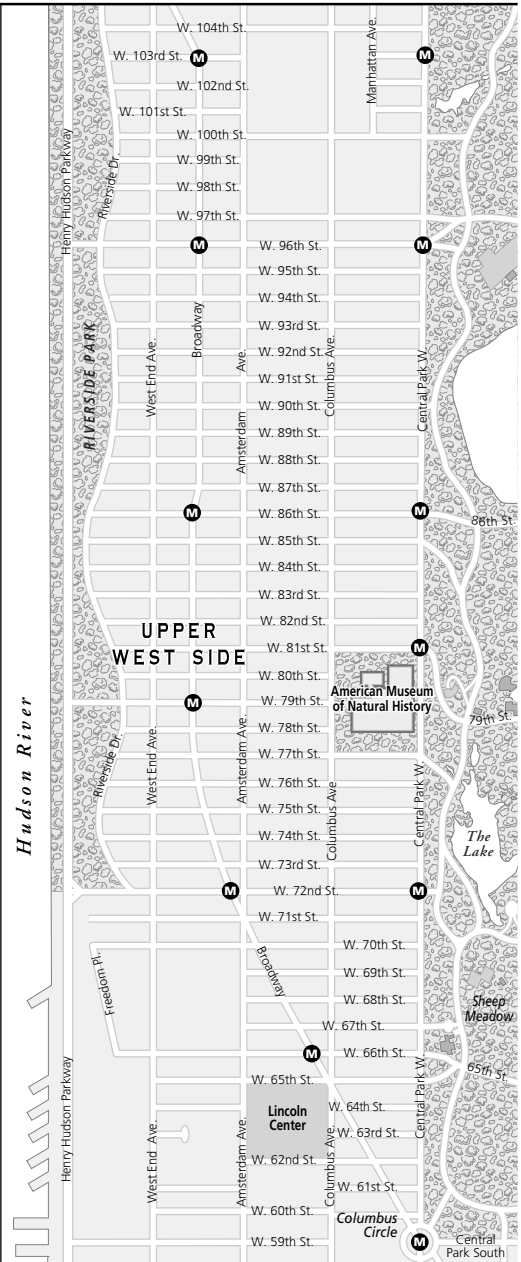
This mostly residential neighborhood also features landmarks like Lincoln Center, the Museum of Natural History, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and is enviable because it is surrounded by two great parks, Central Park and Riverside Park.

