



TRAVELOGUE

Let's hear it for New York!

When I was sitting in Miami weaving grand plans for an NYC trip, almost everyone responded with a shrug and a lot of hmm-ha at the mention of the city. For a person who was brought up on sitcoms like F.R.I.E.N.D.S and How I Met Your Mother, I was at a loss to fathom the disapproval.

There it was. More shrugs from a cousin who actually lives and works out of New York City and can't apparently wait to get away from it. I was gobsmacked. I mean we are talking about THE New York City – the place that spells the importance of freedom to not just the people of America but the rest of the world. Where the sheer sight of the Statue of Liberty, for people reaching the shores, has inspired and evoked endless possibilities and aspirations for generations. The only place in the world where you could be from just about anywhere, and still hope to make it big. The weight of this statement and the freedom of expression, race, culture and tradition that follows, were not matters to be made light of, me thinks.

When I stepped out at Penn Station, the first poster that drew my attention, while frantically looking left and right to find the link to the downtown line C, was that of a colourful lady of liberty saying, "Everybody's welcome!" The big apple, the Empire State, the city that never sleeps. I was in a city that has been spoken of in every TV show, movie, song, poem and let's not forget the "I love New York" t-shirts – I have been donning one since I was ten. So, was it all overstated and overhyped, as the shrugs from the people I met living in America seemed to imply? I didn't have to wait too long to find out. But first, I had to find the Downtown line C.

I had strict written instructions from my dear New Yorker friend, bless her, about how to manoeuvre our way through the subway lines to make it to our hotel in Long Island but just out of curiosity, I decided to pour over the map. It created a buzz in my

head that had nothing to do with the fact that it was Ramadan day one. I could hear my husband muttering under his breathe and solemnly swearing to make the subway system putty in his hands before we left! Tip number one: get a weekly pass for 30 bucks, no matter how long or short your trip is, and you can thank me later.

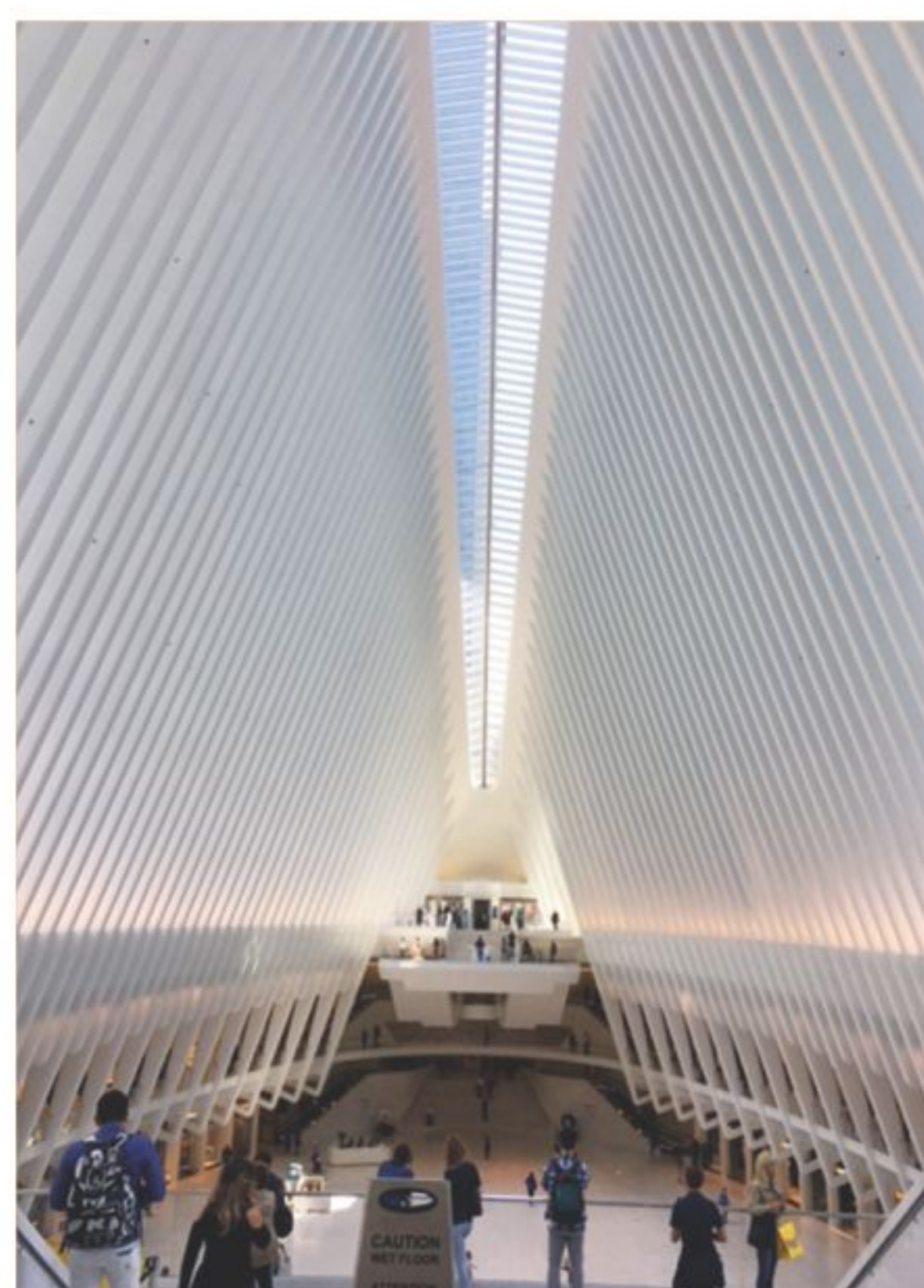
It was kind of eerie standing on the subway platform while we waited for our train and people-watched. After having spent longer than a year in a country like



