

GO WEST ODYSSEY

HOW I SAW AMERICA IN 19 DAYS

NS RAJAN

Foreword
SOUMYA MITRA



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FOREWORD



A WhatsApp message popped up on my phone. It was from my cousin Antara who lives in Delhi, India. “You must read *Go West Odyssey*. It is a pictorial travelogue about the great American east to west coast full circuit road trip in nineteen days.” Antara knows I love to travel, do off-grid camping, biking and photography. The author NS Rajan was looking for a picture of the Moab Fault, which he didn’t have in his album and Antara, who was editing the book, thought of reaching out to me. Also, she felt as an avid reader, I would find this book interesting.

‘Wow, sounds exciting!’ I thought. I always find it fascinating to experience a familiar place through the eyes of a traveler. It is a technique Rabindranath Tagore suggested in his memoir and it works wonders for me to discover new beauty and nuance in a familiar street, sight or object.

The next minute, I loaded the PDF in my iPad and started reading. Rajan’s travelogue documents his nineteen days road trip from New Jersey all the way to Los Angeles, California and back. He and his son drove through the historic heartland of Illinois, Indiana; drove past the great lake of Michigan, Minnesota, Mount Rushmore and the Bad Lands of South Dakota and the breathtaking Yellowstone National Park of Wyoming. They experienced the out of this world geological formations in Utah, the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, the deserts of Nevada, the haunting beauty of Mono Lake, the magnificent Sierra Nevada Mountains, the picturesque Pacific Coast of California, the World Heritage Site of the Grand Canyon at Arizona, the sin city Las Vegas, San Francisco, Hollywood – the list goes on and on. I have been to most of these places but over a span of many years. It was refreshing to see how much of the US can be experienced in such a short time. Rajan’s adventure rekindled my desire to pack my bags and be on the road again.

At every location, Rajan has captured the travel experience truthfully without any attempt to glorify any aspect, which makes it very real and authentic. I see the same approach in his photographs. No staged shots, no copycat landscapes – Rajan’s photos are an extension of his candid travel experiences. I love them. They are a great addition to this book.

The other thing I admire about Rajan is his prolific attention to detail about the places he visited. This book is full of information. It is valuable for anyone

planning to visit the US or thinking of a similar cross-country road trip.

Having said that, I must also say, *Go West Odyssey* is not a travel planning book. It is a true travelogue and real fun to read. I felt I was part of Rajan's adventures from the comfort of my home.

After reading this book, I feel really inspired to plan my next road trip very soon. I am sure readers will enjoy reading it as much I did. I will look forward to reading the next travelogue from NS Rajan.

Soumya Mitra

Inventor, Product Management Expert, Ace Photographer and Travel Enthusiast
Fremont, US

INTRODUCTION



It is said there is a book in each one of us, waiting to be written. Well, that should mean millions of potential writers. But the catch is that one should have a flair for writing and, more importantly, have a subject that would be of interest to other readers. More importantly, one should have sufficient material and the background to write on that subject. This explains why there are so few writers.

The great writer Somerset Maugham began one of his short stories titled 'Salvatore' with the line, "I wonder if I can do it". He then proceeded to write a story about the life of a humble fisherman living on the island of Ischia in Italy, a simple life of goodness, which unfortunately turned complex. Maugham ended the story by saying that he had wondered if he could arrest the attention of the reader for a few pages, writing a simple story about the character of Salvatore as a man who possessed nothing but an invaluable quality, "the rarest, the most precious and the loveliest that anyone can have" - the quality

of goodness. The reader, attracted by the opening line, would read through to the end, and Maugham, indeed, did succeed.

Such writers are masters, not only in the art of storytelling, but also in the way they weave webs of mystery and enigma wrapped in arresting words in just a few pages, even when they are writing about mundane themes, and sometimes, not even about a specific subject. Their narration has the power and the flow to keep the reader glued to their lines, regardless of what they are writing on.