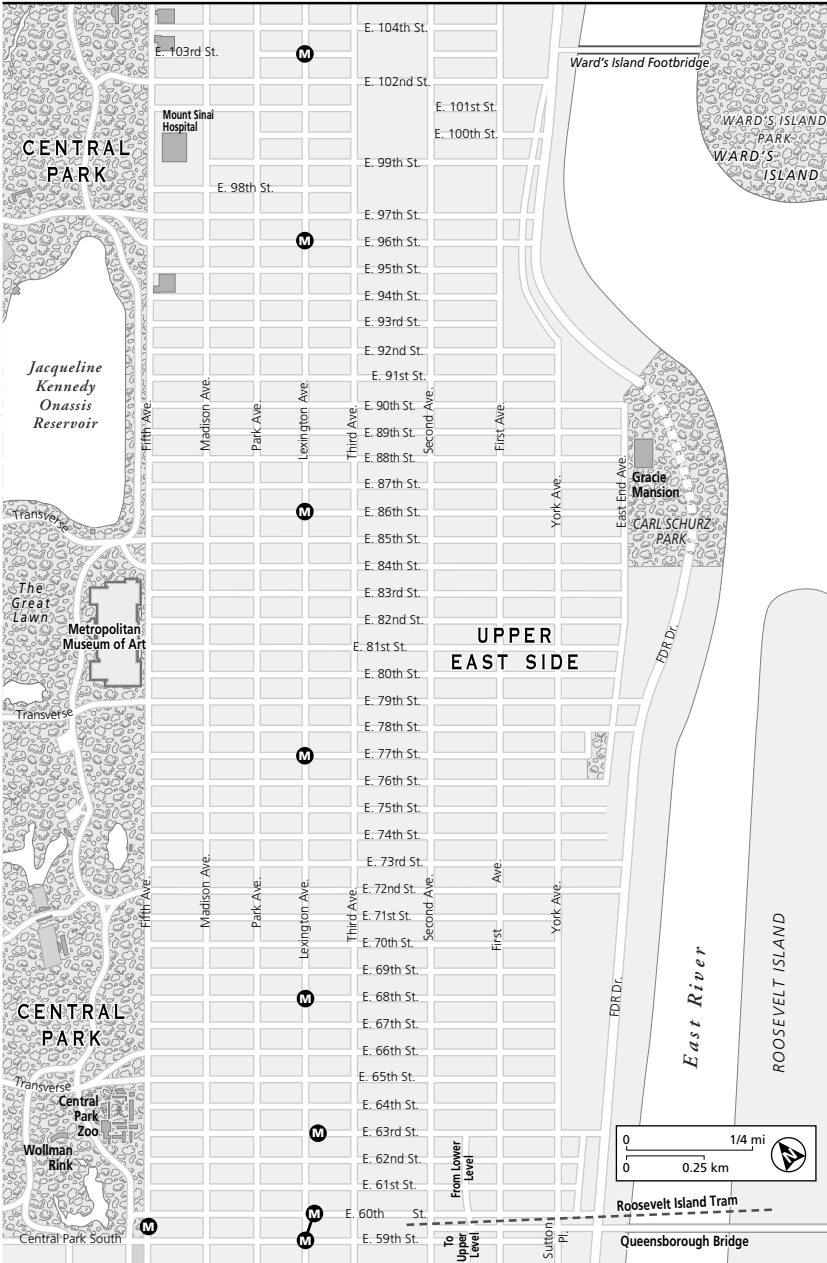
### UPPER EAST SIDE

Long the address of the rich and famous, the Upper East Side is also the home to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim, and other fantastic museums along "Museum Mile." You'll also find a thick concentration of restaurants and bars, and, of course, some great and very expensive shopping along tony Madison Avenue.



 Subway stop





the trees at Rockefeller Center and Lincoln Center, the Hanukah menorah at Grand Army Plaza at Fifth Avenue and 59th Street, the decorations in department store windows, restaurants, and hotels. And even though the crowds, especially around midtown and Rockefeller Center, might bring out the Scrooge in you, the atmosphere is almost always festive and like no other time of year.

**Best Day to Come to New York: New Year's Day.** The holidays are over. You've had enough festivity — see above. You've wisely skipped the insanity of New Year's Eve and arisen fresh and sober. Get out on the town early; you have the city practically to yourself.

## *Best Hotels*

For more information on all the hotels listed, refer to Chapter 9.

**Best Hotel: Ritz-Carlton New York Central Park.** The combination of a great location, just across from Central Park, large well-outfitted rooms, and typically excellent Ritz-Carlton service is as good as it gets.

**Best Hotel for Modern New York Elegance: The Mercer.** The best of the hip, downtown hotels, the Mercer is located in the heart of SoHo. The high-ceilinged, loftlike rooms and suites, some with fireplaces and all with ceiling fans and luxurious bathrooms, are spectacular.

**Best for Classic Old World Elegance: Hotel Plaza Athénée.** That European feel pervades the hotel from the old-world design to the first-rate concierge service.

**Best Trendy Hotel: The Hotel on Rivington.** The first major hotel on the increasingly trendy Lower East Side is a glass marvel with floor to ceiling windows, views galore, soaking tubs, and THOR, one of the hottest bar/restaurants in the city.

**Best Times Square Hotel: Hotel QT.** This moderately-priced recent (2005) addition to the Times Square hotel scene was a very welcome one. There is much to like about the Hotel QT besides its price and location, but what I love best is the swimming pool — in the lobby — with a swim-up bar.

**Best Moderately Priced Hotel: The Lucerne.** This is my favorite hotel on the Upper West Side and one of my favorites in New York. The homey, neighborhood feel of the hotel combined with exceptional service and nice-sized, well-equipped rooms make this a very attractive mid-priced option.

**Best Budget Hotel: Chelsea Lodge.** If you don't mind sharing a toilet with other guests, this charming hotel offers impeccable comforts — including an actual sink and shower — at a budget price.



**Best for Families: Hotel Beacon.** Not only is this hotel a great deal — you can get good-size suites for so much less than you would pay in Midtown — the Upper West Side, with its parks, the Museum of Natural History, and fun, inexpensive restaurants, is also a great neighborhood for children.

**Best Romantic Hotel: Sofitel New York.** How can an almost 400-room hotel be romantic? Maybe it's because the hotel is French-owned and staying here feels like you've escaped for a naughty tryst in Paris.

**Best Hotel Bar: Bemelmans Bar.** in the Carlyle Hotel. Named after book illustrator Ludwig Bemelmans, who created the *Madeline* books and painted the mural in the bar, this romantic, charming bar features white-gloved service and wondrous cocktails.

**Best Hotel Renovation: Carlton Hotel.** This former flophouse has been restored to its 1904 Beaux Arts grandeur by architect David Rockwell. Its sweeping lobby with a two-story waterfall is a marvel.

**Best Hotel Suite: Townhouse Suite in the Kitano New York.** Each of the three one-bedroom suites built inside the landmark town house that is part of this hotel feature a long hallway leading to a sunken living room with original art, a state-of-the-art stereo system, and a tea maker with green tea.

## ***Best Restaurants***

For more information on the restaurants listed, head to Chapter 10.

