

Saunter your way around Manhattan

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As we were turning north in New York City's Battery Park, the rippling Hudson River on our left, we passed a group of moms and dads slowly pushing strollers. One parent noted our mass of determined walkers, all with race numbers pinned to our backs and white caps on our heads.

"What are you doing?" one guy called out to us.

"We're walking around Manhattan," we called back.

"No, really, what are you doing?" he asked.

The framed certificate on my wall attests that I have, in fact, done it. I've completed The Great Saunter. In one long day, my daughter and I walked around the entire rim of the island of Manhattan, from Ferry Point at the southernmost tip, along the Hudson to Inwood Hill Park in the far north, the Bronx just across a shallow spit of water, and then back down the east side, Queens and Brooklyn on our left.

The certificate notes that on the first Saturday in May we walked "about 32 miles through over 20 parks and promenades."

In fact, The Great Saunter – billed as the nation's longest urban hike – was really more like 34 miles (several walkers when we did it clocked the actual distance with GPS). And in addition to all the parks and promenades, we saw much more. We saw unknown parts of the Big Apple accessible only by foot, like the Little Red Lighthouse near the base of the George Washington Bridge and the Inspiration Point Grecian Temple, looking as if it were transported from ancient Athens to the heights of northern Manhattan.

We passed the Statue of Liberty and the Brooklyn Bridge, zigzagged through Harlem streets and past the United Nations, saw the docked USS Intrepid aircraft carrier and a waterfall (in Manhattan!) and discovered what used to be a horse-racing track along the East River.

It took us around 12 hours to complete our circumnavigation of Manhattan because, despite the race numbers, this is a walk, not a race. Shorewalkers, the environmental organization that supports the restoration of the New York waterfront and that organizes The Great Saunter, describes the walk as "seeing New York Island at 3 miles per hour."

That's a pace of around 20 minutes per mile, not too brisk, and pretty much like ... well, a saunter.

In addition, those who saunter can stop for bathroom breaks and food interludes and sometimes simply to regard the extraordinary vistas they pass – new perspectives on the New Jersey Palisades, a 200-year-old gravestone for a child next to Grant’s Tomb, the array of bridges reaching out to Brooklyn.

This weekend’s walk was the 31st annual saunter, which began back in the ’80s with just a couple of dozen intrepid explorers traipsing – and sometimes climbing – along and around a deserted waterfront. When Cy Adler, a founder of the Shorewalkers group and the author of “Walking Manhattan’s Rim: The Great Saunter,” had first suggested a long walk along New York’s rivers, much of the city’s waterfront was inaccessible or dilapidated, consisting largely of long-abandoned docking facilities.

In the early years, the walk served to raise awareness of the crumbling shoreline. It soon became an annual event and helped jump-start the renaissance of New York’s waterfront. The path around the island has since become nearly continuous, with many broad esplanades and riverfront parks, and only a few places where walkers must follow dusty trails or move away from the water and into city streets.

Now, always on the first Saturday in May, more than a thousand participants, from across the country and even around the world, show up for the saunter. They come because “this is the best way to really appreciate and understand the grandeur and complexity of New York’s waterfront,” Adler says. It’s also an intriguing way to safely stretch the limits of what you think you’re capable of doing and test yourself without truly endangering yourself.

Instead of summiting Everest, here is an event that doesn’t take much equipment – just a good pair of walking shoes, some extra socks, water or a sports drink and maybe some moleskin patches to deal with the inevitable blisters. And you don’t need much great physical skill, either, other than an ability to walk for a very long time.

In his late 80s, the dapper Alder still was walking part of the route and helping out along the saunter, doling out drinks and energy bars to walkers. We ran into him last year in Riverbank State Park, about a third of the way into the walk.

“It’s a glorious day for a walk, isn’t it?” he said. And then, encouragingly, “You’re almost halfway there!”

A few miles later, we met a woman who was only going halfway. “Maybe 16 or 17 miles,” she said. “I’m having surgery in three days.”

You can, in fact, drop out at any time. Sometimes saunterers have to stop because they develop blisters or their arches ache or their backs are too stiff to go on. Sometimes they figure they’ve done enough.

But we persevered, and not much later, perfectly flat Manhattan became hilly. Our calves ached and we struggled through Fort Tryon Park but were relieved to reach our lunch break, just next to the wonderful outdoor Inwood Greenmarket, where we picked up some additions to the provisions we had been carrying.

Finally, we turned south, passing a series of bridges tying the Bronx to Manhattan, including the oldest span in New York, the High Bridge, with its massive Romanesque arches. By the time we reached the area on the east side near Gracie Mansion, the official residence of the mayor of New York, everything ached.

But we could see, way off in the distance, the Williamsburg Bridge jutting out from a bulge in Manhattan's Lower East Side. That had to mean we weren't far off, or at least that's what we hoped.

Our pace slowed as we moved past the Queensboro Bridge, forever known to fans of Simon and Garfunkel as The 59th Street Bridge. We passed a helicopter pad, Stuyvesant Cove Park and the South Street Seaport.

A little bit beyond, we turned inland, arriving as light faded in lower Manhattan, at where we had begun, Fraunces Tavern, where George Washington had recited his farewell to his officers.

We were, I admit, exhausted and pretty achy. But we were exhilarated enough that we were back again this past Saturday, ready to walk until our feet gave out.

Want to saunter?

If you'd like to circumnavigate Manhattan by foot, you have almost a year to get ready.

For more information and to register for next year's Great Saunter, visit www.shorewalkers.org.

For a \$25 registration fee, you'll get a race number, a Shorewalkers cap, a saunter map (it marks the good bathrooms) and details about other New York area walks the organization sponsors.