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A whole new angle on New York city

Turning an old railway into a park brings a new perspective says Yvonne Gordon

HIGH FLYER: Eva Longoria is a big fan of the new park



It's the park in the sky. You'll love it.' Staff at the tourist information desk at NYC & Company, who are supposed to be promoting the entire city, are so full of enthusiasm when I ask about the High Line Park, they can't stop

raving about it. The park's popularity is evident next day, when we arrive at the bottom of the steps, on Gansevoort Street in New York's Meatpacking District, and see crowds heading for the park even in chilly weather.

It's easy to see why it's become

the hippest destination in a city littered with attractions, with a host of celebs, such as Hollywood star Eva Longoria, putting it top of their itinerary when visiting.

Nearby, the bustle of New York is in full flow: trucks are loading up on the wide cobblestone streets;

white-coated men running to and fro with boxes, lorry engines idling.

Going up the steps, it feels like we're going up to a subway platform. But at the top, we go through a gap onto a wide platform and there's a stone path stretching ▶



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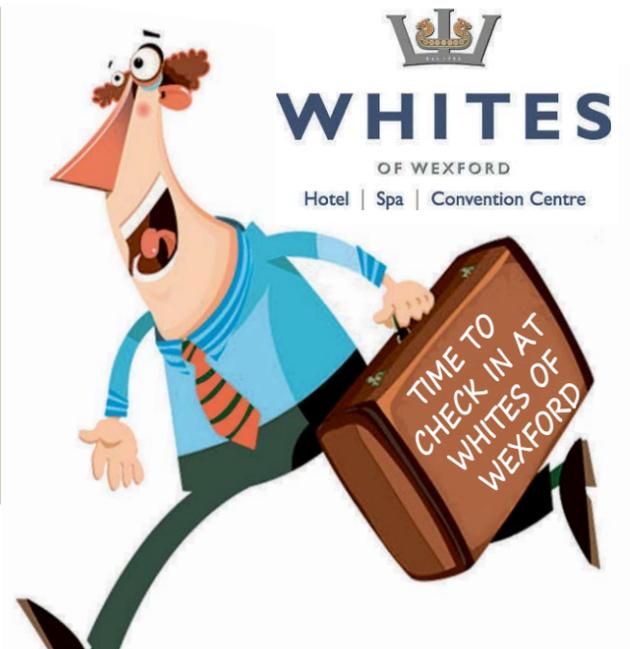


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TRAVEL

► into the distance. The sides are lined with old railway tracks, with rows of trees planted in the gaps.

This is the High Line Park in New York city. It has been built on an old freight railway line which is elevated 30ft above the streets of Manhattan's West Side. The High Line – as the train route was known – was built in the 1930s, running a mile and a half from Gansevoort Street in the Meatpacking District up through West Chelsea.

The line closed in 1980 and lay derelict but was rescued from demolition in the late 1990s when two residents who lived near it campaigned for it to be repurposed as a linear park akin to the Parisian Promenade Plantée.

The city government committed \$50m and the park's first section finally opened in 2009. The second phase opened in 2011 and work is well under way on the final phase, High Line at the Rail Yards, which is scheduled to open this year and will



UP ON THE ROOF: A bridge on the High Line provides a viewing point

take the park all the way to West 34th Street.

As we walk along the path, past a section of woodland, I can see over to the Hudson River on the left, and ahead of us, the 30-storey Standard Hotel looms down over the path, its two hinged concrete slabs set at an angle, appearing almost like an open book.

The air is filled with the sounds of the city – machinery, construction, traffic, sirens. There

are views in every direction of buildings of all designs, shapes and materials – young upstarts of slick, steel-and-glass office and apartment buildings fight for attention among the older and wiser redbricks of warehouses, shops, restaurants, galleries, studios and hotels. Massive apartment buildings with rows of tiny windows reach high into the sky.

This is not a park to get away from it all – quite the opposite: it is the park to get into it all, to

Get away from it all? This is the place to get into it all



VANTAGE: The glass-walled viewing platform on the High Line

admire and understand the buzz of New York from an elevated perspective. At 10th Avenue Square, there's a series of tiered wooden seats with a glass viewing wall over the street so people can sit and watch the traffic, as cars and yellow cabs weave in and out of the four lanes. Somehow, from this setting, it seems like a relaxing view.