**Best Restaurant: Aquavit.** Though its new digs are not nearly as charming as its former town house setting, the service and the food are as good as ever.

**Best Special Occasion Restaurant: Chanterelle.** If you want to impress that special loved one, you won't ever go wrong if you choose Chanterelle. The food is consistently superb, the room lovely and intimate, and the service impeccable.

**Best for Romance: Café des Artistes.** If the murals of the naked wood nymphs don't get you in the mood, the old school French cooking coupled with traditional, white-gloved service certainly will.

**Best Chinese: New York Noodletown.** With all the culinary wonders that Chinatown has to offer, this is a tough choice. Noodletown's my current favorite, where the soups are always fresh and comforting and anything that's salt-baked is guaranteed to be sublime.

**Best French: Daniel.** For faultless French cooking, nobody does it better than Chef Daniel Boulud, especially here at his signature restaurant.

**Best Italian: 'Cesca.** It's difficult to find a restaurant that presents dishes totally original to New York, but 'Cesca, with its truly farmhouse rustic cuisine does just that — and very successfully.

**Best Mexican: Pampano.** Another new arrival in New York, and I, for one, am grateful for it. Seafood is what they do best here and that includes the amazing ceviches and the lobster tacos.

**Best Seafood: Oceana,** You won't believe what chef Cornelius Gallagher can do with fish. His culinary creations look so good on the plate that they are worthy of museum status. What's really remarkable is that the food tastes as good as it looks.

**Best Steak: Frankie & Johnnie's.** Whether you choose the former speakeasy that is the original location in the Theater district or the newer branch located in actor John Barrymore's former townhouse, your steak, particularly the house sirloin, will remind you why Frankie & Johnnie's has been around since 1926.

**Best Jewish Deli: Katz's Delicatessen.** This deli's the choice among those who know their kreplach, knishes, and pastrami. No cutesy sandwiches named for celebrities here — just top-notch Jewish classics.

**Best Burger: Burger Joint.** Who woulda thunk that a fancy hotel like **Le Parker Meridien** would be the home to a place called Burger Joint that serves great burgers at great prices?

**Best Pizza: Patsy's Pizzeria.** This great East Harlem pizzeria has been cranking out coal-oven pizza since 1932. It was the favorite of Frank Sinatra, who used to have Patsy's pizzas packed and shipped to him in Vegas.

**Best Breakfast: Good Enough to Eat.** They've been lining up on Amsterdam Avenue on weekend mornings for over 20 years to get a taste of chef/owner Carrie Levin's bountiful home-cooked breakfasts.

**Best Dessert: Fiamma Osteria.** Many impressive pastry chefs work around the city, but few of them can top the remarkable Elizabeth Katz. Her creations make you want to skip the entrees and head straight for dessert.

**Best Ice Cream: Brooklyn Ice Cream Factory.** A treat from the Ice Cream Factory is the perfect reward after a brisk walk across the Brooklyn Bridge. Rich homemade ice cream with a view of the Manhattan skyline — that's a tough combination to beat.

**Best Bagel: Absolute Bagels.** These aren't huge, like some bagels you can find these days, but they're always hot and baked to perfection.

**Best Hot Dog: Gray's Papaya.** The hot dogs are so good here that it's tough to eat just one. But even though they're delicious, stop at two if you know what's best for you.

**Best Times Square Restaurant: Virgil's Real BBQ.** Times Square is a restaurant wasteland with bad theme restaurants or overpriced national chains. Virgil's, in a sense, is a barbecue-theme restaurant, but they do an excellent job of smoking meats.

**Best New/Old Dining Room: Country.** Designed by architect David Rockwell, the upstairs restaurant in the recently renovated Carlton Hotel is a marvel with restored mosaic tiles on the floor, dramatic chandeliers, nooks overlooking the hotel lobby, and most impressive a gorgeous Tiffany skylight dome that had been hidden for years and uncovered during the renovation.

## ***Best Attractions***

For more information on the attractions below, please refer to Chapter 11.

**Best Attraction: Statue of Liberty.** If you have time to do only one thing on your visit to New York, sail to the Lady in the harbor. No other monument embodies the nation's, and the world's, notion of political freedom and economic potential more than Lady Liberty. It is also the ultimate symbol of New York, the personification of the city's vast diversity and tolerance.

**Best Skyscraper: Empire State Building.** Like the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, once again the tallest building in New York, is one of the city's definitive icons. The view from the 86th-floor observatory is unforgettable.

**Best-Looking Building: Chrysler Building.** This award goes to the chrome-topped, gargoyle-laden Art Deco masterpiece, the Chrysler Building.

**Best Historic Building: Grand Central Terminal.** Even if you don't have to catch a train, make sure you visit this Beaux Arts gem that was built in 1913 and beautifully restored in the 1990s to recapture its initial brilliance.