I have often fancied my own talent as a writer. But I am just as often stymied by the paucity of an interesting subject on which I can write at length and render the result worthy of being called a book. I have managed articles and letters to editors of newspapers and magazines and also have had them published. A passage from one of my most favoured books, *Random Harvest*, written by James Hilton, an eminently readable author (*Lost Horizon, Goodbye, Mr. Chips*), comes to my mind. In this book, a highly successful industrialist, overtaken by illness and on his last leg, commissions his biography, wishing to perpetuate his memory as a titan of industry, but passes away before it can be completed. The writer, engaged for the task, manages to finish writing the biography before the funeral and presents it to the family who, having read and approved it, also nourishes “the secret wonderment of all healthy-minded Philistines that the act of writing can be protracted throughout three hundred pages”. This is a quandary very familiar to not merely Philistines, but also presumptuous writers who ambitiously start off like a house on fire, only to come to a grinding halt and stare at the half-written page, without a clue about how to proceed further. Exactly like me, that is.

In the summer of 2011, on the 19th of July to be precise, I happened to visit the US. I stayed with my son Ravi's family in New Jersey for six months, which is all the length of stay that the USCIS allows for tourist visa holders like me. I had, twice earlier, been frustrated in this endeavor by my inability



After successfully finishing my 25-mile cycling 'feat'



On our 19-day driving tour

to convince the US consulate authorities in Chennai to consider my visit to the US as anything important, or even necessary at all, in the first place. The USA is getting along very nicely without you, they seemed to imply. I had decided

not to trouble them again and had mentally turned off all prospects of going there, but my daughter and her family here in Bangalore, with whom I stay, kept egging me on to make another attempt with sly and flattering assurances that a person with my love for travel and keenness of observation will surely enjoy visiting the US. With Ravi also joining the chorus from the US, I made another visa pilgrimage to Chennai with only half a heart and considerable pessimism. But, to my surprise, the perpetual frown on the figurative face of the US Consulate this time turned into a smile and I was favoured with a visa. I thus owe my family all the pleasure and enjoyment of my visit to the US as, short of bundling and actually depositing me on that plane, they did everything else to make me go.

Thus, July 2011 found me in New Jersey and, with Ravi driving me around everywhere, I was enthusiastically peripatetic. I visited the Niagara Falls, Washington DC, Philadelphia, Shenandoah National Park, Luray Caverns Virginia, and many other interesting spots in Pennsylvania, New York State and New Jersey, besides spending several days in New York City. I was also able to take in the visual feast of Fall colors, join Ravi's family in their annual summer canoeing on the Delaware and Raritan Canal in Princeton, NJ, and, on a 25-mile bicycle ride on the banks of the Lehigh River at Pocono Mountains, Pennsylvania. I also watched them skiing during a two-day visit to a Ski Center in the Catskills Mountains in Northern New York State (I did not do any skiing myself). Also, through a serendipitous (for me) decision of my family at Bangalore, to visit the US at the same time I was there, I could also spend four days with them sightseeing in Boston, Mass.

Amidst all this running around, lasting six months in the US, I managed to click more than 10,000 pictures; 1,600 of them in New York City itself. What a tremendous difference the 'Aim & Shoot' digital cameras have made to the easy and inexpensive manner of taking

thousands of pictures! And now – in 2019, that is — no one bothers even about a handy camera at all. The ubiquitous ‘Smartphone’ has rendered them practically infructuous.

The highlight of my trip to the US, however, was a 19-day driving tour that Ravi and I undertook by road in his car, with him doing all the driving. We traveled all the way West from his New Jersey home to San Francisco, turning Southward down the West Coast, and the Big Sur on the famous Pacific Coast Highway (California State Route 1) to Los Angeles, before turning back East towards home, covering 19 states and countless sights and experiences en route.

But I have digressed from where I began on the travails of writing a book, so I shall come back to it. My family had been consistently pressing me to write. I strongly suspect that this was perceived as the best way to end the prolonged verbal descriptions of my US trip. As Eli Wallach famously said in the movie, *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* - “If you want to shoot, shoot. Don’t talk”. Thanks to their strong urging, I have undertaken the task of putting down my experiences, observations, and impressions from this trip.

