

# TRAVEL Mail

holiday research for people like you

## Going beyond Manhattan

by Jo Tweedy, TravelMail, 19th July 2007

There are no tourists and, metaphorically speaking, Brooklyn is a million miles from the dancing neon light of Times Square. In reality, Manhattan's futuristic skyline is just a few miles west, on the other side of a very famous bridge.

Lunch on Fulton Street had been the idea of Gideon, a thoroughly bohemian young Brooklynite and tour guide for Brooklyn-based Levys' Unique New York Tours. For the last three hours Gideon had built up an appetite by relaying as much information about his beloved suburb as he could possibly impart in 180 minutes - 'not nearly enough time, anyone in Brooklyn will tell you that'.

Four times the size of Manhattan, if this leafy borough across the East River was a city in its own right, as it was until 1898, it would be the third biggest metropolis in America. Along with New York's other outer boroughs: Queens, the Bronx and Staten Island, Brooklyn struggles to lure tourists away from the Big Apple's more obvious attractions.

Brooklyn Bridge, for example, remains one of New York's iconic images except that the lion's share of visitors stand in awe at its gothic wonder on the Manhattan side of the East River. When they do cross, it's more often than not on the subway, en route to Coney Island, New York's much-loved but decidedly run-down seaside resort and home of hot dog-eating competitions and rickety big dippers.

The real appeal of this low-rise, largely residential side to New York City has as much to do with its ethnic diversity as it does with big bridges and kitsch seaside resorts. Immigrants from all over the globe have made their home in Brooklyn's cultural melting pot - at last count two and a half million people lived here.

In three hours, our 'quick' traverse with Gideon across Brooklyn - in a shabby but nifty Honda Civic - takes us through Caribbean Crown Heights, Italian Bensonhurst, Polish Greenpoint and the Hasidic communities of Borough Park. We feel the artistic vibe in Red Hook, and get green eyes at the trendy houses in Park Slope, home to New York's finest yuppies.

At the heart of these neighbourhoods is Prospect Park, a younger sibling to Central Park and created by the same architects, Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux, in 1867. Across 585 acres, there's a boating lake, volleyball courts, bridle paths and a carousel that dates back to 1912 among a host of other attractions. Mainly though, it's an impressive back garden for local inhabitants and whether they're walking the dog, pushing a pram or rollerblading, Brooklynites make the most of their green space.



ABOVE: The Brooklyn Bridge is a gateway to many of New York's less well known attractions  
LEFT: Natty dresser: tour guide Gideon

Sixteen years after Prospect Park opened, the construction of Brooklyn Bridge changed the face of the borough forever. After 13 wearisome years of construction work, the bridge became a forerunner for the skyscrapers of the future combining practicality with gothic splendour. While taking in one of the best vantage points in New York, Gideon enlightens us on the grisly demise of the bridge's engineer John Augustus Roebling. (Click here to watch the video) 'On the day after the bridge was approved for construction, a ferry came landing, swerved, crashed into the dock and crushed Roebling's right foot. He got gangrene and tetanus and died of lockjaw three weeks later'.

Nearby Brooklyn Heights remains among New York's most distinguished neighbourhoods. Stretching from Fulton Street close to the bridge to Atlantic Avenue in the south, the narrow tree-lined streets teem with the brownstone houses the area is famous for, many of which have a story to tell. Bob Dylan penned Tangled up in Blue about his time on Montague Street and other famous creative forces who have resided here include W H Auden, Arthur Miller (with then wife Marilyn Monroe) and Truman Capote. Unsurprisingly, it's a sought after place to live - a recent posting on a Brooklyn Heights blog site claimed that Capote's house at 70 Willow Street can command \$40,000 a month in rent.

Brooklyn seems to ooze creativity in a myriad of different forms. Some of the biggest names in hip hop and rap music, Jay Z, Notorious B.I.G and Busta Rhymes, herald from the borough - a quick search on Wikipedia for 'Brooklyn rappers' returns an exhaustive 46 pages.

This rich vein of talent seems to extend to the tour guides. New Yorkers are fabulous show offs when it comes to their city and Gideon is no exception - I learned more about Brooklyn in three hours than I had about Manhattan in three days.

He works alongside his brother Matt and dad Mark, a third generation Jewish New Yorker with eastern European heritage. Brooklyn, the Levy home for the last

twenty years, is their signature tour and their knowledge of not only the area but the people who live here ensures tourists can really get under the borough's skin.

**A mobile phone is Gideon's biggest ally.** He calls an artists' commune to see 'if we can stop by, say hello'. No reply, although they do call back later - alas too late for us. During our morning in Brooklyn, we hurtled through the most interesting residential suburbs and beeped at anyone that dared to get in our way.

Sadly, three hours, as anyone in Brooklyn will tell you, isn't nearly enough time and the candy-coated delights of Coney Island elude us. The news that New York's 'people's playground' is about to be regenerated (or 'Disney-fied' as opposing New Yorkers are calling it) left us wishing we'd left more time to see Coney Island in its current state, all faded glamour and peeling paintwork. The planned billion-dollar clean-up will almost certainly wash away some of the charm. If Manhattan is about Broadway shows, cloud-skimming buildings and world-beating shopping, then a visit to Brooklyn is about giving your fellow tourists the brush off and being privy to how real New Yorkers live. And there's only one way to do it - fasten yourself to the coattails of a native and hang on for the ride.

### Travel facts

A three-hour tour of Brooklyn with Levys' Unique New York Tours start from \$225. To book a tour visit [www.Levysuniqueny.com](http://www.Levysuniqueny.com). For more information on visiting Brooklyn visit [www.visitbrooklyn.org](http://www.visitbrooklyn.org).

Jo Tweedy flew to New York with SilverJet, the world's first carbon neutral business class airline. Flights start from £999 return including taxes. To book visit [www.flysilverjet.com](http://www.flysilverjet.com).