

#TRAVEL

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Post-vaccination getaway: Manhattan

My husband and I are urbanophiles, so it was little wonder that for our first getaway in nearly two years, we chose the City that Never Sleeps. New York, which was the US epicentre and a global COVID-19 hotspot, has lifted most of its pandemic-induced restrictions after having hit the vaccination mark. At the time this was written, more than 70 percent of the New Yorkers aged 18 and above have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine. We spent three days at the Big Apple as it was swiftly returning to life after more than a year under lockdown conditions.

I felt alive the moment we crossed the Lincoln Tunnel under the Hudson River. The 1.5-mile long tunnel connects Weehawken, New Jersey to Midtown Manhattan, New York City. After having spent most of my time at home since March 2020, the urban cacophony of construction, traffic, honking, ambulance wailing in the distance, and chattering of tourists and locals was music to my ears. I felt like myself after a long, long time, for I almost believed that life would never be the same again. It is still not the same, but it definitely appears to be moving in the right direction.

On our three-day getaway, we explored the city mostly on foot. In a place as diverse and splendid as Manhattan, there is so much to explore and discover in every corner that walking is always the best idea, provided of course you have strong legs and the stamina.

Walking is always the best way to discover a city, because it makes you feel as if you are part of it; you can feel its beats and rhythms as you walk alongside the locals. On our first two days, we walked around seven miles a day.

We chose Chelsea Market for our first dinner. Located in the heart of NYC's Meatpacking District, Chelsea Market is a dining and retail place with a global reputation as one of the greatest indoor culinary destinations. The historic market occupies an entire city block and draws millions of domestic and international travellers every year. We dined at Ayada, a Thai restaurant. There we relished a new kind of appetiser, something we had never tasted before. It was fried chicken and crab meat wrapped with tofu skin. Its taste and texture strangely reminded me of *chital machh er kofta!*

In addition to exploring two Thai restaurants on our first post-pandemic getaway, we also explored Korean cuisine at Koreatown, also known as K-Town, an ethnic enclave in Midtown Manhattan, boasting dozens and dozens of restaurants, salons, and other businesses owned and operated by Korean Americans.

At Five Senses, a highly-rated South Korean casual dining restaurant, we enjoyed traditional kimchi fried rice that arrived on a sizzling pan and fresh rustic ramen noodles stir-fried with protein of our choice. The meal came with banchan or Korean side dishes like kimchi, seasoned soybean sprouts, stir-fried fish cake, pickled cucumber, and braised potatoes. It was our first time eating at a South Korean place in America.

The Vessel, a 150-ft structure which is located at Hudson Yards and NYC's newest landmark, was on our to-visit list. The structure, which resembled a pine cone to me, closed off public access after several people committed suicide by jumping off it. The structure reopened in May 2021, but no visitor is allowed to enter alone. Even though I wanted to see the structure first hand, the idea of climbing was not tempting enough, chiefly because of the unfortunate incidents that took place in it.



We did not explore Manhattan on foot the entire time, we took the subway to places that were further away from the hotel we stayed in. We found out that NYC's subway system now has a new feature. During the pandemic, the city installed a contactless payment system, a fast and hygienic way to pay, at all its subway stations and on all its buses. Fares can now be paid using a smart watch, smartphone, and contactless credit card.

Most of the fully-vaccinated people here in the U.S. have abandoned their masks. It was a delight to see so many mask-less faces after such a long time. However, the servers and sales assistants at business establishments still donned masks.

In Manhattan, many eateries have made outdoor seating arrangements for the guests during the pandemic. It was only the patrons who were without masks at business establishments, although I noticed that at all upscale retail outlets, face covering was still required. When outdoors under the open sky, very few people were covering their faces, because as per Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines, fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear a mask outdoors, except in certain crowded settings.

No matter how many times you have been to Manhattan, visiting the Times Square, even it is for 15 minutes, is a must.

This time, I stood there just to feel the energy around the place. The bright lights, digital billboards, costumed characters, street artists and vendors, people from around the country and world had me thinking that I was indeed standing at the Crossroads of the World, a nickname for Times Square.

We chose to have our last dinner at the Bubba Gump Shrimp Company located in Times Square. Inspired by the Academy Award-winning 1994 film *Forrest Gump*, this seafood chain restaurant has eye-catching movie memorabilia everywhere you set your eyes on. If you love the movie and a fan of Tom Hanks, having a meal at this place could be a fun experience for you.

The metropolis is returning to life but has not returned completely, which means that service could be slow at certain places, because many business establishments are not yet fully staffed. For instance, we had to wait 30 minutes for a table at Bubba Gump, and almost an hour for our hotel room. Anyone who is considering a vacation in a post-pandemic world is therefore advised to not just pack their bags, but their patience as well.

This getaway was much needed after having spent more than a year at home. I feel rejuvenated, recharged, and refreshed.

Photo: Wara Karim