For the sake of cohesion and convenience, I have chosen to make this narration in two parts; a brief one titled ‘The East’, which, by and large, relates only to my movements and activities on the East Coast, my frequent day trips to New York City, and many other places that I covered in one-day or two-day trips from New Jersey. The second part is a fairly detailed and lengthy record of the 19-day cross-country road trip with Ravi from New Jersey to California and back; from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, the various places and sights that we visited and the experiences that we enjoyed during this long trip.

I must mention here that in this travelogue of mine, I have described or written about only those places — national parks, cities, monuments and tourist spots that I, personally, by myself, or in the company of Ravi, visited physically. I have resisted the temptation (and well-meant advice) of enlarging the scope of this ‘book’ to cover places or sights that I did not personally see and experience, even those that were very close to, or an integral part of the areas we were visiting, such as vast areas in Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks, the city of New York, and other cities. This narration is thus more of a personal experience and makes no pretence to being either a ‘guide’ to the USA and New York City, or an adventure in writing.

The “Go West Odyssey” that follows, is thus essentially a labour of love.



PART I
The East



East Windsor



The state of New Jersey is home to a countless number of families from India, settled in the US, owing to its close proximity, and easy access to New York City. Simply hop across on the ferry, or go into the tunnels under the Hudson River, it takes just 15 minutes.

The township of East Windsor in Mercer County, New Jersey, where I stayed during my six-month visit, has numerous such Indian families, dotted all over, in communities. One is spoilt for choice of places serving Indian food within a mere half-hour drive, including a place dedicated to a variety of dosas, named ‘Dosa Corner’, and a provision and vegetable shop named ‘Sabzi Mandi’.

The huge, well-stocked, perennially crowded ‘Patidar Supermarket’ in East Windsor is well patronised by Indians living for miles around, (regular residents there think nothing of driving several miles to even do some casual shopping, anyway). On any given day, the few non-Indians you may find there, will, in all probability, be the Hispanic staff ready to lead you to shelves containing Dabur Chyawanprash, South Indian sun-dried vegetables, condiments and pickles, ‘Lijjat’ Papads, fresh betel leaves, Pan Parag, or any other typically Indian foodstuff from brands and makers back home that you may be craving for.

There are also many other smaller Mom-and-Pop shops catering to the needs of Indians, including newspapers and magazines in regional languages. If you stroll around in the neighborhood of ‘India Square’, ‘Little India’ and ‘Journal Square’ in Jersey City (across the Hudson River

from New York City, and the second most populous city in New Jersey with a substantial Indian presence), you will not find it very different from market streets in India. Your ears will be assailed by a cacophony of Indian languages. Jersey City is described as an amalgam of 'African, Arab, Asian, Jewish, and Hispanic American population'.

The state of California on the West Coast and New Jersey on the east, account for the largest population of Indians settled in a single state in the US. California, of course, is huge and you may not as easily run into many Indians there (except perhaps in Silicon Valley) as you would in New Jersey. California has a land area twenty times that of New Jersey, and the ratio of Indians to the population is almost the same as in New Jersey, where Indians constitute three per cent of the population. The presence of Indians in New Jersey appears larger, owing to the far smaller area.