**Best Museum: American Museum of Natural History.** You could spend your entire visit to New York at this 4-square-block museum; there's that much to see. From the famed Dinosaur Hall to the adjoining Rose Center for Earth and Space, the Museum of Natural History houses the world's greatest natural science collection.

**Best Art Museum: Metropolitan Museum of Art.** It's not only the best art museum in New York, but the best in North America as well. The number of masterworks housed here is mind-boggling.

**Best Museum for Older Children: Intrepid Sea-Air-Space Museum.** This humongous retired aircraft carrier offers almost as many thrills as a theme park. **Note:** Closed for renovations until 2008.

**Best Museum for Younger Children: Children's Museum of Manhattan.** This museum is strictly hands-on and designed for ages 2 to 12. Beyond the normal exhibits, something special is always happening here.

**Best Park: Central Park.** Though New York has many wonderful parks, Central Park has no real competition here. It's one of the world's greatest urban refuges, serving as a center of calm and tranquility amongst the noise and bustle of Manhattan.

**Best Location in Central Park for a Picnic: The Pool.** At 100th Street, the Pool is like being in another world. It's relatively quiet and undiscovered, and with weeping willows, ducks, geese, egrets, and a hawk or two, this watering hole is an oasis of tranquility.

**Best Place to Take the Kids: Central Park.** Again, head to Central Park. With a lovely carousel, a zoo, two ice-skating rinks, and numerous playgrounds and ball fields, Central Park is a children's wonderland.

**Best Street: Broadway.** Fifth Avenue has the reputation, but it has lost some luster in the past few years with the proliferation of chain and theme stores, so my pick is Broadway. As it stretches from one end of Manhattan to the other, no street captures the city's diversity better than Broadway.

**Best Neighborhood to Stroll: Greenwich Village.** Though I'm partial to the Upper West Side, I have to give the nod here to Greenwich Village. With its historic streets, hidden cafes, cozy restaurants, and eccentric characters, Greenwich Village is a constant, but pleasant, barrage on the senses.

**Best Bridge: Brooklyn Bridge.** New York is a city of bridges connecting the various islands to the mainland and beyond. But none equals the splendor and originality of the Brooklyn Bridge. Walking across it is a must.

**Best Free Attraction: Staten Island Ferry.** With views of the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, lower Manhattan, the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, and the rest of New York Harbor — and the chance to mingle with commuters — you can't beat the price of this ride.

## *Best Shopping*

For more information on the stores listed, skip to Chapter 12.

**Best Store: Saks Fifth Avenue.** Not as overwhelming as other department stores, Saks is consistently good. And don't miss those window displays at Christmas.

**Best Clothes Store: Barneys.** This store is the pinnacle with prices to match.

**Best Bookstore: Coliseum Books.** This book-lover's paradise is a mini-superstore (if there is such a thing) with the heart of an independent.

**Best Music Store: Tower Records.** A huge selection and frequent sales make this my personal favorite.

**Best Shopping Zone: SoHo, NoHo, and NoLita.** All three neighborhoods are within easy walking distance of one another and feature the newest, trendiest boutiques.

## *Best Culture and Nightlife*

For more information on the listings below, jump to Chapters 14 and 15.

**Best Performance Space: Carnegie Hall.** You can find few greater performance spaces in the world than this one. Visually and acoustically brilliant, Carnegie Hall regularly attracts an amazing array of talent.

**Best Free Cultural Event: Shakespeare in the Park.** Imagine Shakespeare performed by stars, under the stars, in Central Park. No wonder it has become a New York institution.

**Best Children's Theater: Paper Bag Players.** For children ages 4 to 9, this group performs in the winter only and offers tales told in imaginative and original ways.

**Best Jazz Club: Village Vanguard.** The acoustics and sight lines aren't great, but you can't do better for finding consistent, good-quality jazz.

**Best Rock Club: Mercury Lounge.** This venue is intimate, but not obscure. The Merc is the best for hard-edged rock and roll.

**Best Comedy Club: Gotham Comedy Club.** Comfortable and sophisticated, this is where the best come to hone their acts.

**Best Pub: Ear Inn.** Located in an old hanger-on in chic SoHo, I hope it continues to survive amongst the lush lounges that surround it.

**Best Dive Bar: Subway Inn.** Sure, I know you came to New York to go to a dive bar. Enter the Subway Inn, and it's as if you stepped into a 1940s moody film noir — minus the cigarette smoke, of course.

**Best Bar with a View: Rise Bar,** in the Ritz-Carlton Battery Park Hotel. With views of Lady Liberty, New York Harbor, and incredible sunsets, this bar is worth seeking out even if you're not staying at the hotel.

**Best Bar for Cocktails: Pegu Club.** Owned by former Bememlman's master mixologist, Audrey Saunders, the creative cocktails, whether shaken, stirred, or poured, are always perfect.