

Circling Manhattan (Bring Extra Socks)

By DAVID G. ALLAN
The New York Times
Sept. 17, 2010

WALKING the High Line? That's cute. The length of Central Park? Bucolic. The marathon? Try adding six miles. Circumnavigating Manhattan is the ultimate and extreme city walking tour and promises the seemingly impossible: a path less traveled on an overly trodden island. Half sightseeing tour, half endurance test, the journey at Manhattan's edge takes you into the shadows of 19 bridges, through as many parks and past art installations, city landmarks and 360 degrees of ever-changing views.

Each spring for the past 25 years, scores of people have done the walk as part of the Great Saunter, started by Cy A. Adler, now 82, who also wrote the 2003 book on the subject, "Walking Manhattan's Rim: The Great Saunter," a (slightly outdated) guide crammed with local history and civic commentary. I did the walk solo one Saturday, starting with a coffee at dawn from the Starbucks above the Chambers Street subway near the top of Battery Park City.

You can, of course, start anywhere, but your feet will thank you if you pick a place close to a non-walking way home; clockwise from the Southwest also maximizes shade. It will take at least 10 hours, so give yourself 12.

In his book, Mr. Adler suggests bringing "water, an extra pair of socks and Vaseline for your feet if it's hot out." I would add: his book, sunscreen, Band-Aids or moleskin for blisters, a smartphone for occasional geographic assists (and Twitter posts if you are so inclined), camera, snacks like bananas and protein bars, and a device loaded with music and podcasts to take your mind off your muscles.

The last few miles were painful on my calves, knees and hamstrings, all of which stayed sore for a week. Of course, you don't have to do it all in one shot, either.

6:57 A.M. Battery Park is an unsung hero of the city's green spaces with its winding "nature boardwalks" between Piers 26 and 34, a quiet bench area jutting into the Hudson at the end of [Pier 40](#), pile fields emerging from the water like battalions of wooden soldiers, and assorted art works. At Pier 69, I was compelled to stop and admire a doorless steel house-in-a-bottle installation by Malcolm Cochran called "[Private Passage.](#)" And I found, but was too early for, a charming open-air cafe at the [79th Street Boat Basin](#). It opens at noon on weekdays and 11 a.m. Saturdays and Sundays. I used to bike to work on this stretch of greenway, apparently moving too fast to notice these.

9:11 A.M. Mr. Adler invited me to his Upper West Side apartment for some fortifying coffee and oatmeal, then joined me for a while. We strolled the [Cherry Walk](#) above 100th Street — the geographic midway of the island, which was once a winding path full of cherry trees but has been straightened for bicyclists — as Mr. Adler, his stride as strong as his opinions, complained that the city lacked a monument to Robert Moses.

11:07 A.M. At the one-year-old [Harlem Piers Park](#), around 130th Street and Fairway Market (which makes for a good provision stop), Mr. Adler took us off the water's edge and upstairs from 12th Avenue near 135th Street into [Riverbank State Park](#). Manhattan's only state park is an unexpected complex of playgrounds, handball courts and ball fields, all assembled on the roof of a water-treatment plant. From 69 feet above the Hudson we spied a nest of wild parrots at 160th Street and, a little farther along, broke into a spontaneous, off-key rendition of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land."

11:57 A.M. Faced with a choice between a pedestrian overpass above the Amtrak line and Fort Washington Avenue, which forges into the striking cliffs of [Fort Tryon Park](#) and the Cloisters, we chose a third way, the path of least climbing, through a fence and along the train tracks. "It may not be entirely legal," Mr. Adler said with a grin. It may also not be entirely safe, as he had to quickly hop off the tracks when a train whipped by.

12:44 P.M. A mile-long dirt path along the water ends at Dyckman Street, where the [Inwood Canoe Club](#), the oldest in the city, has a launch and Inwood Hill Park begins. Wrapping around the northwestern tip of the island, we were giddy at the first view of the Harlem River and the Bronx's Spuyten Duyvil neighborhood. At the park's tidal basin we came upon the Plymouthesque Skorakopock Rock, the spot, according to a plaque, where the Dutch scored one of history's greatest (and rawest) deals, snatching up the island from the Canarsie Indians for beads and trinkets.

1:44 P.M. Though [Inwood Hill Park](#) is an ideal picnic spot, especially when the farmers' market is in full bustle on Saturday afternoons, a pint at the nearby [Piper's Kilt](#) bar was more Mr. Adler's speed. I left him there, after one beer together.

2:14 P.M. Subway yards and parking lots monopolize the water's edge here, so I turned south on Broadway, past the only remaining Dutch colonial farm house in Manhattan, [Dyckman House](#), then followed Dyckman Street to the recently restored [Swindler Cove Park](#), which counts Bette Midler as a patron. Strolling the promenade along Harlem River Drive, I joined onlookers watching the Columbia University rowing team under the mammoth spans of the Washington, Alexander Hamilton and High Bridges. Roughly halfway around at that point — it felt like the dark side of the moon — I celebrated by changing my socks.

3:27 P.M. Eastern Harlem is largely without a river walk, so I zigzagged through the neighborhood from 163rd Street down to 120th Street. It was a jolt to re-enter the grid so deeply, hiking past bodegas and laundries.

4:14 P.M. Back along the East River, I worried my haggard look might frighten the nicely dressed young families amid the well-manicured lawns and large terrace of Carl Schurz Park, but they were too busy with their soccer balls and stroller-side chats to notice.

4:40 P.M. Near the Queensboro Bridge, I was booted off the water again, and walked on First Avenue until I passed the United Nations building. By this point, as I followed a route I used to run when I lived in the East Village, my legs were organizing a mutiny, and stopping to stretch only angered them more. My pace slowed from about 60 blocks an hour to 50 as I cleared the three bridges stretching to Brooklyn.

6:39 P.M. I don't think anyone has been more excited to see Jersey City than I was when I hobbled past the Staten Island Ferry terminal at Mile 31. At the end of Battery Park City, where I had taken my first picture 12 hours earlier, I collapsed onto a bench to watch the sun's final salute. I imagined it was welcoming me to the circumnavigation club, perhaps one of New York's more exclusive, if not exactly elite.