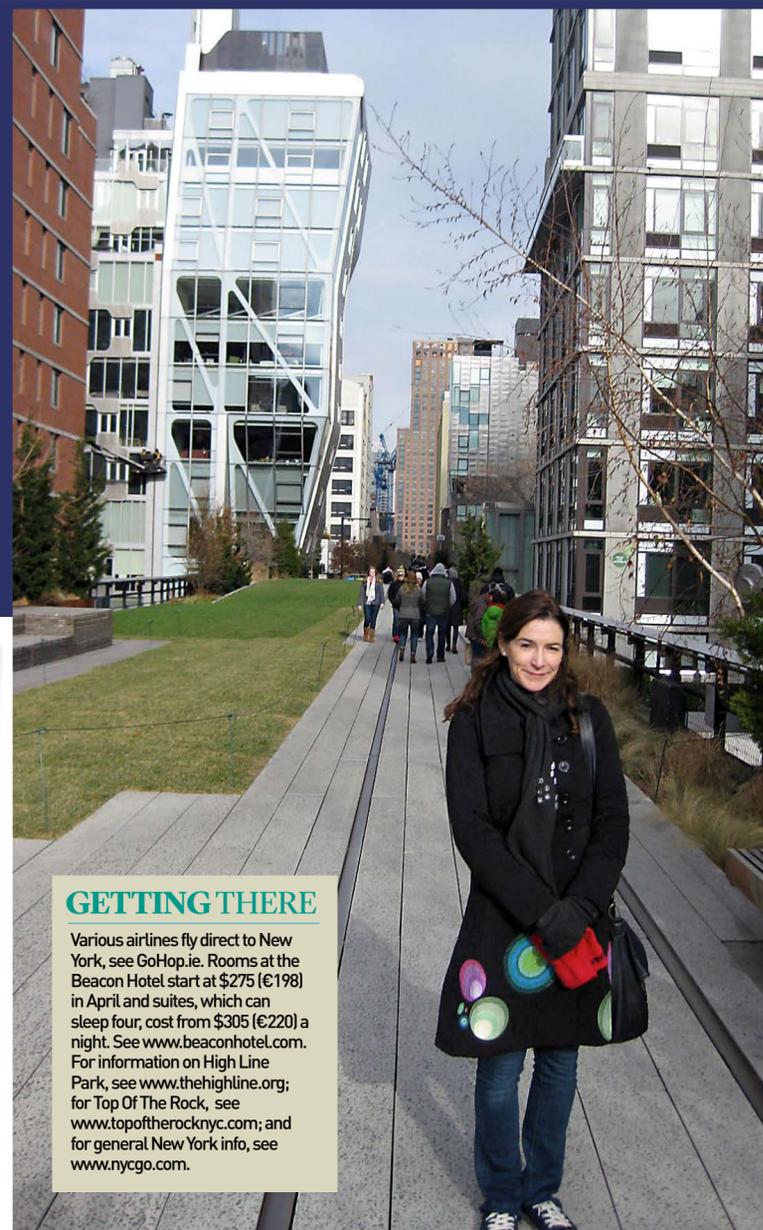
As we walk along, past more trees and bushes, there's a small overpass, where couples pose for photos. The romantic backdrop is one of billboards, buildings, cranes, rooftop watertowers and the tiny background outline of the Empire State Building. Throughout the park, there are benches and seating areas and at 23rd Street, there's even a grass lawn.

The park is a reflection of the diversity and vibrancy of the city. We pass tables and chairs, art and video installations and sculptures. In summer, the park is lined with open-air food stalls and buskers; in winter, walkers flock to Chelsea Market, a buzzing covered

market under the High Line at W15th Street, and one of the park's go-to places for lunch or post-walk shopping. The market is set in the old Nabisco Factory – the old railway used to deliver straight to the warehouse.

Davis Herron of The Lobster Place, a buzzing seafood bar and fishmongers and one of the market's original 1990s tenants, says the High Line opening was the biggest thing for the market, with so many more customers and tourists.

'In the summer, we get a ton of people coming in and grabbing lobster, lobster rolls and sushi and taking it up to the High Line to eat it,' says Davis.



GETTING THERE

Various airlines fly direct to New York, see GoHop.ie. Rooms at the Beacon Hotel start at \$275 (€198) in April and suites, which can sleep four, cost from \$305 (€220) a night. See www.beaconhotel.com. For information on High Line Park, see www.thehighline.org; for Top Of The Rock, see www.topoftherocknyc.com; and for general New York info, see www.nycgo.com.

'I love the High Line. It's been great for the neighbourhood, it has changed it immensely. It has cleaned it up and there's a lot more people in the area.'
The Meatpacking District, now home

to trendy restaurants, boutiques and the soon-to-be-opened Whitney Museum, has experienced a big turnaround since the 1980s, when it was a hotbed of drug dealing, prostitution and sex clubs and

CHANGE: Yvonne Gordon stands on the old rail track bed

'The Fairway Market is like walking onto a live film set'

both tourists and locals are enjoying the revitalised area – the High Line got four million visitors last year.