Singapore where people would position themselves in perfect order while queuing up at stations, as if scared of being court marshalled otherwise, my eyebrows shot up at the sight of dishevelled gentlemen with shaggy beards prowling about, getting impatient and cursing the system with imaginative profanities. In the midst of all the grunts and mutters, I also managed to spot a couple in the corner, mesmerised and lost in each other's eyes, probably newly-weds, which earned my husband a sharp nudge in the ribs.

After waiting for what seemed like ages, with two massive suitcases in tow, we finally saw our train approach, only on the opposite side of the platform! As my husband and I ran at full throttle behind the retreating mob, laden with a case in each hand, we looked at each other and laughed hysterically. I guess this city is not about comfort and convenience. It was one that made you tell stories, long after you have left.

Manhattan is the part of the city that has to be discovered on foot to embrace its full



potential. Because even the locals who probably take that route every day cannot possibly guess what would pop up on those streets the next morning. It could be a new food cart or another anti-Trump protest march. Speaking of the former, the Biriyani House cart next to the red cube in Broadway was unbelievably good! It took us half a day to cover most of midtown that included Times Square, the Empire State Building, the Trump Tower and Museum of Modern Art. And the best way to finish the day off? It is to head to either one of the

places – 230 Fifth rooftop or Le Bain at the Standard Hotel – to rest your feet and sit back to take in the 360 degree, majestic New York skyline in the night, which sent even the most matter-of-fact, engineering eyes of my husband into a trance.

New York does not have a chronological order to how it should be explored. This is its biggest appeal. It can be centred to the kind of food you like to eat, the kind of environment you like to be in, quiet or peaceful, you pick! In your meanderings you will stumble upon hidden gems that will give new meaning to the term hole-in-the-wall. But a special mention has to be made for Central Park for more than one reason. I was almost in half a mind to scrap this off my list having spent too many afternoons in Hyde Park, both in London and Sydney, but nothing prepared me for what this park truly enclosed. By the time you are done listening in to the stories that its giant green columns and surprising mosaic structures recounted, you are in Strawberry Fields – the John Lennon memorial ground – only a few feet away from where the artist was tragically shot. We walked past the apartment building where his wife Yoko Ono still lives.

I have spent the least amount of time in the city I loved the best while travelling through America, in hindsight. And from what I can vouch for, the instant sense of belonging you feel when you arrive in New York, is not something that can be described. Its character is larger than life, and encompasses and rises above all the hype and biases that you will ever hear about it. And as the American author, John Steinbeck had said, "Once you have lived in New York and made it your home, no place else is good enough". As for the subway map, no it did not become putty in any of our hands and the Downtown train C was still arriving on the opposite platform.

By Naaz Fahmida

Photo courtesy: Naaz Fahmida