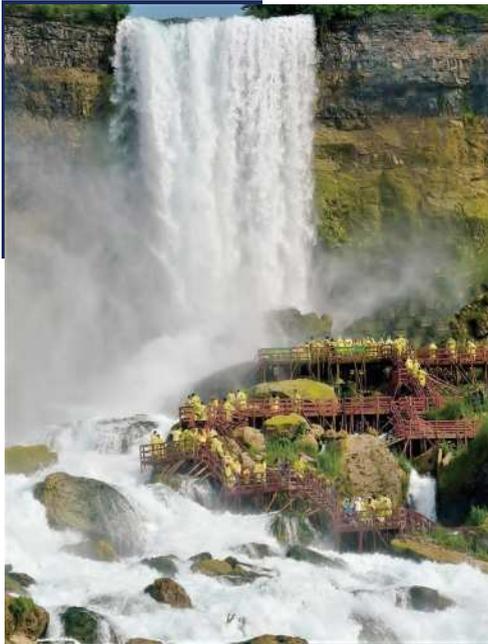
During my stay and travels there, I observed that by and large, Indians living in NJ and California led more comfortable lives compared with those living in other states in the US. The weather in these two states also is generally more favourable than in other states without the extremes of hot and cold. California, however, has a very high cost of living index. New Jersey is relatively reasonable.

Roaring & Awesome The Niagara Falls



On my very first weekend in the US, Ravi and I drove to Niagara Falls and we spent a couple of days there, taking it all in. Our route to the Falls, a distance of about 450 miles, passed through Pennsylvania, touching the picturesque area around Delaware Water Gap and Pocono Mountains, where we stopped at Mt Pocono for breakfast at Burger King.

We arrived at the Falls by about 3 pm. I prefer not to write much about the Falls themselves — it is bound to be either an understatement, or in any case, nothing new to the reader. Nearly 90 per cent of the flowing water goes over the spectacular Horseshoe Falls or, the Canadian Falls on the Canadian side, and only 10 per cent over the American Falls and Bridal Veil Falls on the American side. But that hardly detracts



Bridal Veil Falls

from the imposing and overwhelming experience of being at the Falls (just as at the Grand Canyon, you are never really prepared for the actual majesty and grandeur, regardless of all you may have imagined). I must confess to some trepidation – when our Niagara Falls Tourist Boat, ‘Maid of the Mist’ sailed very close past the American and Bridal Veil Falls, and ventured into the curve under the Horseshoe Falls, there was a lot of spray and dense mist all over (all tourists are thoughtfully provided with a blue rain poncho to protect their

head and clothing). The turbulence created by the huge curving torrent of water 2200 feet across, cascading nearly 200 feet down the Horseshoe Falls, causes roaring and heaving waves of water. With the boat rolling on the waves, I was quite nervous. I can’t swim and water



Maid of the Mist

in huge quantities scares me. But the experience was so unique and overwhelming that I had no time to dwell on the risks and enjoyed taking a lot of pictures and soaking (pun intended) it all in. There was also a little thrill in the realization that, during its passage under the Horseshoe Falls, the 'Maid of the Mist' ventured briefly into the territorial area of Ontario, Canada. Thus, I could claim the dubious distinction of having also 'visited' Canada!



Rainbow on the Niagara

From the top, on the American side, one can have a broad view of the Canadian side with the prominent, 160-meters-tall Skylon Tower housing a hotel, resort and casino dominating the skyline and providing spectacular bird's eye views of the Horseshoe Falls. But, despite Canada lying tantalisingly, a mere 440 meters away across the Rainbow Bridge, one cannot even enter the bridge without a Canadian Visa or relevant papers. A disappointment, as it is nothing short of thrilling to view the same Falls from the Canadian side. The Falls are illuminated every evening and night by multicoloured lights, beginning at dusk and the Niagara Falls transforms into an incredible water and light masterpiece.

I remarked to Ravi that there was a large presence of Indian families visiting the Falls when we were there, which drew a repartee from him that if you wanted to meet anyone from back home here in the US, you are likely to run into them showing their parents around the Niagara Falls in summer.

New York City: An Intro



Verrazano Narrows Bridge

I made several frequent day-trips to New York City, 60 miles away from Ravi's home in East Windsor, but easily accessible. The only problem was that I needed to be dropped at, or had to get to, either the bus pickup point in Monroe Township, ten miles away on the New Jersey Turnpike, or the Princeton Station (same distance) for the NJ Transit Trains to Newark. There onward, I had to catch a PATH (Port Authority) train to NYC. (Let us count our 'Indian' blessings for our own infamous but ubiquitous and highly utilitarian 'auto-rickshaws' for very easy, if uncomfortable, locomotion over short distances anywhere, anytime). On most occasions, I would join Ravi on his office commute and travel to WTC in the shuttle bus with him.

