

DEPARTURES

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CROSS-TOWN TRANSFER

Four writers, all longtime residents of their respective New York neighborhoods, head to an unfamiliar part of the city for a change of scenery and, perhaps, perspective.



From left: A cocktail at Hotel Delmano; afternoon jazz at the Williamsburg Hotel



Below: A trio of dips at MP Taverna



GRAMERCY

ASTORIA

An Out-of-Borough Experience

NAME: Caitlin Macy RESIDENCE: Gramercy Park

VISIT: Astoria HOTEL: The Boro

➔ The best thing about my own neighborhood is, of course, Gramercy Park itself—a tree- and flower-filled garden that blooms in the concrete of downtown. While I rarely enter the park (who has time to sit on a bench and read?), it's nice simply walking around it before confronting, say, Third Avenue's assault of delis, nail salons, and bars, or the aggrieved honking of two-way commercial traffic on Park Avenue. In Manhattan, I feel the need to keep track of escape routes—peaceful streets, a quiet spot near a fountain—the way some people keep track of public toilets. Perhaps in the future I'll simply head out to Queens.

It was known, when I moved to New York 25 years ago, that there were three food pilgrimages one had to make: Chinatown for dim sum, Harlem for soul food, and—most appealing to a fan of taramosalata

and *tiropita* like me—Astoria for Greek. Despite my love for the cuisine, after years of moving around Manhattan, I settled on Gramercy Park and hadn't been back to Astoria in more than two decades. My sole memory from that long-ago box-ticking trip was of goggle-eyed fish swimming in a restaurant tank.

Channeling that newly minted New Yorker who used to jot notes in a tattered *Zagat*, I got three pages of recommendations from locals, then called a friend, and we set out for the southwestern edge of Astoria.

With a Manhattanite's tunnel vision, I'd even forgotten that in Queens the subway comes up out of the dark. I found myself typing into my phone "The beauty of an above-ground train" as our N pulled into the station in the mellow light of a summer evening, and I was glad to leave behind the vague worry and

claustrophobia of subterranean life on the Manhattan corridor of the 6 train.

We checked in to the two-year-old Boro Hotel ("Industrial warm," my friend gushed), and went straight to the famous beer garden at Bohemian Hall, where I marveled at the space—long communal tables in a massive backyard where one could linger for hours, uncrowded, over a pitcher of pilsner.

I was half afraid that the Greek restaurants and even the nonculinary flavor of the neighborhood would have been crowded out by hipper bars and restaurants, of which Astoria has plenty. "Maybe not," my friend said when, having elbowed through the convivial line outside of Taverna Kyclades to put our name down, we were told that the wait (on a Wednesday in deep August, after 8 p.m.) would be an hour.

All along Ditmars Boulevard, one of Astoria's main drags, are signs of the old neighborhood—often literally, as many shop signs are written in Greek letters. That kind of robust connection with history has been watered down in ever-under-construction Manhattan; it's nice to discover it elsewhere. Tradition in Astoria has also made room for newer iterations: the hyper-bright and modern pastry shop Lefkos Pyrgos; the fantastic MP Taverna, young chef Michael Psilakis's updated take on the classic Greek restaurant. Even our hotel felt appropriately not-trying-too-hard, from the clean lines of the roof-deck bar down to the red accordion arm of the light fixture above my bed.

Over the years, I have finished many, many trips with a ride into Manhattan from Queens, home of JFK and LaGuardia airports. Returning from Astoria the next morning, I noticed something different: For once I didn't feel as if I needed a vacation from the vacation. It was almost like being twentysomething again. ♦

UPPER WEST SIDE

From Left: My Grandmother's Ravioli at Locanda Verde; the courtyard balcony view at the Greenwich Hotel



A Downtown Girl Once Again

NAME: Leslie Bennetts RESIDENCE: Upper West Side

VISIT: Tribeca HOTEL: Greenwich Hotel



A longtime denizen of Lower Manhattan, I later spent 30 years raising a family on the Upper West Side. But my children, like my youth, were only on loan, and their adulthood recently sent me back to Tribeca. Once noted for an exhilarating blend of danger and possibility, the neighborhood that had previously defined the avant-garde has been transformed. Some landmarks still look the same; more than 30 years after Odeon's orange neon sign was featured on the cover of best-seller *Bright Lights, Big City*, the restaurant's icon-status was reaffirmed when Lena Dunham—who describes herself as a "deranged daughter of Tribeca"—had it tattooed on her left buttock.

But the historic buildings have been cleaned, eradicating generations of blackened grime and graffiti. Their walls are now immaculate, and the streets glow with light from the soaring glass towers and expensive restaurants that generate a pervasive atmosphere of cheerful affluence—a striking contrast to the bracing whiff of menace that used to characterize the area.

As New York teetered on the brink of bankruptcy during the 1970s, the name Tribeca was invented to describe the triangle below Canal Street, but the urban wilderness was so derelict, its homesteaders were mostly

impoverished artists. "It was the new frontier—the Wild West," recalls filmmaker Oren Jacoby. "The thing I remember is darkness. There were all these old warehouses and abandoned industrial spaces, and then you'd see an oasis of light in the distance. It was scary, and the sense of danger was highlighted by how deserted it was."

Jacoby produced and directed *Shadowman*, which premiered at this year's Tribeca Film Festival. The documentary chronicles the street art of Richard Hambleton, whose alarmingly kinetic silhouettes startled passersby. "The first time you saw one of the shadow men, you thought it was somebody who was about to jump out and mug you," Jacoby says. Instead of muggers and junkies, bankers and the media elite populate today's Tribeca. "It's overrun with young wealthy families," says Ben Ensminger-Law, a wealth analyst who lives on Hubert Street. "Next door to us is a townhouse with its own garage that rents for \$50,000 a month."

Wealth can reach oligarchic heights there, as attested by a recent *Wall Street Journal* story about a Vestry Street condominium listed at \$65 million. Gentrification has led many to lament the loss of the cheap spaces to live and work that once fostered a creative community. "It was art against commerce, and commerce won," actor Jeff

Bridges observed in *The Only Living Boy in New York*.

Tribeca's current economy is so robust you'd never guess it was devastated by 9/11. In 2002, Robert De Niro cofounded the Tribeca Film Festival, and today he owns the rustic-chic Greenwich Hotel, where the penthouse costs \$15,000 a night and the resident canteen is run by star chef Andrew Carmellini.

At such high-end destinations, the sticker shock can induce palpitations. My dinner at Carmellini's Locanda Verde was delicious, but I had one aperitif, one glass of wine, and pasta, so how did two of us run up a tab exceeding \$300? Lunch at Yves, a casual hangout on Greenwich Street, was equally tasty, but the bill was comparable to an expense-account lunch in Midtown.

Bubby's—originally a pie company—still draws crowds, as it has since John F. Kennedy Jr. was a regular and lived down the street on North Moore. My family remembers it as the place where my five-year-old son ordered peanut butter pie, which his parents and sister told him was a dumb choice, only to invade his plate with marauding forks. Twenty years later, he's still indignant about the pie raid. I went back to Bubby's and bought him a whole peanut butter pie. It vanished overnight.

"How was it?" I ask.

"Fabulous," he says.

At Bubby's, at least, some things don't change. ♦