If there's a vibrancy about the High Line Park, there seems an extra buzz of general excitement in the Big Apple for 2014. The city's new mayor, Bill de Blasio, took office in January. The new bike sharing scheme, CitiBike (similar to Dublinbikes) launched last year has been a huge success. In Lower Manhattan, the museum at the September 11 Memorial will open this year and the final touches are being put to the new World Trade Center.

Even on the Upper West Side, what seems a quiet residential area away from the madness of Midtown, has its own slice of New York buzz. Our hotel room at the Beacon Hotel has a kitchenette (all the rooms do) and a trip to the local supermarket, Fairway Market, opposite the hotel, is one of the highlights of my stay.

It's like walking into a live movie set. People come from all over New York to shop there so there seems to be a cross-section of all society there, queuing at the deli counter for hot food or shouting over each other in the fruit section with central-casting-type New York accents.

If you want spectacular cityscapes and a place to get away from it all, check out the top of the Rockefeller Centre or Central Park.

But if you really want to get into New York, don't miss the High Line Park – or Fairways.

TRAVEL

Great ESCAPES

PLATINUM RATED: Thomson is offering a series of discounts on its Platinum range of holiday destinations, all of which have to score 'good' or 'excellent' with at least 90% of customers, like the Hotel Natura Palace in Lanzarote (see picture), perched in a quiet spot next to the promenade that leads to the centre of Playa Blanca. It's available for two sharing from €634pp in June. Other hotels include the Los Gigantes in Tenerife and the Altica Imperial Resort in Greece. See thomsonholidays.ie or call 1850 45 35 45.



DISNEY DISCOUNT: If family fun in Disneyland Paris this summer sounds appealing, Abbey Travel is offering free half-board meals and a 20% discount on hotel bills. The offer is valid for arrivals until November 12 but the sale ends on June 30. It's worth bearing in mind that children under seven get free hotel and park tickets for the entire stay. For example, a family of two adults and two children under seven staying for two nights in the Santa Fe Hotel works out at €680. That includes two nights half-board and three-day park tickets. Flights and transfers not included. See abbeytravel.ie

LONG-HAUL DEALS: Clickandgo.com has two offers: a 12-night Thailand escape for just under €1000 and 12 nights in Cancun & Las Vegas for €1699pps, staying in four-star hotels, with eight all-inclusive nights in the Allegro Playacar Resort in Cancun and four nights at Planet Hollywood, Las Vegas, room only. Flights included. See clickandgo.ie

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Biggest danger to

When it comes to wreaking destruction on some of the most beautiful places on the planet, what's right up there at the top of the offenders' list? Tourists. That's right, you and me. Why? Because no matter how precious a place, or a monument or a landscape, money talks. *Bye Bye Barcelona* is a documentary doing the rounds on YouTube. Shot by artist Eduardo Chibas it gives natives of the city a voice, and the opportunity to express their displeasure at how their city is being destroyed by the negative impact of tourism. The Catalan



city, say some, is becoming a theme park. It's time to shout Stop! But what can be done as, in many places, commerce causes more destruction than war ever did? In Venice, a city close to my heart, only 60,000 people are privileged enough to call the city home but every year some 20 million outsiders tramp all over it.

cultural hotspots is tourist throng

Not least of those are the thousands upon thousands who arrive on 100,000-ton cruise ships – those floating horror palaces that stand 14 or 15 storeys high – in the waters of the relatively narrow Giudecca Canal which pours into the basin close to St Mark's Square. An attempt to ban such liners from the city was, unbelievably, recently overturned by the Italian courts following intense lobbying from the shipping operators. It's easy, of course, when you love a place so much that you feel like a local when you visit, to forget that you are a tourist, too. But there are things you can do.

When I visit Venice these days I travel out of season, I avoid the main sights and eschew the glass and leather shops where the goods owe more to Macau than to Murano. And I eat where the locals eat – in proper little restaurants that have sustained the same family for generations. (Like Altanella, where the elderly owner turned Elton John away a couple of summers ago because he was booked out with his regulars for Sunday lunch.) Special places require special protection and I would happily, for example, pay a substantial Venice tax every time I visit. I would also

limit visitor numbers to the major sights and lay on 'tourist-only' vaporetos (the water buses) so that locals are not inconvenienced. In Barcelona, meanwhile, the 'privatisation' of Gaudi's stunning Parc Güell and the imposition of a €7 entrance fee has caused a stir. The last time I visited, I wandered there on a Sunday morning and watched a group of elderly locals set-dancing beneath the trees. Under new regulations they would still have free access to the park but, as a tourist, I would have to pay to enter. If that helps preserve one of Spain's most memorable sights, what's wrong with that?



HORDES: A busy street in Barcelona

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