The impressive new OneWorld Trade Center was under construction and coming up fast (it was incomplete when I returned to India in January 2012) or we would drive to either Journal Square or Exchange Place in Jersey City, park the car there and hop over to WTC by the PATH

train, a 15-minute ride. I got used to going and spending whole days in New York City, walking around, visiting some of New York's renowned museums, and exploring the city and its delightful offerings. I became very familiar with New York City within a surprisingly short time owing much to the fact that I went around it mostly by myself on foot, having carefully selected each day's itinerary by browsing the internet and devouring books on New York City.

Negotiating/navigating New York City is very easy. First-time visitors largely assume that 'Manhattan Island' is itself New York City. (I will not be surprised if many New Yorkers themselves do). The first thing that a visitor should note is that the city is five boroughs and Manhattan Island is just one of those boroughs. The others are:

1. Brooklyn, also known as King's county (named after King Charles II in 1683), is a vast area of 71 sq miles to the east of Manhattan across the East River; Brooklyn is so large that it could independently count as the fourth largest city in the world if it were not a borough of New York City.

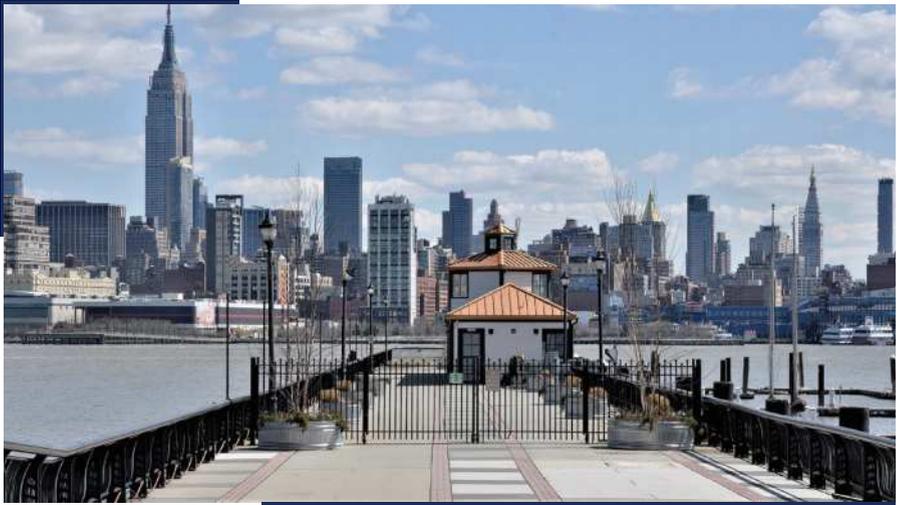
2. Queens, to the north, is an amalgam of immigrants with half its 2.3 million residents being foreign-born.

3. Bronx, north of Queens, northeast of Manhattan and across the Harlem river.

4. Staten Island to the southwest, with an area of 58 sq. miles, is connected to Brooklyn by the famous Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and to Manhattan by the Staten Island ferry and the Bayonne Bridge.

Each of these boroughs has its own attractions, prominent places, sites and buildings of historical importance and tourist spots. To mention only a few: the beautiful 526-acre Prospect Park with its 60-acre lake in Brooklyn; the world-famous Wildlife Conservation Park, popularly known as the Bronx Zoo; the New York Botanical Garden in Bronx; Flushing Meadows Corona Park (site of the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center and venue of the annual US Open tournament); JFK International Airport and LaGuardia Airport in Queens; the proposed Staten Island Ferris Wheel (630 feet) coming up; the magnificent Verrazano Narrows Bridge and, the beautiful parks in Staten Island.

New York City's Manhattan Island, with its Uptown, Midtown, Downtown and Financial District, is where all tourists end up spending most of their time. For my part, I barely touched Bronx and Queens except when passing through them *en route* elsewhere. I covered Brooklyn fairly well, though falling short of what I wanted to (can it ever be enough?) and made only a foray into Staten Island as there was no time to do all the boroughs. Thus, my description here of NYC, except



View of South Manhattan from Liberty State park, NJ

as stated otherwise, applies mainly to the Manhattan Island area.

Manhattan Island, one of the boroughs of New York City visited most by tourists, is shaped like a long rectangle with a North-South orientation (broad in the north and tapering to a tip in the south at Battery Park). It stretches 14 miles, north to south and 2.5 miles wide, east to west. Manhattan Island is bound by the Hudson River to the west and the East River to the east. To the north, the Harlem River divides Manhattan Island from Bronx and the mainland United States, while in the south, it ends at the New York Bay, which is shared by the states of New York and New Jersey.

There are 13 (almost) parallel roads running down its entire length from south to north called 'Avenues'. The easternmost Avenue (on the banks of the East River) is numbered as 1st Avenue and the numbering goes on progressively westward to 13th Avenue, (on the Hudson River), which is westernmost.

Similarly, there are a large number of parallel roads crisscrossing these Avenues, running from east to west. These are named 'Streets'. These too, are numbered progressively as 1st Street, which is the southernmost and streets thereafter, going north, to 226th Street at the northern end of Manhattan.

For some reason, the 1st Street in the south ends much above the tip of the island in the south. Below the 1st Street is a triangular area, in which the streets have names —such as Wall Street, Bleeker Street, Prince Street, Houston Street etc. If you could easily work out the area above 1st Street by their numbers, you will have to go by the 'names' of the streets below to the south of 1st Street. Negotiating all this is still very easy. All streets have names and not numbers (just when you were

feeling cocky that you have got it all figured out).

In NYC, I always used subway trains whenever I had to cover long distances, which was often. These are the NYC transport equivalent of the human nervous system, and one can go from just about anywhere to anywhere quite quickly, with a change (or two) of trains, for a very low cost. I used a regular MetroCard, which saves a lot of money if you are likely to avail of the service frequently, as I did. Besides, it can be used for rides on buses and the PATH commuter trains between NYC and Newark in New Jersey. The New York Subway helped me cover much of the city in so short a time. (For visitors to NYC, it is also a very interesting place and an opportunity to take a sneak peek into New Yorkers and their way of life).

New York's famous Fifth Avenue roughly runs down the middle of the city, dividing it into Manhattan East and West, helping the orientation in the city even better. This, generally, is the grid pattern of New York City (with exceptions as above). Thus, locating an address here is easier, even for a newcomer, than in most cities. You can share your location just as easily by giving a cross-reference of the Avenue and the Street (remember these were pre-GPS days). 'I shall be at Sixth and 42nd by 6 pm' or, 'the place you want to go is at 55, West 34th', meaning number 55 on 34th Street, west of Fifth Avenue. This eliminates the need for referring to familiar landmarks and tedious directions. One can get used to this very quickly, in just a couple of days. All one needs is a map of the city. Abundant maps and tourist information in colourful brochures are available for free in open booths scattered all over the city, not only about NYC but also other popular tourist places all over the country. Travel, and its facilities are taken very seriously by Americans. They think nothing of motoring all over the country, just sightseeing. Summers are times when practically every other American family is on the roads. Naturally, there is a host of services to facilitate this.

Usually, when Ravi and I traveled together in the mornings, commuting to his office on Wall St, we would part company somewhere in the Financial District and I would be on my own from there. This exploration of the city by myself helped me considerably as apart from the usual must-see sights for every tourist, I saw and did a lot more in New York City.

My Days in NYC: I was a Millionaire



One exciting experience was my attending the live TV shoot of an episode of 'Who wants to be a Millionaire' in ABC's Television Center East Studio on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, hosted by the highly popular Meredith Vieira. This was a surprise package from Ravi. As a keen follower of its Indian version, the Amitabh Bachchan-hosted Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC) for years, participating live by joining the audience on this American show was a very interesting experience for me. Especially so as I was invited to sit in the second row from below directly facing all the action, (the audience was directed to specific seats by an official as they entered the studio) and was within the camera field for most of the shoot.

Their format is different from our KBC and livelier. The contestant and the host are not seated across each other. The contestant generally stands at a central round table, and the hostess freely walks around, to mention just one feature. This allows movement across the floor area of the two principal characters in the show, making it livelier and more interesting than watching them sitting across each other all the time.

There is a lot of banter and lively exchange between the hostess of the show and the contestant. This is a live shoot and naturally, the director in charge cuts in from time to time and arranges things as desired before allowing the shooting to resume. During such short breaks, an official keeps the audience engaged, moving around with small talk, jokes and a question or two to keep the audience from getting fidgety as no one may go out.

To make it even more exciting for the audience, towards the conclusion of every such live shoot, one lucky member from the audience, selected by a 'Draw', is invited to the stage to answer one question, and rewarded with a prize of \$1,000 for a correct answer. It was a very absorbing morning.

NYC: My Typical Walking Day

Brooklyn, Chinatown, Staten Island & Liberty State Park



Brooklyn Heights Promenade, NYC

To describe one of my typical days in New York, on 1st September 2011, after parting from Ravi at the WTC station, I walked south in the Financial District, and ascended the 1.8 kms long Brooklyn Bridge to cross the East River. One needs to be very careful when walking across the Brooklyn Bridge on the pathway marked for pedestrians, to not sway in the adjacent path for bicyclists, who are very impatient and brusque with walkers straying onto their marked path. Both paths are divided only by a white line and not fenced or otherwise separated, and thus present the considerable risk of a bicyclist crashing into an unwary walker. Don't expect any sympathy.

On descending the Brooklyn Bridge, I turned right to get to the Brooklyn Heights Promenade and walked up and down the Promenade, a delightful, just over half a kilometre long, broad walkway at a commanding height above the East River. It is lined by old red brick

mansions fronted by leafy gardens forming a picturesque backdrop to the left, while Downtown Manhattan across the East River and the Brooklyn Bridge are to the right. Away and around can be seen, prominent landmarks such as the Empire State Building, Chrysler Building, Statue of Liberty, Liberty State Park, New Jersey, and Staten Island, with Staten Island Ferries (acclaimed as the only thing in New York available for 'free'), cruise ships and other craft of all kinds crisscrossing the waters in between. Brooklyn Heights Promenade is a great place to relax and soothe your nerves, sitting on the comfortable benches, facing Downtown Manhattan and watching all the panorama described above.



Staten Island Ferry

The Staten Island Ferry, a great convenience to commuters and tourists alike, can be boarded, free of charge, at South Sea Street, Manhattan. It takes 25 minutes to cross over to the St George Terminal on Bay St, Staten Island. You can make as many trips a day as you like, but have to get off and get on each time. There are trips every half hour between 7 am and 11.30 pm (the frequency increases during the summer and rush days).

The crossing, which passes close to the Statue of Liberty, is interesting. There is a lot of room to sit and enjoy the scenery floating by, with seagulls joining the ride, if you can avoid the commuter rush hours. On the only occasion that I availed the service, I disembarked at the Staten Island dock and walked around in the near about area, a beautiful borough full of parks. St George Historic District lies just inland from the dock.

On the island's East Shore, the FDR Boardwalk stretches 4 km along the South Beach, reputedly the fourth-longest boardwalk in the world. South Shore was the site of 17th century Dutch and French Huguenot settlements. The eastern end is connected to Brooklyn through the picturesque and towering Verrazano Narrows Bridge (4,260 feet long, 230 feet above the narrows). Its aerial sight, along with the Statue of

END OF SAMPLE

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